

On Service to Human Life

Following is the text of the address given by Pope Paul to the bishops of the mid-western United States.

Venerable and dear Brothers in Christ,

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die, but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."



Today, brethren, by your presence at the See of Peter, you solemnly attest by word and action that you firmly believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God, and that your ministry is dedicated to his work of salvation — the salvation of the world. You have come, as bishops of the Catholic Church, in order to celebrate in a special way the communion of this universal Church. All of us together are gathered in the Holy Spirit; our pastoral meeting is placed under the sign of absolute fidelity to "the chief Shepherd" of the flock. In order at this moment to have a deeper insight into our mission, it is fitting for us to look up to him who says: "I have life, and have it to the full."

Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, remains forever the exemplar of all our pastoral activities. We are his disciples, and "it is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher." Our ministry is patterned on his. We have been sent to carry on, in his name and by his power, the work of God's only Son. We have been sent, as apostles, to preach the Gospel of salvation, to proclaim life in Christ, and finally to lead the human family to the fulness of eternal life. Since, in God's plan, the whole person is called to eternal life, and this life is already begun on earth, our ministry necessarily involves service to human life in its entirety.

We wish today to speak especially about life: to assure you all of our closeness to you in the splendid efforts, the sustained efforts, the united efforts, that you have made on behalf of life, precisely in order to be faithful to your calling as shepherds of God's people in the States of Ohio, Michigan and Minnesota. By reason, moreover, of the solidarity of unity, responsibility and merit that links the entire hierarchy in your country in this crucial matter, we now address our words not only to you, but also to all the bishops of the United States — as we did during the "ad limina" visit of the New York bishops last month, and as we intend, with God's help, to do in the future.

We speak to you as one who has been called to strengthen his brothers, and who, for this reason, has been given supreme authority in the Church of Jesus Christ. And so, in his name, in the name of Jesus Christ, we thank you for your ministry to the service of life. We know that you have labored precisely in order that the words of the Good Shepherd would be fulfilled: "that they may have life and have it to the full."

Under your leadership, so many of the Catholic people — priests, deacons, religious and laity — have joined in numerous initiatives aimed at defending, healing and promoting human life.

With the enlightenment of faith, the incentive of love and an awareness of your pastoral accountability, you have worked to oppose whatever wounds, weakens or dishonors human life. Your pastoral charity has found a consistent expression in so many ways — all related to the question of life, all aimed at protecting life in its multiple facets. You have endeavored to proclaim in practice that all aspects of human life are sacred.

In this regard, your efforts have been directed to the eradication of hunger, the elimination of subhuman living conditions and the promotion of programs on behalf of the poor, the elderly and the minorities. You have worked for the improvement of the social order itself. At the same time we know that you have held up to your people the goal to which God calls them: the life above, in Christ Jesus.

Among your many activities at the service of life there is one which, especially at this juncture of history, deserves our strongest commendation and our firmest support: it is the continuing struggle

against what the Second Vatican Council calls the "abominable crime" of abortion. Disregard for the sacred character of life in the womb weakens the very fabric of civilization; it prepares a mentality, and even a public attitude, that can lead to the acceptance of other practices that are against the fundamental rights of the individual. This mentality can, for example, completely undermine concern for those in want, manifesting itself in insensitivity to social needs; it can produce contempt for the elderly, to the point of advocating euthanasia; it can prepare the way for those forms of genetic engineering that go against life, the dangers of which are not yet fully known to the general public. It is therefore very encouraging to see the great service you render to humanity by constantly holding up to our people the value of human life. We are confident that, relying on the words of the Good Shepherd, who inspires your activity, you will continue to exercise the leadership in this regard, sustaining the entire ecclesial community in its own vocation at the service of life.

It is also a source of worldwide honor that, in your country, so many upright men and women of differing religious convictions are united in a profound respect for the laws of the Creator and Lord of life, and that, by every just means at their disposal, they are endeavoring, before the witness of history, to take a definitive stand for human life.

We are convinced moreover that all efforts made to safeguard human rights actually benefit life itself. Everything aimed at banishing discrimination — in law or in fact — which is based on "race, origin, color, culture, sex or religion" is a service to life.

When the rights of minorities are fostered, when the mentally or physically handicapped are assisted, when those on the margin of society are given a voice — in all these instances the dignity of human life, the fulness of human life, and the sacredness of human life are furthered. And all the work done in your local Churches in the area of the Catholic school, in training for social justice, and in confronting various social issues touching the local, national or international community are a service to life. In particular, every contribution made to better the moral climate of society, to oppose permissiveness and hedonism, and all assistance to the family, which is the source of new life, effectively uphold the values of life.

We know that, in conjunction with the tenth anniversary of Humanae Vitae, various initiatives are being sponsored throughout your country to explain natural family planning, in accordance with the teaching of the Church. These activities honor life directly in the dignity and importance of its origin. In supporting natural family planning programs, the Church gives witness not only to her fidelity to the Creator, but also to her faithful service to the human person, who remains "the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions."

Your mission at the service of human life, however, finds its summit in leading your people to the fulness of eternal life: salvation in Christ. Through your ministry, the Lord himself offers the faithful the bread of life: it comes from the table both of God's word and of the Body of Christ. And according to Christ's promise, he who eats this bread already has eternal life.

In all the hopes, in all the difficulties and challenges of your ministry, we exhort you to go forward with fidelity and confidence in the communion of the universal Church, leading your people along the path of life. Remember that Christ tells us: "I am with you always."

Dear Brothers in Christ: Why do we speak about these things? Because of the vital importance of the theme of life as an orientation of our ministry. But also, so that, gathered in the Holy Spirit, we may experience together the joy of life in Christ, and the joy of being apostles of him who is Life itself. And we pray that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, you will go forth to prepare in your local Churches a fresh outpouring of Christian joy among all your people: a job based on the keen conviction that God sent his Son to bring eternal life, so that the world might be saved through him.

With these sentiments, Brethren, and with deep affection in the Lord, we send our greeting and our Apostolic Blessing to all your dioceses, to all your clergy, religious, seminarians and laity. "Peace to all of you who are in Christ."

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