

matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community" (US Bishops, 1998, Living the Gospel of Life, n.23).

"Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights -- for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture -- is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition of all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination" (Pope John Paul II, 1988, The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World (*Christifideles Laici*), n.38).

Those are clear and strong words.

Why do the bishops say that when a public servant cannot stand up for the right to life, his stand for other human rights is "suspect?"

When one says that people have a "right" to be safe, free, educated, and economically secure, on what basis do these rights exist? Are they human rights, that belong to the person simply because he or she is human, and are therefore beyond the authority of anyone to take away? Or are they "rights" granted by those in power?

These rights cannot possibly be human rights if *life itself* isn't a human right. And the public official who says abortion can be legal is saying that life itself is not a human right. This is because he or she is saying that some human beings (those in the womb) can be deprived of that right to life.

Bishop Elio Sgreccia, Vice-President of the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life, stated, "*Without respect for life, society simply does not exist...all [other] rights presuppose the right to life. If the right to life is not defended, the*

*defense of all these other rights is useless. It becomes a lie, because it would mean that the defense to the right to work, to society, etc. applies only to some, and not to all"* (May 2004 interview with Priests for Life).

This is also why the Pope can call the outcry for human rights "false and illusory" without the right to life.

Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, "*The Holy Father speaks of the protection of life as the fundamental realization and respect for human rights. Without that respect for the right to life, no other discussion of human rights can continue; it must be based upon the foundation of human dignity and the right to life"* (May 2004 interview with Priests for Life).

In short, to allow legalized abortion is an attack on the entire moral order. If abortion is not wrong, nothing is wrong. If it is wrong, civilization will not survive unless it is set right.



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Pamphlet 456

## "And What I Have Failed To Do..."

Fr. Frank Pavone  
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What's this I hear from some people that they might "sit out" the Presidential election because they aren't comfortable with the likely choice of candidates?

Since when are elections supposed to make us "comfortable?" Since when do we exercise that right to vote, for which people fought and died, only when it's easy and clear-cut, and our choices are just the way we want them to be?

At Mass we pray, "I confess to Almighty God...that I have sinned...in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, **and in what I have failed to do...**"

What we *fail to do* can make us just as guilty as what we do. A sin is a wrong choice, and to decide *not to do something* is just as much of a choice as to decide to do something.

A sin of omission is still a sin – and we are still responsible for the results.

What, then, makes us think that we are more responsible for the results of voting than for the results of *not* voting?

A vote is not a philosophical statement. It is a transfer of power. It is a pragmatic act to preserve, as much as possible under the circumstances, the common good, and to limit the evils that threaten it.

And in the pragmatic matter of elections, what matters is not how closely a candidate measures up to my preferences and convictions. Instead, it's a question of who *can and will actually get elected*. It does little good if the person I felt most comfortable supporting doesn't get to actually govern and implement those positions I like so much.

The vote can be used just as much to keep someone *out* of office as to put someone in.

If we fail to use that tool, however, and as a result the person who gets elected is far worse and does far more damage than the other person we did not like, then we still share responsibility for the damage that will be done.

Elections have seasons. In the earliest phases, the field is wide open. We can recruit candidates, or decide to run ourselves. We build up the name recognition and base of support for the person or people who would make the best candidate. This takes years of work.

Then the season of primaries arrives, during which voters choose between the candidates who have been recruited and who have been building up their strength.

Then the general election season arrives, and we may find that we don't like any of the names on the ballot. At that point, we have to shift our thinking and focus on "better" rather than "best." The reality usually is that one of several unsatisfactory candidates will in fact be elected. So we use our vote to create the better outcome and to limit the damage. That's the shift that some fail to make.

And we are still responsible for what we fail to do.

## Voting for Vitae

One of the most striking, bold, and sobering paragraphs ever written about the impact of abortion on the common good is the 20<sup>th</sup> paragraph of Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)*. It is a great antidote for the thinking that says we can elect a "pro-choice" candidate because "their other positions are good." It's easy to start counting the positions we think a candidate has "right" and see what candidate has the greater "sum" of right answers or "Catholic" answers. But that's a very superficial and flawed way of doing moral analysis. It's like saying to a supporter of terrorism, "I disagree with you on the one issue of terrorism, but what's your health care plan?"

Paragraph 20 of *Evangelium Vitae* starts by showing the radical and practical impossibility of living with the implications of "pro-choice." The same illusion that separates "choice" from the demands of respect for life is the illusion that makes us think we can separate other "rights" from the right to life. But human rights are integrally interconnected. Take away the basis for respecting life and you've taken away the basis for *all* human rights. As the Pope says, "At that point, everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining."

The Pope then takes aim at the idea that if abortion has been legalized according to proper democratic procedures, then that's all that matters. He says, "*The appearance of the strictest respect for legality is maintained .... Really, what we have here is only the tragic caricature of legality; the democratic ideal, which is only truly such when it acknowledges and safeguards the dignity of every human person, is betrayed in its very foundations: How*

*is it still possible to speak of the dignity of every human person when the killing of the weakest and most innocent is permitted?"*

Along with this, he has some of the strongest words ever written about what happens when the state legalizes abortion: "*In this way democracy, contradicting its own principles, effectively moves towards a form of totalitarianism. The State is no longer the 'common home' where all can live together on the basis of principles of fundamental equality, but is transformed into a tyrant State, which arrogates to itself the right to dispose of the life of the weakest and most defenseless members ... When this happens, the process leading to the breakdown of a genuinely human co-existence and the disintegration of the State itself has already begun. To claim the right to abortion, infanticide and euthanasia, and to recognize that right in law, means to attribute to human freedom a perverse and evil significance: that of an absolute power over others and against others. This is the death of true freedom.*"

"*The disintegration of the State itself...totalitarianism...the death of true freedom.*" In other words, no "common good" can co-exist with legal abortion. The very foundations of civilization break down. It sure sounds like abortion is more than just one issue among many.

## Cannot be Right

When a candidate for public office is wrong on abortion, he or she *cannot be right* on the other issues.

"*Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the 'rightness' of positions in other*