*"Thou shalt not kill." -Ex. 20:13*

*"You have heard it said of old, "Thou shalt not kill," and everyone who kills shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment." -Matt. 5:21-22*

## 1. The Sacredness of Human Life

Human life is sacred because the creation of every person involves a direct, creative act of God that forever puts the person in a unique relationship to the Creator that is not enjoyed by any other earthly creature. God alone is the Master of life from beginning to end, and no person can assume for himself the right to directly destroy an innocent human life.

*See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god beside Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of My hand.* -Deut. 32:39

Man was created to live in harmony with his fellow man and together offer up worship to God, but because of sin, man frequently finds that he is at odds with other men. The human relationship becomes perverted and dominated by envy, greed, anger and covetousness. Following the example of Cain, men not infrequently choose to exercise their freedom in a radical way by using it to destroy others who are made in God's image. God's words in Genesis reveal how horrible a crime murder is and how by its nature it cries out for justice:

*And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground."* -Gen. 4:10

Blood is considered a sacred sign of life. He who spills another's blood needlessly profanes God's gift of life, a crime which calls out not only for judgment by God but also by society, who have been robbed by the taking of an innocent life. Scripture portrays the killing of a person as an insult to God, a destruction of His most priceless work (see Gen. 9:5-6). This law is universally binding and applies to everyone everywhere.

## 2. Legitimate Self-Defense

The Scriptural prohibition against killing is specified in Exodus 23:7: "Do not slay the innocent and the righteous." Scripture and Tradition have always recognized that the legitimate defense of persons and societies are not condemned by the 5th commandment. The commandment only prohibits murder (the Hebrew word *Qal* means "to murder or slay"), and is not meant to refer to legitimate self-defense.

Self-defense is a right of persons and societies, based on the legitimate desire that one's own right to life be respected. Someone who defends his life is not guilty of murder, even if he deals his aggressor a lethal blow. This defense is not only a right, but also a *duty* to someone who is responsible for the well being of another. Nevertheless, this legitimate defense can cross the line

and become murder.

"If a man in self-defense uses more than necessary violence, it will be unlawful" (St. Thomas, *STh* II-II, 64,7). The goal of self-defense is (1) preserving one's own life, and (2) rendering the aggressor incapable of inflicting harm. Only those means should be employed which are minimally necessary to accomplish these ends.

### 3. Capital Punishment

Because governments are charged with preserving the common good, the Church has always acknowledged the right of the state to punish malefactors by means of penalties proportionate to the gravity of the crime, not excluding the death penalty in grave cases. The duty of the individual to repel aggressors is shared by the state, which has a duty to ward off aggression against society and the common good.

Punishment has four ends:

> ***Retribution***: To redress the wrong caused by the offender.
> ***Protection***: To preserve public order and safety.
> ***Deterrence***: To deter would-be criminals from committing the same act.
> ***Rehabilitation***: The correction of the offender, his reconciliation with man and God.

If these four ends can be met (and society thereby defended by aggressors) by bloodless means, then this is more preferable, as it is more in keeping with the dignity of the human person and the mercy of God. St. James says, "Judgment is without mercy to him who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jas. 2:13). Nevertheless, "the state reserves to itself the right to exercise capital punishment when it prudentially decides that it would be in the interest of the common good" (CCC 2266). The Church in recent decades has taught that these situations are rare, but they do exist.

### 4. Homicide

*The fifth commandment forbids direct and intentional killing as gravely sinful. The murderer and those who cooperate in murder commit a sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance. Infanticide, parricide, fratricide and the murder of a spouse are especially grave because of the natural bonds they break. Concerns for eugenics or public health cannot justify any murder, even if commanded by public authority.* -CCC 2268

Indirectly bringing about a person's death is also gravely contrary to the moral law. Unintentionally bringing about a person's death is not itself morally imputable, but a person can still be guilty if the death was brought about by negligence, ignorance or carelessness.

### 5. Abortion

The Church teaches that a human person comes into existence from the first moment of conception, when the soul is immediately created by God and joined to the embryo. The Church

recognizes that every human being is by the very fact a human person as well, and possesses the rights of a person, the most fundamental of these being the right to life. Therefore, anything that would not be morally permissible to do to a person outside the womb is likewise not permissible for somebody *inside* the womb.

Many think the Church's stance against abortion is a relatively modern position, but the fact is that she has opposed abortion from the beginning. Look at this quote from the *Didache*, written around 70 AD:

*You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause the newborn to perish* (Didache,2,2).

Formal cooperation in an abortion is a grave offense and carries with it the penalty of excommunication *latae sententiae* ("by the very commission of the offense"). The Church attaches this penalty in order to better make clear the gravity of the crime in an age when it is looked on as no more than a woman's legitimate choice.

The inalienable right to life must be a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation, "from the moment of conception until death" (CCC 2273).

*Prenatal diagnosis* is morally acceptable so long as the integrity and the dignity of the embryo are respected, but becomes a serious sin when this is done with the thought of possibly obtaining an abortion depending on the results. "A diagnosis must not be the equivalent of a death sentence" (*Donum Vitae*, I, 2).

Other unacceptable acts are *harvesting human embryos for use as disposable biological material* and genetically *manipulating chromosomes* for the purpose of creating a baby of a predetermined qualities (a certain gender, eye color, etc.), neither of which respect the dignity of the human person.

## 6. Euthanasia

What is true of the dignity of persons at the beginning of life is also true at the end. Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect and care. Whatever its motives or means, direct euthanasia consists of putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick or dying persons and is always unacceptable. The error of those who advocate euthanasia is in confusing the *goodness* of life with the *quality* of life. These would say that life is worth living only in so far as a certain quality of life is maintainable, but becomes not worth living if that quality is not attained. The Church's teaching is that life is good regardless of the quality of any particular life. Remember, for Catholics, suffering can have redemptive value and ought not to be shunned but lived through with patience, fortitude and prayer.

## 7. What Constitutes Euthanasia?

Oftentimes there is confusion over what exactly constitutes euthanasia. Is removing the feeding tube of brain-dead persons euthanasia? What about a cancer patient who refuses any further

chemotherapy and chooses instead to take their chances with the disease? When is one guilty of euthanasia? The Catechism says the following:

*Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of "over-zealous" treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. The decisions should be made by the patient if he is competent and able or, if not, by those legally entitled to act for the patient, whose reasonable will and legitimate interests must always be respected.* -CCC 2278

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clarified this position in its 2007 statement on bioethics by stating that food and hydration were considered ordinary means of maintaining life and could thus not be considered extraordinary or disproportionate:

*The administration of food and water even by artificial means is, in principle, an ordinary and proportionate means of preserving life. It is therefore obligatory to the extent to which, and for as long as, it is shown to accomplish its proper finality, which is the hydration and nourishment of the patient. In this way suffering and death by starvation and dehydration are prevented…A patient in a "permanent vegetative state" is a person with fundamental human dignity and must, therefore, receive ordinary and proportionate care which includes, in principle, the administration of water and food even by artificial means.*

> -RESPONSES TO CERTAIN QUESTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONCERNING ARTIFICIAL NUTRITION AND HYDRATION, Aug. 2007

Even if death is thought to be imminent, ordinary care cannot be legitimately interrupted (nutrition, hydration, and palliative care).

## 8. Suicide

In antiquity, men were divided on the question of whether or not suicide was morally licit. Some held it to be acceptable when honor had been gravely offended (the Roman story of the rape of Lucretia), others held that it was never permissible, such as Plato, who said, "A man should wait, and not take his own life until God summons him" (*Phaedo*, 61).

The Catholic faith teaches that everyone is responsible to God for his own life. God is the sovereign Master of life, and we ought to accept whatever life gives us for His honor and the salvation of our own souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the lives God gives us.

Suicide is wrong for several reasons: it contradicts the natural instinct of every creature for self preservation, it is contrary to the just love of self, it is an injustice towards God to whom every person belongs[1], and it is a sin against charity in the family bonds it sunders and the poor

[1] Plato understood this aspect of the gravity of suicide as well. In the *Phaedo*, he explains it this way: "And if one of your own possessions, an ox or an ass, for example took the liberty of putting himself out of the way when you had given no intimation of your wish that he should die, would you not be angry with him,

example it sets.

In order to arouse in the faithful an understanding of the gravity and horror of suicide, the Church has traditionally refused Christian burial to suicides, though this is no longer true today. Oftentimes persons who take their own lives may not be in their right mind, and due to this fact their guilt for this sin is questionable. The Catechism does say that "we should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives…the Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives" (CCC 2283).

## 9. Other Offenses Against the Dignity of Persons

*Scandal* is an attitude or behavior that causes others to do or think evil. A person who causes scandal becomes the tempter of his neighbor. It is a mortal sin when it leads another to commit sin. It is especially grave if done by one in authority or one entrusted with teaching the young.

The *cult of the body* is a neo-pagan notion that tends to sacrifice everything for the physical well being of the body and idolizes physical perfection and success at sports for their own sake. By its selective preference for the strong and attractive over the weak, it can lead to the perversion of human relationships and the social isolation of the weak and physically unattractive.

Temperance enjoins us to avoid all kinds of *excess*: abuse of alcohol, food, or medicine are all offenses against human dignity and become serious sins when they endanger one's own life or the lives of others.

The *use of drugs*, unless for therapeutic purposes, inflicts grave damage on human health and life and is to be rejected.

*Scientific experimentation* on human beings is not morally licit if it exposes the subject's life or well-being to disproportionate and avoidable risks. It is never acceptable when not accompanied by the consent of the subject.

*Organ transplants* are commendable and virtuous, but become offenses against dignity when they are done without the consent of the donor. "It is morally inadmissible to bring about the disabling, mutilation or death of a human being, even in order to delay the death of other persons" (CCC 2296).

*Kidnapping, hostage taking, terrorism, torture*, and punitive use of *amputations, mutilations* and *sterilizations* are against the moral law.

The *bodies of the dead* must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection. *Autopsies* are acceptable for legal inquests or scientific research. *Cremation* is permitted, so long as it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the Resurrection of the body.

## 10. Avoiding War

and would you not punish him if you could?"

The fifth commandment forbids the intentional destruction of human life. Because of the evils and destructions that accompany all wars, the Church urges all to pray for peace and strive as far as possible to avert war.

Nevertheless, as long as the danger of war persists, governments cannot be denied the right of legitimate self-defense, once all peace efforts have failed. Legitimate defense by military force requires much consideration and is a prudential judgment that must be made by a nation's governing authorities. The following are the traditional conditions that must be met for a just war:

- The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain.
- All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective.
- There must be serious prospects of success.
- The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.

The moral law is permanently valid, even during armed conflict. "The mere fact that war has regrettably broken out does not mean that everything becomes licit between the warring parties" (CCC 2312). Non-combatants, wounded soldiers, prisoners and civilians must be respected and treated humanely.

*Insofar as men are sinners, the threat of war hangs over them and will so continue until Christ comes again; but insofar as they can vanquish sin by coming together in charity, violence itself will be vanquished and these words will be fulfilled: "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."*

-CCC 2317

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9).

**<u>For Further Reading:</u>**

Gen. 4:1-16
Ex. 20:13
Rom. 13
Jas. 2:8-13
Plato, *Phaedo*
St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh*, II-II, 64
*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1897-1917, 2258-2330
Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae* (1987)
Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995).