

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP MARTINO Scranton, PA

Respect Life Sunday

My brothers and sisters in Christ, The American Catholic bishops initiated Respect Life Sunday in 1972, the year before the Supreme Court legalized abortion in the United States. Since that time, Catholics across the country observe the month of October with devotions and pro-life activities in order to advance the culture of life. This October, our efforts have more significance than ever. Never have we seen such abusive criticism directed toward those who believe that life begins at conception and ends at natural death.

As Catholics, we should not be surprised by these developments. Forty years ago, Pope Paul VI predicted that widespread use of artificial contraceptives would lead to increased marital infidelity, lessened regard for women, and a general lowering of moral standards especially among the young. Forty years later, social scientists, not necessarily Catholics, attest to the accuracy of his predictions. As if following some bizarre script, the sexual revolution has produced widespread marital breakdown, weakened family ties, legalized abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, pornography, same-sex unions, euthanasia, destruction of human embryos for research purposes and a host of other ills.

It is impossible for me to answer all of the objections to the Church's teaching on life that we hear every day in the media. Nevertheless, let me address a few. To begin, laws that protect abortion constitute injustice of the worst kind. They rest on several false claims including that there is no certainty regarding when life begins, that there is no certainty about when a fetus becomes a person, and that some human beings may be killed to advance the interests or convenience of others. With regard to the first, reason and science have answered the question. The life of a human being begins at conception. The Church has long taught this simple truth, and science confirms it. Biologists can now show you the delicate and beautiful development of the human embryo in its first days of existence. This is simply a fact that reasonable people accept. Regarding the second, the embryo and the fetus have the potential to do all that an adult person does. Finally, the claim that the human fetus may be sacrificed to the interests or convenience of his mother or someone else is grievously wrong. All three claims have the same result: the weakest and most vulnerable are denied, because of their age, the most basic protection that we demand for ourselves. This is discrimination at its worst, and no person of conscience should support it. Another argument goes like this: "As wrong as abortion is, I don't think it is the only relevant 'life' issue that should be considered when deciding for whom to vote." This reasoning is sound only if other issues carry the same moral weight as abortion does, such as in the case of euthanasia and destruction of embryos for research purposes. Health care, education, economic security, immigration, and taxes are very important concerns. Neglect of any one of them has dire consequences as the recent financial crisis demonstrates. However, the solutions to problems in these areas do not usually involve a rejection of the sanctity of human life in the way that abortion does. *Being "right" on taxes, education, health care, immigration, and the economy fails to make up for the error of disregarding the value of a human life.*

Consider this: the finest health and education systems, the fairest immigration laws, and the soundest economy do nothing for the child who never sees the light of day. It is a tragic irony that “pro-choice” candidates have come to support homicide – the gravest injustice a society can tolerate – in the name of “social justice.” Even the Church’s just war theory has moral force because it is grounded in the principle that innocent human life must be protected and defended. Now, a person may, in good faith, misapply just war criteria leading him to mistakenly believe that an unjust war is just, but he or she still knows that innocent human life may not be harmed on purpose. A person who supports permissive abortion laws, however, rejects the truth that innocent human life may never be destroyed. This profound moral failure runs deeper and is more corrupting of the individual, and of the society, than any error in applying just war criteria to particular cases. Furthermore, National Right to Life reports that 48.5 million abortions have been performed since 1973. One would be too many. No war, no natural disaster, no illness or disability has claimed so great a price.

In saying these things in an election year, I am in very good company. My predecessor, Bishop Timlin, writing his pastoral letter on Respect Life Sunday 2000, stated the case eloquently: Abortion is the issue this year and every year in every campaign. Catholics may not turn away from the moral challenge that abortion poses for those who seek to obey God’s commands. They are wrong when they assert that abortion does not concern them, or that it is only one of a multitude of issues of equal importance. No, the taking of innocent human life is so heinous, so horribly evil, and so absolutely opposite to the law of Almighty God that abortion must take precedence over every other issue. I repeat. It is the single most important issue confronting not only Catholics, but the entire electorate. My fellow bishops, writing ten years ago, explained why some evils – abortion and euthanasia in particular – take precedence over other forms of violence and abuse. The failure to protect life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community. If we understand the human person as ‘the temple of the Holy Spirit’ – the living house of God – then these latter issues fall logically into place as the crossbeams and walls of that house. *All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the house’s foundation* [emphasis in the original]. These directly and immediately violate the human person’s most fundamental right – the right to life. Neglect of these issues is the equivalent of building our house on sand. *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, 23. While the Church assists the State in the promotion of a just society, its primary concern is to assist men and women in achieving salvation. For this reason, it is incumbent upon bishops to correct Catholics who are in error regarding these matters. Furthermore, public officials who are Catholic and who persist in public support for abortion and other intrinsic evils should not partake in or be admitted to the sacrament of Holy Communion. As I have said before, I will be vigilant on this subject. It is the Church’s role now to be a prophet in our own country, reminding all citizens of what our founders meant when they said that “. . . all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” The Church’s teaching that all life from conception to natural death should be protected by law is founded on religious belief to be sure, but it is also a profoundly American principle founded on reason. Whenever a society asks its citizens to violate its own foundational principles – as well as their moral consciences – citizens have a right, indeed an obligation, to refuse. In 1941, Bishop Gustave von Galen gave a homily condemning Nazi officials for

murdering mentally ill people in his diocese of Muenster, Germany. The bishop said: “Thou shalt not kill!” God wrote this commandment in the conscience of man long before any penal code laid down the penalty for murder, long before there was any prosecutor or any court to investigate and avenge a murder. Cain, who killed his brother Abel, was a murderer long before there were any states or any courts or law. And he confessed his deed, driven by his accusing conscience: “My punishment is greater than I can bear. . . and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me the murderer shall slay me” (*Genesis* 4:13-14)” Should he have opposed the war and remained silent about the murder of the mentally ill? No person of conscience can fail to understand why Bishop von Galen spoke as he did. My dear friends, I beg you not to be misled by confusion and lies. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, does not ask us to follow him to Calvary only for us to be afraid of contradicting a few bystanders along the way. He does not ask us to take up his Cross only to have us leave it at the voting booth door. Recently, Pope Benedict XVI said that “God is so humble that he uses us to spread his Word.” The gospel of life, which we have the privilege of proclaiming, resonates in the heart of every person – believer and non-believer – because it fulfills the heart’s most profound desire. Let us with one voice continue to speak the language of love and affirm the right of every human being to have the value of his or her life, from conception to natural death, respected to the highest degree. October is traditionally the month of the Rosary. Let us pray the Rosary for the strength and fortitude to uphold the truths of our faith and the requirements of our law to all who deny them. And, let us ask Our Lady to bless our nation and the weakest among us.

May Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Lord of Life, pray for us.

Sincerely yours in Christ,
Most Reverend Joseph F. Martino, D.D., Hist. E.D.
Bishop of Scranton