Catholic Social Teaching #1 and 2

**Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

and

**Call to Family, Community, and Participation**

*God created mankind in His image.  
In the image of God He created them.  
Male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27)*

# **The Sanctity of Human Life**

*What is life?*

* Look at other living beings around you: people, animals, plants.
* **A natural “force” that unifies matter in a cyclic process of development.**

*What is dignity? —* “worthy of honor or respect” (Oxford) due to *inherent* goodness, part of the “what-it-is-ness” of a thing (nature, ουσία)

*Why does life have dignity? —* Life is good: God said so, and so it is.

*Why does human life carry more dignity over other forms of life?*

* Unique origin: We are made in God’s “image and likeness” (Gn 1:26-7)
  + Image — Intellect, reason, free-choice, λόγος; male and female, communion (more on this later)
  + Likeness — Share in God’s glory; “soul’s incorruptibility.” All creation shares God’s likeness in its own way (ST I.Q93.A6.C)
* Unique purpose: We are made to be united with God
* **Human life doesn’t just have dignity; it’s *sacred*!**

“Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal  with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the  presence of something holy and sacred.” Accordingly, “the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.” (USCCB)

*What happens when dignity is disregarded?*

* Violence! — In a broad sense, **when something’s nature is inhibited or when a thing is made to do something contrary to its nature.**
* Permissible when done to a lesser *object* meant to serve a greater purpose, e.g., when grain is pulverized to flour and turned into bread for our nourishment (or to be consecrated on the Altar!)
* Unacceptable when done to a *subject* or when anything is used for lesser purpose, e.g., depriving a human of life or freedom or using him/her for selfish gain.

Belief that human life is sacred from conception to natural death is the foundation of Catholic social teaching.

* Not exclusively Catholic: most religions believe life is sacred, even if they understand it differently.
* Until 100 years ago, all major Christian denominations agreed on the details (e.g. contraception).

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.…Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour, he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ vere latitat—the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden. (C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* 21-2)

# **Quality of life vs. Sanctity of Life**

Every legislator, every doctor, and every citizen needs to recognize that the real issue is whether to affirm and protect the sanctity of all human life, or to embrace a social ethic where some human lives are valued and others are not. As a nation, we must choose between the sanctity-of-life ethic and the quality-of-life ethic. (Ronald Reagan)

The Church teaches that we must always strive for the betterment of living conditions, but we must not allow a person’s situation to decide whether his or her life is worth living.

* There’s a degree of damage that renders a dollar bill worthless.
* Quality-of-life ethos: there’s a degree of damage beyond which life is no longer worth living.
* Sanctity-of-life ethos: no degree of damage can diminish any person’s value.
  + An unwanted child is still a person.
  + People with cognitive impairments can teach us a lot about patience, trust, and joy, if we are willing to listen.
  + Living beyond “usefulness” (which usually means economic usefulness) is not living beyond meaning. It is impossible to live beyond meaning something.

“Quality of life” is often a phrase used to justify the rejection of burdens. Replace the word *burden* with *cross*.

* As Christ’s Incarnation glorified humanity, Christ’s Passion glorified suffering.
* Everything from God is a blessing—even a cross.

# **Refusing Treatment**

A patient has the right to refuse treatment when treatment only prolongs or increases pain.

* Extraordinary measure that they are not morally required to take
* Nutrition and hydration are not extraordinary measures, any more than is bottle feeding a baby.
  + Permissible to withhold If the patient’s body stops retaining food and water, or if death will result not from starvation or dehydration but from the underlying condition.
* “The ordinary care owed to a sick person cannot be legitimately interrupted.” (CCC 2279)

The sick person in a vegetative state, awaiting recovery or a natural end, still has the right to basic health care (nutrition, hydration, cleanliness, warmth, etc.), and to the prevention of complications related to his confinement to bed. He also has the right to appropriate rehabilitative care and to be monitored for clinical signs of eventual recovery. (Pope John Paul II)

Terri Schiavo sustained serious brain damage in 1990

* No serious health problems; needed only a feeding tube.
* Her husband fought to have this feeding tube removed, arguing that Terri would not have wanted to be kept alive in this condition.
* Terri’s parents disagreed and fought a decade-long legal battle to keep her alive. Those advocating for the tube’s removal argued that Terri was in a persistent vegetative state (PVS), but evidence from doctors and visitors showed her to be responsive.
* Eventually, her feeding tube was removed, and she died in 2005 of starvation and dehydration.

# **Family, Community, and Participation**

The Trinity: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8)

* Lover and Beloved: Father and Son
* Love is fruitful: Holy Spirit
* Love is selfless: “he emptied himself” (Pp 2:7), “He learned obedience” (Heb 5:8)
* Unity of persons; Equal in dignity (none is “more important”)

We are created in this image, thus we are made for union

* Temporal: union with others
  + Masculinity and Femininity, matrimony / sexuality, family (cf. Theology of the Body by St. John Paul II)
  + Friendship, Community, Workplace, Interdependence
  + Liturgy, Communal Worship
* Eternal: union with God
  + Perfect happiness: Enter into the Trinity
  + “nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence.” (ST I-II.Q3.A8.C)

# **Affronts to Life, Dignity, and Family**

Many of the following are immoral because they separate the marital act from procreation (e.g. contraception); others because they commodify children and/or women (IVF, surrogacy); still others because they are simply murder under another name (abortion, euthanasia).

* Abortion
* Adultery
* Cloning
* Contraception (onanism: Genesis 38:9)
* Death penalty
* Embryonic stem cell research
* Euthanasia
* Fornication, including cohabitation
* Honor killing
* Intentional targeting of civilians in war
* In vitro fertilization (IVF)
* Masturbation
* Pornography
* Racism
* Slavery
* Sodomy (nonprocreative sexual acts, not homosexuality exclusively)
* Sterilization
* Suicide
* Surrogacy
* Torture

# **Further Reading**

Aquinas, St. Thomas. Summa Theologiæ. <https://aquinas.cc>

* On the Human Soul (I.QQ75–95)
* On Happiness as Humanity’s Last End (I-II.QQ1–5)

“Begotten Not Made: A Catholic View of Reproductive Technology”: <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/reproductive-technology/begotten-not-made-a-catholic-view-of-reproductive-technology>

“Life and Dignity of the Human Person” (USCCB): <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/life-and-dignity-of-the-human-person>

The National Catholic Bioethics Center: <https://www.ncbcenter.org/bioethics-resources>

Check out Catholic singer-songwriter Danielle Rose’s album “Culture of Life.”