

LIFE AND SOLIDARITY

Every human person is sacred and should be respected and protected. This is a basic tenet of Christian belief and social justice. Churches have generally upheld this principle and spoken up for it. There have been some exceptions to this belief. Until recently, it was believed that the state had the right to put some criminals to death but there is much less conviction in this practice now. We admit that soldiers take lives on a battlefield though there are provisions to safeguard civilian and innocent lives. It is abortion that has torn apart our national consensus as well as that of many churches, including the Catholic Church which teaches absolute prohibition of abortion even if many Catholics do not accept the absolute condemning of it.

I sincerely believe that abortion, the taking of a live fetus, is a terrible thing. I believe it has at times been done much too quickly and easily, indeed sometimes for weighty reasons, but sometimes for mere convenience. But, all along, I have believed that it cannot be overcome through legal and political means. The current mayhem about the repeal of Roe/Wade may be the cause of even a stronger pro-choice movement. I also believe that abortion is a symptom of a throwaway, self-centered society. It has to be seen as part of a larger problem in our culture. It has to be opposed not only on the basis of the natural law but because of scripture and spirituality.

One more negative. I believe the pro-life and pro-choice groups have been too dogmatic, inflexible and combative in their positions. They have not been listening to each other. I think the Democratic Party should have been open to pro-life adherents so that debate could take place within the party. I think the pro-choice people have relied too much on individual rights whereas there are also rights of the common good which they often neglect. Lots and lots of problems! The legal and political way is not the way to go. The culture wars have made all this worse.

In 1983 Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago gave a talk in New York on the "Consistent Ethic of Life." The Catholic Bishops had recently written a pastoral letter on "The Challenge of Peace" in light of the nuclear deterrence and war. He included genetics, abortion, Capital punishment, modern warfare and the care of

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the terminally ill all in this consistent ethic. Cardinals O'Connor in New York and Law in Boston both openly criticized him for being too soft on abortion.

For the next thirteen years until his death on 1986, Bernadine fine-tuned his approach and continued to present it as a better way to deal with common problems. He also sought a wider theological framework. The Consistent Ethic would have to be rooted, he now said, not only in the forbidding of taking innocent life, but more broadly in defense of the human person. He saw, as Pope Francis does, that all threats to human indignity are intertwined, not simply by logical consistency, but by reality itself, as diverse threats to life tend to reinforce one another. He wrote about this in his book, "The Gift of Peace." He also saw that the Church and the pro-life movement had to remind the wider culture how important it is to support medical support for expectant mothers as well as help them with raising the children. And, in 1996, shortly before he died, he launched the Common Ground Initiative which would use a synodal approach in bringing believers together to discuss a variety of issues with the goal of finding common ground. I know a local man who went to Chicago yearly to take part in these talks.

On September 27th of this year, Cardinal Blaise Cupich, Bernardin's successor as Archbishop of Chicago, spoke at Fordham University, the same place and date as the original talk forty years earlier. He believes the church and its teaching would be stronger now had it adopted Bernardin's consistent ethic. But he also noted the changes over the past forty years that must be dealt with now, First, the Dobbs decision changed the playing field but also had the consequence of many people supporting abortion rights. Secondly, climate change threatens humanity itself and creates climate refugees. Thirdly, new technologies have brought both great benefits and great threats. Fourth, the church has had a decade with Pope Francis who has sounded much in keeping with Cardinal Bernardin's vision for God's People. Both have focused on the essentials. Finally, the context of our age presents intense polarization, isolation, and fear. All these must be dealt with.

Cardinal Cupich made a called for an integral ethic of solidarity. Diversity does not take away unity. Life issues must now be examined by treating them in a committed and respectful way. Solidarity points to the interconnectedness of all human beings, to the unity that we should strive for, and the responsibility for the common good that we all share. It calls us to challenge the structures of sin that lay at the root of so much human suffering, whether racism, anti-Semitism, climate change, or the life of the unborn. Solidarity confirms that we live

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interconnectedly and therefore helps us to see that structures of sin are something we can change.

Christians should rely both on natural reason and scripture to live and proclaim this ethic. The combative, strident, arrogant ways of the past have not worked and have not been in accord with the gospel. I, for one, think we need this ethic to make the joy of the gospel evident. You can find me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.