



## **Right to life foundation on which all other rights rest**

*October 9, 2002*

If we want peace, we need to work for justice. The one depends on the other. They can't be separated — in our relations with other countries, or in our politics here at home.

In his great letter to the world "Pacem in Terris" ("Peace on Earth"), Blessed Pope John XXIII wrote that every human society, "to be well ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely, that every human being is a person" with rights and obligations.

He said that every person "has a right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services."

He also added that "the right of every man to life is correlative with the duty to preserve it." In other words, we not only enjoy the right to life; we also each have the obligation to defend it for others.

What does this mean for Coloradans today, especially in an election year?

First, it means that pious words about human dignity mean very little unless we do something about them. We need to act on our convictions. Christian sentiments can only become a Christ-formed culture — a culture of life — when we witness our Catholic faith in all our economic and political choices. We can't talk about the sanctity of life in the womb and then fail the needs of the poor, the homeless, the immigrant, the elderly or the single-parent families in our midst.

At the same time, no amount of good policy on "the social issues" makes up for bad policy when it comes to protecting society's first priority: the right to life. The right to life from conception to natural death is the foundation on which all other rights rest.

A nation cannot systematically kill its unborn children and then witness to the world about human dignity. To the degree that Americans tolerate and even encourage abortion, euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, we contradict our own founding principles as a people. These acts of violence — "legal" or not — are direct attacks on the sanctity of the human person, direct and grievous violations of human dignity. No Catholic can willingly collaborate in them without turning away from his or her faith and undermining any personal claim to discipleship.

If we're disciples of Jesus Christ, we need to act like it. If we don't, we're not. Every abortion kills an innocent life. No disciple can have any willing part in such violence. And wherever abortion is part of the culture, part of the law, we have the duty to work to change it through personal involvement in the public debate, and by holding our elected officials accountable not only at election time, but throughout the year.

Elections bring important issues into focus in a special way. All of us as citizens have the right and the obligation to vote. And every vote is an exercise of political power, for which we will be held accountable by God. What separates real citizens from political consumers is the act of voting with an informed moral conscience.

Oct. 6, Respect Life Sunday, began the annual Respect Life program for American Catholics. It's a good time to reflect on God's great gift of life, the many public issues that flow from it, and the priorities we need to have in defending it. Next month, in the November elections, each of us will face the task, in the voting booth, of building a culture of life — or its opposite. Each of us will make that choice as an individual, but we'll bear the consequences as a community. So we need to choose well.

People who want peace work for justice — beginning with justice for the weakest and most vulnerable among us, from conception to natural death. We need to remember that as vividly on Election Day, Nov. 5, as we do today.

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