

lives and dignity. Yet abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others. They are committed against those who are weakest and most defenseless, those who are genuinely "the poorest of the poor." They are endorsed increasingly without the veil of euphemism, as supporters of abortion and euthanasia freely concede these are killing even as they promote them. Sadly, they are practiced in those communities which ordinarily provide a safe haven for the weak -- the family and the healing professions. Such direct attacks on human life, once crimes, are today legitimized by governments sworn to protect the weak and marginalized. (n. 5).

Directly attacking life itself

We are called at the same time to recognize the interrelatedness of all "life issues" and the claim to more urgent attention that one or another of those issues has at any given time in history. One of the reasons abortion and euthanasia hold such a claim, the document explains, is that they "directly attack life itself." We have commented on this at some length in previous issues; let's look at it a bit more closely.

The child in the womb has been declared a non-person (and not necessarily a non-human) by the Supreme Court's 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision and subsequent decisions reaffirming it. This declaration in no way depends on any characteristic that the child has, whether skin color, nationality, economic status, or religion, but simply on his or her existence. Abortion "directly attacks life itself," not some aspect of life, or some right to a particular possession or activity or position in the world. What is attacked here is the very right to be in the world. When Roe vs. Wade declared, "The word 'person,' as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn" (Roe at 158), it referred to the amendment that speaks of the very protection of life: "...nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty,

or property without due process of law...." From the vantage point of the child, the only criterion that makes him/her eligible for destruction by abortion is that he or she be alive. That, in fact, is what constitutes the difference between the abortion procedure and a perfectly legitimate medical process, using the same techniques, to remove a dead child from the womb. Abortion "directly attacks life itself."

Life: The Foundation

The bishops' statement goes on to describe "life itself" as "the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others." While it is quite obvious that one's "rights" do a person little good when he or she is dead, the point requires emphasis in order to understand why abortion is so critical a problem. Nobody should claim that abortion is the only issue, but nobody should miss why it is the foundational issue. Of course we need to be actively concerned, as the bishops' statement says, about enhancing the conditions for human living by helping to provide food, shelter and meaningful employment, beginning with those who are most in need. But why is that a concern at all? Because human beings need food and shelter to live, and they have a right to live. They have a right to employment because they have a right to make a living, and that is so because they have a right to live. Abortion attacks, in principle and in fact, the very right which is the foundation and constitutes the motive for every other right. It is the right to life which makes other issues to be issues at all.

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Pamphlet 458

Abortion as the Fundamental Issue

**The following ran as articles in the Priests
for Life newsletter.**

Abortion as the Fundamental Issue

The recent document of the US Bishops, Living the Gospel of Life asserts,

"Respect for the dignity of the human person demands a commitment to human rights across a broad spectrum.... Yet abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others." (n.5)

As Fr. Richard Hogan points out, many of the public policy controversies of our day deal with the question of how best to secure the rights of others, whose basic personhood is acknowledged. In the matter of abortion, however, the question at issue is not how, but whether those rights will be secured at all, whether they even exist, and whether the human beings affected are indeed persons.

This brings the issue to a more fundamental level than "someone was killed." Many tragedies take human life, but not all deny it. The crux of the Roe vs. Wade decision was the statement, "[T]he word 'person,' as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn." The child in the womb, in other words, is legally obliterated before being physically destroyed. The tragedy is not simply in the fact that the life is taken, but that such taking is declared to be a matter of no legal concern. No due process is necessary to end this life; it is regarded as fundamentally unequal to the lives of all other human beings.

Nor is it denied in *Roe vs. Wade* that the unborn is a human being. Regarding that issue, the Court simply pleads ignorance and irrelevance: "We need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins...[T]he judiciary, at this point in the development of man's knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer." One might think that in the light of such a statement, one would have to opt not to destroy, just as one would refrain from shooting what one was not sure to be a bear or a man, or would refrain from destroying a building if there were a doubt about whether anyone was still inside.

The Court, however, pleaded ignorance about the nature of the unborn, but then proceeded to strip him/her of legal personhood. This is a fundamental evil even prior to the taking of the life, and removes all other rights besides.

The 1985 Reaffirmation of the US Bishops' Pastoral Plan for Pro-life Activities states the following:

Moreover, among the many important issues involving the dignity of human life with which the Church is concerned, abortion necessarily plays a central role. Abortion's direct attack on innocent human life is precisely the kind of violent act that can never be justified. Because victims of abortion are the most vulnerable and defenseless members of the human family, it is imperative that we, as Christians called to serve the least among us, give urgent attention and priority to this issue of justice. Our concern is intensified by the realization that a policy and practice allowing over one and a half million abortions annually cannot but diminish respect for life in other areas. As we said in our pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*: "Abortion in particular blunts a sense of the sacredness of human life. In a society where the innocent unborn are killed wantonly, how can we expect people to feel righteous revulsion at the act or threat of killing noncombatants in war?" (no. 285). In a society where abortion is claimed as "a woman's right," the most fundamental right—the right to

life—is denied, and the basis for defending the rights of all women and men is, thereby, eroded. In this Pastoral Plan we, therefore, focus attention especially on the pervasive threat to human life arising from the present situation of abortion virtually on demand.

The passage, whose theme was also recently reflected in *Living the Gospel of Life* (November, 1998) brings to mind the words of Mother Teresa, "And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another?" (National Prayer Breakfast, 1994, Washington DC).

In considering this, we should keep in mind that supporters of abortion increasingly admit that it is the killing of a baby. In fact, half the respondents of a 1998 CBS/NY Times poll were willing to call it "murder," but one third of that group said it is sometimes the best course of action. Abortion, in other words, does not only lead to other evils; it already contains them within itself. It is not only the taking of a life. It is the claim to validate the taking of life as a perceived solution to problems.

Moreover, those whose lives are taken by abortion are the most defenseless. The Church has a "preferential option for the poor," just as Christ Himself has. "The poor" is a concept that goes beyond the materially disadvantaged. The poor are those who have only God as their help, those most cast aside or abandoned by others, and considered insignificant.

Children still in the womb are defenseless first of all because they are largely unseen. "Out of sight, out of mind..." They are easy to ignore, easy to forget about, easy to reduce to just a bothersome concept.

Yet the Church teaches that they are to be treated as persons from the first moment of conception. To treat them as persons, when the law says they are not persons, and when they cannot vote, speak, organize, write, protest, or even pray, demands an extra effort on our part. We have to pick up the slack created by the special and

extreme disadvantages that this group of human beings has. To care about them as much as we care about any other people requires extra effort. To care about them with a preferential option requires priority effort.

On February 13, 1986, the Holy Father spoke the following words to a Congress organized by Food and Disarmament International: Permit me to observe, with sorrow, that, in face of a very deep and, as it were, sacrosanct sensitivity to offences against life which are the result of hunger, war and terrorism, one does not find a similar sensitivity to the crime of abortion, which, however, cuts off innumerable innocent lives.

Abortion as the priority moral concern...

What the Bishops Said

"*Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*," issued by the US Bishops in November of 1998, explains the priority attention that abortion deserves in the following words:

Respect for the dignity of the human person demands a commitment to human rights across a broad spectrum: "Both as Americans and as followers of Christ, American Catholics must be committed to the defense of life in all its stages and in every condition."⁴ The culture of death extends beyond our shores: famine and starvation, denial of health care and development around the world, the deadly violence of armed conflict and the scandalous arms trade that spawns such conflict. Our nation is witness to domestic violence, the spread of drugs, sexual activity which poses a threat to lives, and a reckless tampering with the world's ecological balance. Respect for human life calls us to defend life from these and other threats. It calls us as well to enhance the conditions for human living by helping to provide food, shelter and meaningful employment, beginning with those who are most in need. We live the Gospel of Life when we live in solidarity with the poor of the world, standing up for their