

Towards a Culture of Life
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January 28, 2025

Last week I wrote on how being pro-life involves much more than just being against abortion (see ["Being Pro-life Is About Much More Than Just Abortion"](#)). We must consider how we view life in general *from* its beginning *to* its end (for a discussion on when life begins and when it ends see ["The Beginning and the End"](#)).

Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago began to use the phrase “consistent ethic of life” to describe how we need to treat life with its proper dignity not just at its beginning and end but also at every stage in between. Now, the expression commonly used has become “consistent life ethic” (CLE).

Narrow View of Being “Pro-life”

In my article last week, ["Being Pro-life Is About Much More Than Just Abortion,"](#) I discussed how some people focus solely on abortion. Viewed a little broader but still narrowly, some focus on the moments when life *begins* and when it *ends*. For these people, the “only” pro-life issues are abortion, euthanasia (assisted suicide), and the death penalty. They are against these because they bring an *immediate* end to life. Those who support these issues ignore the issue of life and see them as “reproductive health care” (abortion), compassionate end to suffering (assisted suicide), and justice (death penalty). Those who see the death penalty as justice, point to [Leviticus 24:20](#), with its phrase “*an eye for an eye*” but fail to refer to Jesus’s words in [Matthew 5:38-42](#). It is challenging to dialogue on these issues because the perspectives of each side is very different.

Broader view of Being “Pro-Life”

Of course, as I wrote last week, our Catholic understanding of what it means to be *pro-life*, is much broader than just abortion, assisted suicide, and the death penalty. These are very important issues for us, but they are not the totality of Catholic Pro-Life teaching.

More than just not killing, "The Fifth Commandment calls us to foster the physical, spiritual, emotional, and social well-being of self and others."¹

Scripturally we find the heart of Catholic Pro-Life teaching in the Corporal Works of Mercy as taught by Jesus in [Matthew 25:31-46](#) and in the Fifth Commandment ([Exodus 20:13](#), [Deuteronomy 5:17](#)).²

We need to view the Corporal Works of Mercy not simply as external actions we are called to as disciples of Christ. They are to be works of our *hearts* and part of how we view the world.

For example, the Third Corporal Work of Mercy, “welcome the stranger”³ calls us to care for immigrants. Why? Because they are God’s people too! We need to remember what the Lord said

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, (USCCB), *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. Washington, DC: USCCB. 2006. 389.

² cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [2258-2230](#)

³ [Matthew 25:35](#)

to the Israelites concerning the treatment of immigrants in [Exodus 22:20](#), "*You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, for you were once aliens residing in the land of Egypt.*"

This is not an easy issue to deal with. Those who desire to help immigrants offer “sanctuary cities” while the “other side” asks who pays for it. The Catholic Bishops of Colorado recently issued a [“Statement on Immigration: Welcoming the Stranger, Protecting the Common Good”](#).⁴ In their statement they call for reform and fair treatment of immigrants. They also call for balance between the two extremes. They “encouraged government officials to “welcome the stranger” while taking responsibility to “ensure the safety and well-being of local communities.” They remind us that “The Catholic Church teaches that while individuals and their families have the right to migrate, no country has the duty to receive so many immigrants that its social and economic life is jeopardized.”⁵

Dignity of Each and Every Person

Central to Catholic Pro-life teaching is the dignity of *each and every person*. In my series, [“Treating Life with Dignity and Love”](#), [Part I](#) provides our Catholic understanding of the source of this dignity. In one paragraph, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sums it up

*Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains for ever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being.*⁶

This dignity is not dependent on the color of our skin, the language we speak, or where we were born. It includes people who live with same-sex attraction or struggle with their gender identity.⁷

It depends on none of these. Instead, "The essence of our identity and worth, the source of our dignity, is that we are loved by God: "*We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son.*"⁸

Who Helps the Poor?

Just as abortion, assisted suicide, and the death penalty *should not* depend on our political leanings, neither should our concern and aid for the poor. Yet, we find many people in our society divided

⁴ Colorado Catholic Conference, “Statement on Immigration: Welcoming the Stranger, Protecting the Common Good.” January 24, 2025 as posted online at <https://cocatholic.org/bishop-letters/the-colorado-bishops-statement-on-immigration-welcoming-the-stranger-protecting-the-common-good/> .

⁵ Katie Quinones, "Colorado's bishops on immigration: 'An open border is not a just system.'" Catholic News Agency. January 24, 2025. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/261785/colorado-s-bishops-on-immigration-an-open-border-is-not-a-just-system>.

⁶ as quoted from CFC, instruction, *Donum vitae*, intro. 5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church. Second Edition*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997. [2258](#).

⁷ Treating those who struggle with same-sex attraction and gender confusion stands at the heart of my papers, [“Towards Dignity and Truth: Compassionate Dialogue on Homosexuality”](#) and [Towards Dignity and Truth: Compassionate Dialogue and Pastoral Response on Transgenderism](#).

⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, "How to Build a Culture of Life." (bulletin insert) interior quote from St. Pope John Paul II, Homily, 17th World Youth Day, Downsview Park, Toronto, July 28, 2002.

into sides. One side, while standing in favor of life by rejecting abortion, supports the death penalty, and says we need to cut social programs as we cannot spend money we do not have. People of this side may point to Paul's words in [2 Thessalonians 3:10](#) - "*In fact, when we were with you, we instructed you that if anyone was unwilling to work, neither should that one eat.*"

On the other side, we have those who support abortion but want to do more to provide for those in need with more social programs. At times they seem to have no care for the costs for these programs. They want to help the sick (the Fourth Corporal Work of Mercy) by ensuring medical insurance for everyone. The reality is this costs money. Just as with the balance called for by the Colorado bishops in immigration reform, we need to seek a balance between what resources are available and the needs of the poor.

Our Attitude Towards the Poor

What do you think about poor people? Some people think the poor are solely responsible for their state in life. They think that if the poor do not have enough, they just need to work harder (see [2 Thessalonians 3:10](#)). Are there poor people who are lazy? Yes. There are also those whose abilities are limited. I think of those with mental health issues or intellectual disabilities that they did not cause for themselves. Or what about the single parent who was abandoned by the other parent of their children? Sometimes they need a *hand out* to get through a difficult time. Sometimes they need a *hand up* to reach their full potential in life to become self-sufficient. A small amount of assistance offered as a hand up can save a large amount of future assistance.

Either way, we need to think with the mindset of St. Mother Teresa who always saw the face of Jesus in the poor. When we see Jesus Christ in them, we are called to love, to love God and to love our neighbor.

Seeing a person's exterior state in life tells us they are poor. However, we need to look deeper. Exterior appearances do not speak to the heart of the person. "*But the Lord said to Samuel: Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature, because I have rejected him. God does not see as a mortal, who sees the appearance. The Lord looks into the heart.*"⁹ In looking at those who have earthly riches and those who are poor in worldly terms, Jesus saw the better person in the poor widow who gave from her poverty.¹⁰ Earthly riches do not define how God sees a person.

Building a Culture of Life

At the beginning of this article, I spoke of the *Consistent Life Ethic*. We need to root our actions in the dignity owed to each and every person as a child who is loved by God. We must *consistently* treat life according to this principle. It should govern our actions. Yet, respecting life and loving our neighbor is not simply a matter of what *we do*. Our concern for life needs *to be* part of the core of our worldview. Our concern for life is part of the core of what it means for us *to be* disciples of Christ. After all, Jesus tells us that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor.

When we live this way, we bring hope to the world, hope that is desperately needed. It is hope that can help life the person stuck in material poverty to become all that God calls them to be.

⁹ [1 Samuel 16:7](#).

¹⁰ [Mark 12:41-44](#).

What we need to do is build a “Culture of Life”

It is not enough for me *to be* pro-life. It is not enough for you as an individual *to be* pro-life. We need our whole culture to be pro-life. St. Pope John Paul II uses the terminology “culture of life” and “culture of death” in his encyclical, [*Evangelium Vitae*](#).

Why? Because it is an establishment of a *culture of life* to replace the *culture of death* that can change the world. I am not talking just about abortion, assisted suicide, and the death penalty. Take a moment and think about the mass shootings going on in our country. Think about the gang violence. Think about the killing involved in terrorism and war. All of these actions do not respect life. Sometimes people do not even respect their own life. Society’s acceptance of abortion and the growing acceptance of assisted suicide say that life is not a fundamental good or a right.

This culture of death is not just a matter of life and death decisions. There is a growing *cancel culture* today that says if one encounters someone they disagree with, they dismiss both the person they disagree with and their ideas. The former, dismissing the person, functionally says their life, what they say, do, and feel, is not important to us. It is almost as if the person they have cancelled out is dead to them.

God does not see things this way and neither should we. If we want to change the world, we need to, as St. Pope John Paul II says, build a culture of life. Now, let us take a look at some of what he says about “culture of life” and “culture of death.”

St. Pope John Paul II speaks of these things in terms of a "war of the powerful against the weak" that unleashes a “conspiracy against life” (EV, 12). It is not the right of the powerful to get their way. St. Pope John Paul II goes on to say

On a more general level, there exists in contemporary culture a certain Promethean attitude which leads people to think that they can control life and death by taking the decisions about them into their own hands. What really happens in this case is that the individual is overcome and crushed by a death deprived of any prospect of meaning or hope. We see a tragic expression of all this in the spread of euthanasia-disguised... Thus it is proposed to eliminate malformed babies, the severely handicapped, the disabled, the elderly, especially when they are not self-sufficient, and the terminally ill.¹¹

We also need to consider if the news is just reporting on the present attitudes of people or if they have a hand in determining whether we live in a *culture of life* or a *culture of death*. Here, St. Pope John Paul II writes

Nor can it be denied that the mass media are often implicated in this conspiracy, by lending credit to that culture which presents recourse to contraception, sterilization, abortion and even euthanasia as a mark of progress and a victory of freedom, while depicting as enemies of freedom and progress those positions which are unreservedly pro-life.¹²

¹¹ *Evangelium Vitae* (EV), 15.

¹² EV, 17.

The “elimination” of babies in the womb when diagnosed with health issues and ending of the lives of those are the end of life and cannot care for themselves does not go unnoticed by St. Pope John Paul II as evidenced in his words.

Here we are faced with one of the more alarming symptoms of the "culture of death", which is advancing above all in prosperous societies, marked by an attitude of excessive preoccupation with efficiency and which sees the growing number of elderly and disabled people as intolerable and too burdensome.¹³

A proper culture of life also includes our attitudes towards sexuality. Human sexuality is about much more than the physical act of sex and pleasure. St. Pope John Paul II writes

In particular, there is a need for education about the value of life from its very origins. It is an illusion to think that we can build a true culture of human life if we do not help the young to accept and experience sexuality and love and the whole of life according to their true meaning and in their close interconnection. Sexuality, which enriches the whole person, "manifests its inmost meaning in leading the person to the gift of self in love".¹²⁸ The trivialization of sexuality is among the principal factors which have led to contempt for new life. Only a true love is able to protect life.¹⁴

Our understanding of contraception, before life even begins, can also be part of the culture of death we face. I repeat the question I wrote in my article [“Cooperating with the Way God Created Reproductivity.”](#) “Before I shift to another moral concern regarding the use of contraception, I would like to invite everyone to take a moment to think about how you see children. Are they a gift or are they something to be avoided?” Contraception says no to life just as seeing abortion as reproductive health care does.

Lastly, just as a proper culture of life includes our attitude of contraception, it does not end when natural death occurs. The Seventh Corporal Work of Mercy is to bury the dead.¹⁵ Thus, what we do with a human body after death, is part of our choice between a culture of life and a culture of death.¹⁶

Having included multiple Corporal Works of Mercy in this article, I wish to include the Fifth and Sixth Spiritual Works of Mercy before concluding this article. They are “forgiving injuries” and “bearing wrongs patiently.” What do they have to do with what I have written here? They are what we must do to all those who have knowingly or unknowingly embraced the culture of death and committed sins against life.

Actually, this makes me realize that we really need to conclude with the Seventh Spiritual Work of Mercy, “Praying for the Living and the Dead.” We need to conclude by praying that all embrace a culture of life.

¹³ EV, 64.

¹⁴ EV, 97.

¹⁵ [Tobit 1:16-18.](#)

¹⁶ See my articles ["Respecting the Dead"](#) and ["More on Respecting the Dead"](#)).

Let us do so with the prayer that St. Pope John Paul II concluded *Evangelium Vitae* with.

O Mary,
bright dawn of the new world,
Mother of the living,
to you do we entrust the cause of life
Look down, O Mother,
upon the vast numbers
of babies not allowed to be born,
of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
of men and women
who are victims of brutal violence,
of the elderly and the sick killed
by indifference or out of misguided mercy.

Grant that all who believe in your Son
may proclaim the Gospel of life
with honesty and love
to the people of our time.

Obtain for them the grace
to accept that Gospel
as a gift ever new,
the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
throughout their lives
and the courage to bear witness to it
resolutely, in order to build,
together with all people of good will,
the civilization of truth and love,
to the praise and glory of God,
the Creator and lover of life.

Amen.