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## Documentation

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# Ratzinger proposes doctrinal document on threats to life

*Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, gave the following address to a special meeting of the College of Cardinals on April 4.*

## I. Biblical foundations

To deal adequately with the problem of threats to life and to find the most effective way to defend human life against these threats, we must first of all determine the essential components, positive and negative, of the contemporary anthropological discussion.

The essential point of departure is, and remains, the biblical vision of man, formulated in an exemplary way in the accounts of creation. The Bible defines the human being in his essence (which precedes all history and is never lost in history) with two distinctive features:

1. Man is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26); the second account of creation expresses the same idea, saying that man, taken from the dust of the earth, carries in himself the divine breath of life. Man is characterized by an immediacy with God that is proper to his being; man is *capax Dei* and because he lives under the personal protection of God, he is sacred: "If anyone sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has man been made" (Gen. 9:6). This is an apodictic statement of divine right which does not permit exceptions: Human life is untouchable because it is divine property.

2. All human beings are one because they come from a single father, Adam, and a single mother, Eve, "the mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20). This oneness of the human race, which implies equality and the same basic rights for all, must be solemnly repeated and inculcated again after the flood. To affirm again the common origin of all men, the 10th chapter of Genesis fully describes the origin of all humanity from Noah: "These three were the sons of Noah, and from them the whole earth was peopled" (Gen. 9:19).

Both aspects, the divine dignity of the human race and the oneness of its origin and destiny, are definitively sealed in the figure of the second Adam, Christ: The Son of God died for all, to unite everyone in the definitive salvation of divine filiation. And so the common dignity of all men appears with total clarity: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

This biblical message, identical from the first page to the last, is the bedrock of human dignity and human rights; it is the great inheritance of the authentic humanism entrusted to the church, whose duty it is to incarnate this message in every culture, and in every constitutional and social system.

## II. Dialectics of the modern age

If we look briefly at the modern age, we face a dialectic which continues even today. On the one hand, the modern age boasts of having discovered the idea of human rights inherent in every human being and antecedent to any positive law, and of having proclaimed these rights in solemn declarations. On the other hand, these rights, thus acknowledged in theory, have never been so profoundly and radically denied on the practical level. The roots of this contradiction are to be sought at the height of the modern age: in the Enlightenment theories of human knowledge and the vision of human freedom connected with them, and in the theories of the social contract and their idea of society.

The fundamental dogma of the Enlightenment is that man must overcome the prejudices inherited from tradition; he must have the boldness to free himself from every authority in order to think on his own, using nothing but his own reason. From this point on, the search for truth is no longer conceived of as a community effort, in which human beings joined in space and time help each other to discover better what is difficult to discover on one's own. Reason, free from any bond, from any relation with what is other, is turned back on itself. It winds up being thought of as a closed, independent tribunal. Truth is no longer an objective datum, apparent to each and everyone, even through others. It gradually becomes something merely external, which each one grasps from his own point of view without ever knowing to what extent his viewpoint corresponds to the object in itself or with what others perceive.

The same truth about the good becomes unattainable. The idea of the good in itself is put outside of man's grasp. The only reference point for each person is what he can conceive on his own as good. Consequently, freedom is no longer seen positively as a striving for the good which reason uncovers with help from the community and tradition, but is rather defined as an emancipation from all conditions which prevent each other from following his own reason. It is

termed *freedom of indifference*.

As long as at least an implicit reference to Christian values is made to orient the individual reason toward the common good, freedom will impose limits on itself in service of a social order and of a liberty guaranteed to all.

Thus, the great theories about liberty and democratic institutions, for example Montesquieu's, always suppose the recognition of a law antecedently guaranteed by God and of universal values which these institutions, by limiting individual liberties, conspire to have respected by those who permit them to be practiced in this way. In this dynamic, the great declarations on human rights were pronounced.

The theories of the social contract were founded on the idea of a law antecedent to individual wills which was to be respected by them. From the moment when religions showed themselves unable to guarantee peace, being rather a cause of war, theories of the social contract were elaborated at the end of the seventeenth century (cf. Hobbes): That which would bring harmony among men was a law recognized by reason and commanding respect by an enlightened prince who incarnates the general will.

Here, too, when the common reference to values and ultimately to God is lost, society will then appear merely as an ensemble of individuals placed side by side, and the contract which ties them together will necessarily be perceived as an accord among those who have the power to impose their will on others.

To illustrate one aspect of this dialectic between theoretical affirmation of human rights and their practical denial, I would like to refer to the Weimar Constitution of the first German republic of Aug. 11, 1919. This constitution does indeed speak of basic rights, but puts them in a context of relativism and of indifferentism regarding values, which the legislators considered to be a necessary consequence of tolerance, and therefore, obligatory. But precisely this absolutizing of tolerance to the point of total relativism also relativized basic rights in such a way that the Nazi regime saw no reason to have to remove these articles, the foundation of which was too weak and ambiguous to offer an indisputable protection against their destruction of human rights.

Thus, by a dialectic within modernity, one passes from the affirmation of the rights of freedom, detached from any objective reference to a common truth, to the destruction of the very foundations of this freedom. The "enlightened despot" of the social contract theorists became the tyrannical state, in fact totalitarian, which disposes of the life of its weakest members, from an unborn baby to an elderly person, in the name of a public usefulness which is really only the interest of a few.

This is precisely the striking characteristic of the great drift currently regarding respect for life: It is no longer a question of a purely individual morality, but one of social morality ever since states and even international organizations became guarantors of abortion and euthanasia, passing

laws which authorize them and providing the wherewithal for those who put them into practice.

### III. The war on life today

If, in fact, today we can observe a mobilizing of forces for the defense of human life in the various pro-life movements, a mobilization which is encouraging and gives cause for hope, we must nevertheless frankly realize that till now the opposite movement has been stronger: the spread of legislation and practices which voluntarily destroy human life, above all the life of the weakest—unborn babies. Today we are the witnesses of a true war of the mighty against the weak, a war which looks to the elimination of the disabled, of those who are a nuisance and even of those who are poor and "useless," in all the moments of their existence. With the complicity of states, colossal means have been used against people at the dawn of their life, or when their life has been rendered vulnerable by accident or illness, or when it is near death.

A violent attack is made on developing life by abortion (with the result that there are 30 million to 40 million a year worldwide), and to facilitate abortion millions have been invested to develop abortifacient pills (RU-486). Millions more have been budgeted for making contraception less harmful to women, with the result that most chemical contraceptives on sale now act primarily against implantation, i.e., as abortifacients, without women knowing it. Who will be able to calculate the number of victims from this massacre?

Surplus embryos, the inevitable product of *in vitro* fertilization, are frozen and eliminated unless they join their little aborted brothers and sisters who are to be turned into guinea pigs for experimentation or into raw materials for curing illnesses such as Parkinson's disease and diabetes. *In vitro* fertilization itself frequently becomes the occasion of "selective" abortion (e.g., choice of sex), when there are undesired multiple pregnancies.

Prenatal diagnosis is almost routinely used on so-called women "at risk" to eliminate systematically all fetuses which could be more or less malformed or diseased. All of those who have the good fortune of being carried to term by their mother, but have the misfortune of being born disabled, run the serious risk of being eliminated immediately after birth or of being deprived of nourishment or the most elementary care.

Later, those whom illness or accident cause to fall into an "irreversible" coma will frequently be put to death to answer the demand for organ transplants, or they will even be used for medical experiments ("warm cadavers").

Finally, when the prognosis is terminal, many will be tempted to hasten its arrival by euthanasia.

### IV. Reasons for the opposition to life

But why is there this victory of legislation and anti-human practice precisely at the time when the idea of human rights seemed to have reached the point of universal and uncondi-

tional recognition? Why do even Christians, even persons of great moral formation, think that the norms regarding human life could and should be part of the compromises necessary to political life? Why do they fail to see the insuperable limits of any legislation worthy of the name—the point at which “right” becomes injustice and crime?

1. At the first stage of our reflection I think I can point to two reasons, behind which others are probably hiding. One reason is reflected in the opinion of those who hold that there must be a separation between personal ethical convictions and the political sphere in which laws are formulated. Here, the only value to be respected would be the complete freedom of choice of each individual, depending on his own private opinions.

In a world in which every moral conviction lacks a common reference to the truth, such a conviction has the value of a mere opinion. It would be an expression of intolerance to seek to impose that conviction on others through legislation, thus limiting their freedom. Social life, which cannot be established on any common, objective referent, should be thought of as the result of a compromise of interests, with a view to guaranteeing the maximum freedom possible for each one. In reality, however, wherever the decisive criterion for recognizing rights becomes that of the majority, wherever the right to express one’s own freedom can prevail over the right of a voiceless minority, there is the might that has become the criterion of right.

This result is even more obvious and is extremely serious when in the name of freedom for those who have power and voice, the fundamental right to life is denied to those who do not have the possibility of making themselves heard. In reality, in order to exist any political community must recognize at least a minimum of objectively established rights not granted by way of social conventions, but antecedent to any political system of law. The same “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” signed by almost all the countries of the world in 1948 after the terrible experience of the Second World War, expresses fully, even in its title, the awareness that human rights (the most basic of which is the right to life) belong to man by nature, that the state recognizes them but does not confer them, that they belong to all human beings inasmuch as they are human beings, and not because of secondary characteristics which others would have the right to determine arbitrarily.

One understands, then, how a state which arrogates to itself the prerogative of defining which human beings are or are not the subject of rights and which consequently grants to some the power to violate others’ fundamental right to life, contradicts the democratic ideal to which it continues to appeal and undermines the very foundations on which it is built. By allowing the rights of the weakest to be violated, the state also allows the law of force to prevail over the force of law. One sees, then, that the idea of an absolute tolerance of freedom of choice for some destroys the very foundation

of a just life for men together. The separation of politics from any natural content of right, which is the inalienable patrimony of everyone’s moral conscience, deprives social life of its ethical substance and leaves it defenseless before the will of the strongest.

Someone may ask us, however, when does the person, the subject of basic rights which must be absolutely respected, begin to exist. If we are not dealing with a social concession, but rather a recognition, the criteria for this determination must be objective as well. Now as *Donum Vitae* (1,1)

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has confirmed, modern genetics shows that “from the time that the ovum is fertilized a new life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth.” Science has shown “that from the first instant, the program is fixed as to what this living being will be; a man, this individual man with his characteristic aspects already well determined. Right from fertilization is begun the adventure of a human life and each of its great capacities require time to develop and to be in a position to act.” The recent discoveries of human biology recognize that “in the zygote resulting from fertilization the biological identity of a new human individual is already constituted.” Certainly no experimental datum can be in itself sufficient to bring us to the recognition of a spiritual soul; nevertheless, the conclusions of science regarding the human embryo provide a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the moment of the first appearance of a human life: How could a human individual not be a human person? Regarding this question, if the magisterium has not expressed itself in a binding way by philosophical affirmation, it has still taught constantly that from the first moment of its existence, as the product of human generation, the embryo must be guaranteed the unconditional respect which is morally due to a human being in his spiritual and bodily totality. “The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and

therefore, from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life."

2. A second reason which explains the extent of a mentality opposed to life, I think, is the very concept of morality that today is widespread. Often a merely formal idea of conscience is joined to an individualistic view of freedom, understood as the absolute right to self-determination on the basis of one's own convictions. This view is no longer rooted in the classical conception of the moral conscience, in which (as Vatican II said) a law resounds which man does not give himself, but which he must obey (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 16). In this conception, which belongs to the entire Christian tradition, conscience is the capacity to be open to the call of truth that is objective, universal, and the same for all who can and must seek it. It is not isolation but communion: *cum scire* in the truth concerning the good, which accompanies human beings in the intimacy of their spiritual nature. It is in this relationship with common and objective truth that conscience finds its justification and its dignity, a dignity which must always be accurately guaranteed by a continuing formation. For the Christian this naturally entails a *sentire cum ecclesia*, and so, an intrinsic reference to the authentic magisterium of the church.

On the other hand, in the new conception, clearly Kantian in origin, conscience is detached from its constitutive relationship with a content of moral truth and is reduced to a mere formal condition of morality. Its suggestion "do good and avoid evil," would have no necessary and universal reference to the truth concerning the good, but would be linked only with the goodness of the subjective intention. Concrete actions, instead, would depend for their moral qualification on the self-understanding of the individual, which is always culturally and circumstantially determined. In this way, conscience becomes nothing but subjectivity elevated to being the ultimate criterion of action. The fundamental Christian idea that nothing can be opposed to conscience no longer has the original and inalienable meaning that truth can only be imposed in virtue of itself, i.e., in personal interiority. Instead, we have the divinization of subjectivity, the infallible oracle of which is conscience, never to be doubted by anyone or anything.

## V. Anthropological dimensions of the challenge

1. However, it is necessary to investigate the roots of this opposition to life more deeply. And so on a second level, reflecting a more personalist approach, we find an anthropological dimension where we should pause, however briefly.

It should be noted here that Western culture increasingly affirms a new dualism, where some of its characteristic traits converge: individualism, materialism, utilitarianism, and the hedonist ideology of self-fulfillment for oneself. In fact, the body is no longer perceived naturally by the subject as the

concrete form of all of his relations with God, other persons, and the world, i.e., as that datum which in the midst of a universe being built, a conversation in course, a history rich in meaning, one can participate in positively only by accepting its rules and its language. Rather, the body appears to be a tool to be utilized for one's well-being, worked out and implemented by technical reason which figures out how to draw the greatest profit from it.

In this way even sexuality becomes depersonalized and exploited. Sexuality appears merely as an occasion for pleasure and no longer as an act of self-giving or as the expression of a love in which another is accepted completely as he or she is, and which opens itself to the richness of life it bears, i.e., a baby who will be the fruit of that love. The two meanings of the sexual act, unitive and procreative, become separated. Union is impoverished while fruitfulness is reduced to the sphere of a rational calculation: "A child? Certainly. But when and how I want one."

It becomes clear that such a dualism between technology and the body viewed as an object permits man to flee from the mystery of being. In reality birth and death, the appearance and passing of another, the arrival and the dissolution of the ego all direct the subject immediately to the question of his own meaning and his own existence. And perhaps to escape this anguishing question he seeks to guarantee for himself the most complete dominion possible over these two key moments in life; he seeks to put them under his own control. It is an illusion to think that man is in complete possession of himself, that he enjoys absolute freedom, that he can be manufactured according to a plan which leaves nothing uncertain, nothing to chance, nothing to mystery.

2. A world which makes such an absolute option for efficiency, a world which so approves of a utilitarian logic, a world which for the most part thinks of freedom as an absolute right of the individual and conscience as a totally solitary, subjectivist court of appeal, necessarily tends to impoverish all human relations to the point of considering them finally as relations of power and of not allowing the weakest human beings to have the place which is their due. From this point of view, utilitarian ideology heads in the direction of machismo, and feminism becomes the legitimate reaction against the exploitation of the woman.

However, so-called feminism is frequently based on the same utilitarian presuppositions as machismo and, far from liberating woman, contributes rather to her enslavement.

When in line with the dualism just described woman denies her own body, considering it simply as an object to be used for acquiring happiness through self-achievement, she also denies her own femininity, a properly feminine gift of self and her acceptance of another person, of which motherhood is the most typical sign and the most concrete realization.

When woman opts for free love and reaches the point of claiming the right to abortion, she helps to reinforce the notion of human relations according to which the dignity of

each one depends, in the eyes of another, on how much he is able to give. In all of this, woman takes a position against her own femininity and against the values of which she is the bearer: acceptance of life, availability to the weakest, unconditional devotion to the needy. An authentic feminism, working for the advancement of the woman in her integral truth and for the liberation of all women, would also work for the advancement of the whole human person and for the liberation of all human beings. This feminism would, in fact, struggle for the recognition of the human person in the dignity which is due to him or her from the sole fact of existence, of being willed and created by God, and not for his or her usefulness, power, beauty, intelligence, wealth or health. It would strive to advance an anthropology which values the essence of the person as made for the gift of self and the acceptance of the other, of which the body, male or female, is the sign and instrument.

It is precisely by developing an anthropology which presents man in his personal and relational wholeness that we can respond to the widespread argument that the best way to fight against abortion would be to promote contraception. Each of us has already heard this rebuke leveled against the church: "It is absurd that you want to prevent both contraception and abortion. Blocking access to the former means making the latter inevitable." A similar claim, which at first sign seems totally plausible, is, however, contradicted by experience: The fact is that generally an increase in the rate of contraception is paralleled by an increase in the rate of abortion. It must be noted, in fact, that contraception and abortion both have their roots in that depersonalized the utilitarian view of sexuality and procreation which we have just described and which in turn is based on a truncated notion of man and his freedom.

It is not a matter of assuming a stewardship that is responsible and worthy of one's own fertility as the result of a generous plan that is always open to the possible acceptance of new, unforeseen life.

It is rather a matter of ensuring complete control over procreation, which rejects even the idea of an unplanned child. Understood in these terms, contraception necessarily leads to abortion as a "backup solution." One cannot strengthen the contraception mentality without strengthening at the same time the ideology which supports it, and therefore without implicitly encouraging abortion. On the contrary, if one develops the idea that man only discovers himself fully in the generous gift of himself and in the unconditional acceptance of the other, simply because the latter exists, then abortion will increasingly appear as an absurd crime.

An individualistic type of anthropology, as we have seen, leads one to consider objective truth as inaccessible, freedom as arbitrary, conscience as a tribunal closed in on itself. Such an anthropology leads woman not only to hatred toward men, but also to hatred toward herself and toward her own femininity, and above all toward her own motherhood.

More generally, a similar anthropology leads human be-

ings to hatred toward themselves. Man despises himself; he is no longer in accord with God who found his human creation to be "something very good" (Gen. 1:31). On the contrary, man today sees himself as the destroyer of the world, an unhappy product of evolution. In reality, man who no longer has access to the infinite, to God, is a contradictory being, a failed product. Thus, we see the logic of sin: By wanting to be like God, man seeks absolute independence. To be self-sufficient he must become independent, he must be emancipated even from love, which is always a free grace, not something that

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can be produced or made. However, by making himself independent of love, man is separated from the true richness of his being and becomes empty. Opposition to his own being is inevitable. "It is not good to be a human being"—the logic of death belongs to the logic of sin. The road to abortion, to euthanasia, and to exploitation of the weakest lies open.

To sum up everything, then, we can say: The ultimate root of hatred for human life, of all attacks on human life, is the loss of God. Where God disappears, the absolute dignity of human life disappears as well. In light of the revelation concerning the creation of man in the image and likeness of God, the inestimable sacredness of the human person has appeared. Only this divine dimension guarantees the full dignity of the human person. Therefore, a purely vitalist argument, as we often see used (e.g., in the sense intended by A. Schweitzer), can be a first step, but remains insufficient and never reaches the intended goal. In the struggle for life talking about God is indispensable. Only in this way does the metaphysical foundation of human dignity become apparent; only in this way does the value of the weak, of the disabled, of the non-productive, of the incurably ill become apparent; only in this way can we relearn and rediscover, too, the value of suffering: The greatest lesson on human dignity always remains the cross of Christ; our salvation has its origin not in what the Son of God did, but in his suffering, and whoever does not know how to suffer does not know how to live.

## Possible responses to the challenge of our time

What should be done in this situation to respond to the challenge just described?

For my part, I would like to confine myself to the possibilities associated with the function of the magisterium. Magisterial statements on this problem have not been wanting in recent years. The Holy Father tirelessly insists on the defense of life as a fundamental duty of every Christian; many bishops speak of it with great competence and force. In the past few years the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has published several important documents on the moral themes regarding respect for human life. In 1974 the congregation issued a "Declaration on Procured Abortion"; in 1980, with the instruction *Jura et Bona*, it published a statement on the problems of euthanasia and care for the terminally ill; in 1987 the instruction *Donum Vitae* confronted, in the context of dealing with medically assisted procreation, the problem of respect for human embryos, of the so-called "surplus" products of *in vitro* fertilization, of their freezing and destruction as well as that of selective abortion following multiple implantations.

In spite of these position statements, in spite of very numerous pontifical addresses on some of these problems or on their particular aspects, the field remains wide open for a global restatement on the doctrinal level which would go to the deepest roots of the problem and denounce the most aberrant consequences of the "death mentality."

One could think, then, of a possible document on the defense of human life which in my opinion should have two original characteristics in respect to the preceding documents. First of all, it should not only develop its treatment of individual morality, but should also give consideration to social and political morality. More in detail, the threats against human life could be confronted from five points of view: the doctrinal, the cultural, the legislative, the political, and finally, the practical.

From the specifically doctrinal point of view the magisterium today could propose a strong reaffirmation of the principle that "the direct killing of an innocent human being is always a matter of grave sin." Without being a formal dogmatic pronouncement, this affirmation would nevertheless have the weight of a dogmatic pronouncement. Its key elements: "direct killing," "innocent human being," "a matter of grave sin," can effectively be defined with precision. Neither biblical foundations nor those of tradition are lacking.

Such a strictly doctrinal position taken with a high degree of authority could have the greatest importance at a time of widespread doctrinal confusion. However, that is not enough. The reasons for our faith, its human evidence, must be apparent in the context of our time. Hence, there is the necessity of developing the church's teaching by following other points of view.

The cultural point of view would allow for a denunciation of the anti-life ideology, which is based on materialism and

justified by utilitarianism.

The legislative point of view could present an outline of the different types of legislation which are being planned in regard to abortion, the embryo trade, euthanasia, etc. This would make it possible to highlight the implicit presuppositions of these laws, to show that they are intrinsically immoral, and to clarify the proper function of civil law in relation to the moral law.

The political point of view could be one of the most important elements. It would be a matter of showing how laws are always the implementation of a social plan and how the implicit intention in anti-life laws is basically totalitarian within society and imperialistic on the part of the developed countries of the West in regard to the Third World countries. The former are seeking to contain the latter on the pretext of demographic politics and are not shunning any means.

From the practical point of view, finally, we could commit ourselves to making people aware of the wickedness involved in using certain abortifacient or contraceptive-abortifacient means, of the evil implicit in belonging to or promoting so-called "right to death with dignity" associations or in distributing pamphlets which teach how to commit suicide.

In this context, one could also speak of the role of the mass media, of parties and parliaments, of doctors and health-care personnel, always mentioning the positive and negative aspects: on the one hand denouncing any complicity, on the other encouraging, praising, and motivating those activities which favor life.

And so we arrive at the second original feature of a possible new document: Although there should be room for a denunciation, this would not be the main feature. Above all, it would be a matter of giving a joyous restatement of the message about the immense value of each and every human being, however poor, weak or suffering he or she may be. The statement would show how this value is seen in the eyes of philosophers, but above all in the eyes of God as revelation teaches us.

It would be a matter of recalling with wonder the marvels of the Creator toward his creation, the marvels of the Redeemer toward those he came to meet and save. It would be a matter of showing how receptivity to the Spirit entails in itself a generous availability to other people, and thus a receptivity toward every human life from the first moment of its existence until the time of its death.

In short, against all ideologies and politics of death, it is a matter of recalling all that is essential in the Christian good news: Beyond all suffering, Christ has cleared the way to thanksgiving for life in both its human and divine aspects.

More important than any document will be a coherent and committed proclamation of the Gospel of life by all preachers of the world, to rebuild the clarity and joy of the faith and to offer believers the reason for our hope (1 Pt. 3:15), which can also convince non-believers.