



Life — a gift always worth living

TO BE 'SACRED' is to be worthy of veneration and respect. Catholics regard the Scriptures and the Sacraments as 'sacred.' Our belief in the 'sanctity of human life' means that we also regard human beings as sacred. C.S. Lewis, the author of the Narnia books, wrote that next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, another human being is the holiest thing on earth. (*The Weight of Glory*, 1949)

For human beings, sacredness is not something we acquire by passing certain developmental milestones or earn by achieving certain goals: it is not a graduation prize. Neither is it something that can ever be lost. The life of an unborn child or a newborn baby, a person with an intellectual disability or a brilliant scientist, a premier athlete or a bedridden elderly person, is equally sacred. Human life is sacred not because of how we look or what we can do, but because of what we are. *We are sacred* – every human being is sacred - because we have all been created in the image of God. (*Gen: 1:26*)

Belief in the *sanctity of human life* is not peculiar to Christians. Many people of different faiths or of no faith believe in the sanctity or the inherent dignity of the human person. John Paul II's encyclical *The Gospel of Life* affirms that "even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognise the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end." (*Gospel of Life 22*)

However, belief in the sanctity of human life becomes fragile if we reject or forget about God and his hand in our creation. Too frequently modern man "no longer considers life as a splendid gift of God, something sacred entrusted to his responsibility and thus also to his loving care and *veneration*. Life itself becomes a mere *thing*, which man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation." (*Gospel of Life 22*)

New threats to the sanctity of human life: the 'new eugenics'

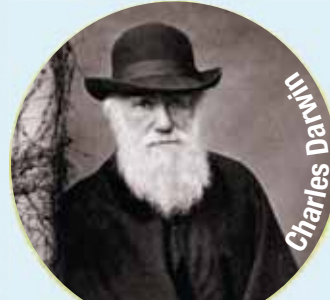
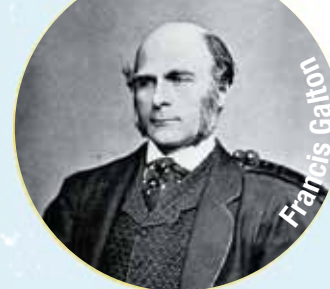
ONE WAY of seeking to control and manipulate human life is by the practice of eugenics. Eugenics aims to produce 'superior' human beings by improving inherited qualities. Popularised in the late 19th century by figures such as Charles Darwin and Francis Galton, eugenic programs during the early 20th century initially focused upon marriage prohibitions and the compulsory sterilization of the 'unfit.' They were later taken to a horrifying level with the Nazi eugenic policies of 'racial hygiene' and genocide which involved the forcible sterilization of 400 000, euthanasia of 200 000 and gassing of over 6 million people (many of whom the Nazis regarded as unworthy of life).

After World War II the international community strongly condemned the eugenic program of the Nazis. Talk of human rights exploded around the world and nations vowed that the mistakes of the past would never be repeated. But sadly, as Pope Benedict recently observed, eugenic forces are still at work in contemporary society.

“ A new mentality is being introduced that tends to justify a different view of life and personal dignity founded on personal desires and individual rights. Hence there is a tendency to give priority to functional ability, efficiency, perfection and physical beauty to the detriment of life's other dimensions which are deemed unworthy. The respect that is due to every human being, even bearing a developmental defect or a genetic disease that might manifest itself during life, is thus weakened while children whose life is considered not worth living are penalised from the moment of conception. (Pope Benedict XVI, Address, 21 Feb. 2009 to the Pontifical Academy for Life)

The 'new eugenics' of the 21st century involves the use of reproductive and genetic technologies to prevent the birth of babies with genetic diseases or disabilities (selective eugenics) or to 'improve' on human nature (enhancement eugenics), both of which are traditional eugenic goals.

When human embryos are conceived by reproductive technology (e.g. IVF), preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) may be used to detect desired or undesired genetic characteristics. Only those 'wanted' embryos that successfully pass genetic testing qualify to be transferred to the uterus. Unwanted embryos are destroyed. PGD is most commonly used to detect serious genetic disorders such as cystic fibrosis. But screening is proposed or has now started for some adult onset forms of cancer and Alzheimer's disease;



minor conditions such as asthma and cross-eye; sex selection; and tissue matching for existing sick siblings.

Screening the child during pregnancy for possible illnesses and disabilities has also become a routine part of prenatal care, and where there is a likelihood of a problem, more invasive diagnostic tests may be used. Although this information can occasionally be used to benefit the child, these tests are usually performed to give parents the option of aborting a child with a serious health problem. Internationally, there are abortion rates of between 84% to 98% following a positive prenatal diagnosis, with 90% of all unborn children with Down's Syndrome now being aborted.

Some parents refuse to undertake any testing of this type, preferring to foster an attitude of unconditional acceptance towards their child. Others, while clearly against abortion, take the view that information from prenatal testing might help them better prepare to welcome a sick or disabled child. However, these couples should be aware that some of these tests (e.g. chorionic villus sampling and amniocentesis) carry a significant risk of miscarriage.

Sanctity of life and quality of life: what's the difference?

BELIEF IN the 'sanctity of human life' acknowledges that every human life is sacred irrespective of its 'quality'.

This is not to say that quality of life is of no importance. We should certainly try to ensure that all people enjoy a reasonable quality of life. People shouldn't be left to cope alone with conditions of poverty, illness, injury or disability. But judgements about a person's quality of life should never become the basis of decisions about who is or is not deserving of reverence and respect, care and concern.

People often use quality of life judgments to justify the decision to select and discard embryos or to abort a sick or disabled child. It is claimed that some children are 'better off dead' than alive. But we never show mercy or love towards children by killing them. We show them mercy and love by giving them the chance to be carried and born, held and loved, to grow and achieve as much as they are able. Doing all that we can to maximise their quality of life is how we respect the sanctity of their lives.

Even as our scientific understanding grows there remains a deeper mystery in why some children are born with illnesses or disabilities. The 'gift of life' can sometimes be difficult to accept and demands great courage and sacrifice from us. But it is not up to us to decide which human beings will live or die. This denies our equality and disregards our sacredness as human beings, all created in the image of God.



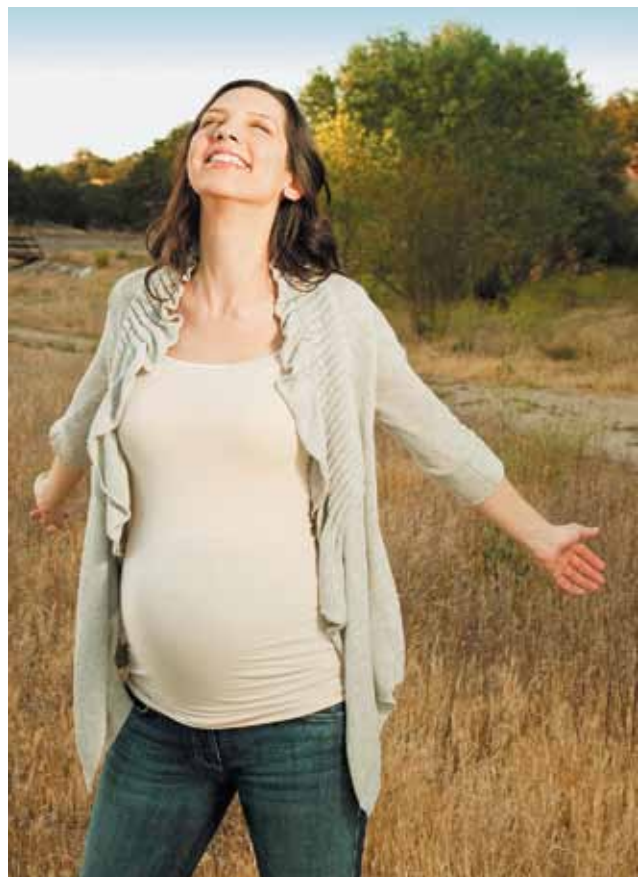
“ God's love does not differentiate between the newly conceived infant still in his or her mother's womb and the child or young person, or the adult and the elderly person. God does not distinguish between them because he sees an impression of his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26) in each one. He makes no distinctions because he perceives in all of them a reflection of the face of his Only-begotten Son... This boundless and almost incomprehensible love of God for the human being reveals the degree to which the human person deserves to be loved in himself, independently of any other consideration -- intelligence, beauty, health, youth, integrity, and so forth. In short, human life is always a good, for it "is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory" (Pope Benedict XVI, Address, 27 Feb. 2006 to the Pontifical Academy for Life)

Respecting the sanctity of human life.

“ 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. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2258)

A CONSEQUENCE of the sanctity of human life is that the destruction of human embryos, abortion, murder, assisted suicide and euthanasia are always wrong. Even in situations involving aggressors rather than innocent human beings, we ought to do everything that we can to defend persons and society without having to resort to killing. This is why Catholic teaching also actively discourages warfare, the use of excessive violence to maintain civil order and capital punishment: better ways should be sought to defend or restore the peace.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also teaches that respect for the sacredness of human life and the dignity of persons involves active care and concern for the health of others. This involves the reasonable provision of food and clothing, housing, health care, basic education, employment, and social assistance (2288); supporting or engaging in scientific research that contributes to healing the sick and the



advancement of public health, without exposing human research participants, including human embryos, to undue risks (2292-95); and opposing threats to human life and dignity such as terrorism and torture. As well as acknowledging the sanctity of the living, we are even called to treat the bodies of the dead with respect and charity. (2300)

“...be profoundly consistent”

CATHOLIC TEACHING on life issues is both comprehensive and radically inclusive of every human being from conception until natural death. No one is excluded. No serious threat to human life is left unopposed on grounds that it is ‘unpopular’ to do so.

“Where life is involved, the service of charity must be profoundly consistent. It cannot tolerate bias and discrimination, for human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage and in every situation; it is an indivisible good. We need then to “show care” for all life and for the life of everyone. (Gospel of Life 87)

The concern of the Church to be engaged in the full range of life issues and consistently recognise the claims of each and every human being to our care and compassion is surely Christianity at its best. But ultimately, it is impossible to further the common good without first acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable

rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop. (Gospel of Life 101) As Pope Benedict repeatedly reminds us, the protection of human life, from conception until natural death, is a non-negotiable principle – our absolute starting point – in human affairs.

“When a society moves towards the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man’s true good. If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of a new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away. The acceptance of life strengthens moral fibre and makes people capable of mutual help. (Charity in Truth, 28)

Being ‘pro-life’ is never an optional extra for Christians. It is at the heart of the Christian life.

“We all have the “inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life.” (Gospel of Life 28)

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