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Faithful For Life: A Moral Reflection

A Statement from the U.S. Bishops
September 1995

A man on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho was beaten, robbed and dumped by the side of the road to die. Three travelers later saw him lying there. The first and the second were his own countrymen, and in fact, one was a priest and the other a Levite. Each one crossed the road to avoid the victim and hurried on his way. The third man was a foreigner, almost as unwelcome as the bandits themselves. He was the only one who stopped, gave the victim first aid, carried him to the nearest inn (where he himself would not have been welcome to stay), and lodged him there at his own expense to convalesce (Lk. 10:29-37).

This was the story told by Jesus when asked: "Who is my neighbor?" The Samaritan befriended the Jew in a way that the Jew's countrymen failed to do. Jesus tells us that the Samaritan did his duty, while the first to see the victim did not. To be a neighbor, the victim did not need to be kin or countryman or someone to whom the rescuer had made a commitment. Anyone lying helpless in that ditch was neighbor.

We are all journeying down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and this story haunts us, for it flatly contradicts the strong persuasion so widely held today that our loyalties and our obligations are owed only to those of our choice. On the contrary, we owe fidelity to those we choose and, beyond them, to others we do not choose. It is We who have been chosen—to go out of our way for them.

The charity of Christ and the unsettling imperatives of his Gospel compel us as Catholic bishops to speak on behalf of neighbors whose lives are devalued: the faceless poor, the hungry children, the neglected elderly.

Human lives have stood in jeopardy for various reasons in our country and throughout the world, and our witness over the years has taken many forms and defended many victims. Beginning as early as 1840, the Catholic bishops of the United States have spoken out on myriad subjects that concern our fidelity to one another. Alcohol and drug abuse, racial justice, the welfare of working men and women and persons with disabilities, civil freedoms, capital punishment, adolescent pregnancy and world peace are just a few of these.

Of particularly grave concern at this time, however, are abortion and euthanasia. We choose now to speak about these concerns because each places human life itself at stake, and each has broad implications for our fidelity to God and to one another.

At the very heart of our respect for human life is a special and persistent advocacy for those who depend on others for survival itself. Those most dependent lie on the opposite extremities of their life's journey, near the start and near the finish. Because they are helpless to provide for themselves, they are utterly at the mercy of those closest to them. Many are welcomed by those to whose care they have been entrusted. Others are not so welcomed.

Since the legal floodgates were opened in 1973 by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Roe v. Wade, an abortion mentality has swept across our land and throughout our culture. The language and the mindset of abortion—presented in terms of unlimited choice, privacy, and autonomy—pervade our entertainment, our news, our public policies, and even our private lives. Wrapped so appealingly in the language of self-determination, cloaked so powerfully in the mantle of federal authority, is it any wonder that the logic of Roe has been extended to apply beyond the unborn? Is it any wonder that it appears so explicitly in our public and private conversations about euthanasia?

Over the past year, in the midst of our reflections on the crises of abortion and euthanasia in our country, we were blessed with the papal encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*. Speaking to every country, the Holy Father reminded us that the modern phenomena of abortion and euthanasia highlight a crying need to respect, protect, love, and serve human life (*EV* §5). Here we reflect upon these issues in the context of the alarming trend to advance abortion and euthanasia in the name of freedom. But it is a freedom gone wrong.

As disciples of Christ, as bishops in his church, our first concern for human life has to be for those who are unwanted—with fatal results—by their parents or their children, or by society itself. Such as these fall victim to the ultimate abuse of abortion or euthanasia. As human beings we are outraged at the cruel injustice of these acts of deliberate killing. And our Christian faith gives an even sharper edge to our consciences in this matter, compelling us to call for courage and unconditional love in defense of those who are helpless.

The Fraying of Fidelity

Faithful to a long tradition, the Second Vatican Council denounced abortion and euthanasia as "disgraceful" and "unspeakable crimes" (Gaudium et Spes, §27, §51). Yet such practices, proved through centuries of experience to be wrong and destructive of human life and human dignity, are in our day expounded upon in schoolrooms, prescribed by physicians, condoned by public figures, protected by courts, subsidized by legislatures, and even advertised in the Yellow Pages. How has it come to pass that the elimination of one's child or one's parent, acts of desperation wrought in every age, are now described as sensible and even attractive alternatives? And is it not unthinkable that people who call themselves Christians sometimes fit in so well among a people that tolerates the killing of its unborn children and elders?

It is for good reason that many find the roots of this disdain for life in the breakdown of the family. The family has a special role to play throughout the life of its members, for it is within the family that neighboring begins or does not. The family is the first haven where those who are dependent—by being too young or too old, too disabled or too sick to care for themselves—find their closest and surest support. For this reason it can be called the "sanctuary of life" (*Evangelium Vitae*, §11). At the heart of this sanctuary is fidelity—unwavering loyalty both to those we choose and to those who have been given to us. The unraveling of that fidelity in our time leaves dependents to become lawful victims of their guardians.

This same shift toward the self has altered our society's views on marriage and divorce. Men and women find it increasingly difficult to make permanent commitments to each other. Marriage, even for many who plan to parent, is seen as optional. At the same time, the

grounds for divorce, restricted at first to adultery and desertion, have continually expanded in our society to include general incompatibility, finally giving way to groundless or "no fault" divorce. The outcome of groundless divorce has been increasingly more divorce and the disabling of marriage itself as an institution in society.

Christian marriage is the union of a man and a woman bound by the same transforming fidelity which Christ has for his church: for better or for worse. When a people lose confidence in fidelity between husbands and wives, it is an easy leap to imagine that other fidelities—of parents to children, and of adult children to their elder parents—no longer need to be permanent, for-better-or-for-worse obligations. When a family lives in fidelity it is a place of refuge and dignity, a place where each member is accepted, respected, and honored precisely because he or she is a person; and if any member is in greater need, the care which he or she receives is all the more intense and attentive (*Evangelium Vitae*, §92). If it becomes each one only for himself or herself, then instead of being the source, school and standard for fidelity to neighbor, the family can become the scene of its harshest violations. The home becomes the place where, when you knock, they no longer have to let you in.

Freedom vs. Commitment

This decay of inviolable trust has had pervasive effects. The view of human life as the pursuit of individual satisfaction, not to be curtailed by faithful duty, is a belief powerfully expounded in the United States in the fields of education, entertainment, information and politics. As servants of Christ's Gospel, however, we are convinced that such a view of human life is profoundly mistaken (*Veritatis Splendor*, §84-87).

As the Gospel tells us, human beings find fulfillment in pursuing what is authentically good for the human person as created by God. The pursuit of disordered desires masquerading as "interests" easily leads to violence or greed or self-indulgence or loneliness. Our true needs include virtues that human beings sometimes lack the wisdom or the audacity to desire: steadfast friendship, clear thought, patience, candor, compassion, self-control. These are the sinews and ligaments of love.

It is not good for anyone to be alone (Gn. 2:18). We find our fulfillment as committed individuals bound in kinship, friendship and fellowship to our families, our neighbors, and then beyond them to strangers and even to enemies. Without community, we wither.

Many of the critical moments in our lives require that we rise to meet responsibilities given to us, not chosen by us. This is true of our obligation to be stewards of the world's resources. It is equally true of the obligations which bind us in love to our families. We are bound to our children, not because we chose them, but because we were given them: simply because they are our children, our very near neighbors. Many in our society today seem to live by the belief that human beings find their ultimate sense and fulfillment in unlimited individual freedom. Unlimited personal choice is celebrated as the prerequisite for every satisfying human experience, even within the family. Yet such an individualistic concept of freedom severs the true meaning of freedom from its moorings and distorts social life. It extols a society in which individuals stand side by side, but have no bonds holding them together. Yet between life itself and freedom there is an inseparable bond, a link. And that link is love or fidelity (Evangelium Vitae, 20, 76, 96). To live in fidelity we have to rearrange our lives, yield

control and forfeit some choices. To evade the full burden of putting ourselves at the disposal of those we belong to, to allot them only the slack in our own agendas and not what they require, is to practice desertion by other means.

Violation of Life and Trust

Abortion, and now euthanasia, have become socially accepted acts because many have been persuaded that people unfairly lose their freedom when others make claims on them that pose burdens and obligations. In the course of a very few years many people have come to think of an unplanned baby as an unwanted baby, and of an undesired baby as an undesirable one. The prescribed social remedy has been to put an end to the baby's life before he or she can make a claim on yours. Some even believe that a parent or a spouse who has lost the capacity to fend for herself or himself, or is too old or sick to be a good companion, or for whom the cost of care is hard to bear, should be helped to die. It is cruelly ironic that the thought of eliminating one's child or one's parent could be considered an acceptable, even altruistic, action.

To be sure, no one should be blind to the problems that women may face in regard to pregnancy. A decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother. At times it is the father who pressures her to abort their child, or who indirectly encourages her to such a decision by leaving her to face the problems of pregnancy alone. Parents and friends may exert such pressure. A teenager, pregnant and deserted, may feel that she cannot give up her baby in adoption because she does not feel assured that the child will be well cared for. A mother may be persuaded that her child who is disabled would be "condemned" to live a "defective" life. But none of these circumstances, however serious and tragic, gives the parent a right to kill his or her child before or after birth (*Evangelium Vitae*, §58-59). The same kinds of seemingly altruistic claims are sometimes made in regard to the very old. The old and the sick can be persuaded that their lives have become too burdensome both to themselves and to their caregivers—that they have lives "not worth living." But those who would remove, through killing, the disability, pain, or depression of the young or the elderly often act with a conflict of interest they do not see—that it is not the lives of those they care for that are unbearably burdened, but their own lives.

The most obvious victims of abortion and euthanasia are, of course, those who die. But desperate acts leave many casualties. Absolute personal autonomy, pushed to its insanely logical limit, has fueled the abortion movement, resulting in the deaths of more than thirty million unborn children since 1973 in the United States of America. It has also harmed tens of millions of women who are relegated to the "tender mercies" of a $500-million-a-year abortion industry. Youngsters who learn that their parents destroyed or were ready to destroy a child for one reason or another—wrong gender, wrong father, wrong time, wrong health, wrong economy—can and do fear that their own claim on their parents' love and care might go terminally wrong. If a parent destroys one child in the womb, will she or he be able to retain a no-matter-what loyalty toward other children in the family?

The same can now be asked of adult children and their parents. In a climate in which euthanasia is accepted, will adults be able to provide their infirm parents with the unconditional loyalty they themselves once needed to survive as children?

Distorted Fidelities

Today, when many people fear being treated as an object without dignity at the end of their lives, doctors and families confronting an imminent death can be tempted in two directions. They may resort to aggressive but useless procedures as proof of their faithfulness to the dying patient, who may not want or be able to withstand such demanding procedures. This treatment, when used to cure or to sustain, would be benevolent. But when needlessly imposed on someone who is inevitably and imminently dying, it can cause unnecessary hardship on the patient and other burdens on whoever is responsible for his or her care.

Frustrated by the anguish and complexity of such dilemmas, doctors and families may also be tempted to a total denial of fidelity: the violation of life known as euthanasia. For once we have convinced ourselves that every human ailment simply must have a cure, the undeniable fact of incurable illness tempts many to consider "curing" life itself. And the euthanasia movement has convinced many patients that their only "escape" from the pain and indignities of illness and over-treatment is a medically assisted suicide.

This second and more grave violation, that of "assisting" the vulnerable patient by extinguishing his or her life, wears the garb of caring and compassion. But it knows nothing of the Christian understanding of compassion, of "suffering with" our loved ones and alleviating their fears as they confront the shadows at the end of life. It shies away from the search for real solutions to a patient's problems, choosing instead to convince the patient that he or she is the problem—a problem solved only by his or her extinction. As Pope John Paul II has reminded us, true compassion leads to sharing another's pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear (*Evangelium Vitae*, §66).

Efforts to legalize such killing are based not just on an uncritical love of freedom—for the "freedom" to kill oneself is not promoted equally for all who encounter problems in life -- but on a lack of regard for the perduring worth and dignity of sick and disabled people. The truth is that our young and able-bodied citizens support euthanasia for their elders far more strongly than do the old and the frail themselves. That any sick person may be convinced that his or her "assisted suicide" is the responsible, perhaps even expected, solution for a painful illness is an indictment against a society with too little love for some of its most vulnerable members. The sick and the elderly may be required to defend their lives at the very moment in which they are the weakest.

A genuine respect for life abhors euthanasia and assisted suicide as attacks on life. At the same time, it does not require us to impose the burdens of over-treatment on persons near death. Once the dying process has begun, the services due from caregivers must often change. Even though healing is no longer attainable, the physician is still urgently needed to help family members provide their loved one with a peaceful death. The capacity to manage pain, and to offer a comforting presence to patients we cannot cure, is essential to the health care profession and is among its duties to patients. A love which accepts life as a gift also accepts the given limits on our lives; it never abandons those who are close to death.

A Christian Fidelity

People of wholesome spirit and genuine fidelity do not easily turn from life-giving to abortion or euthanasia. These are not the wayward gestures of the innocent; they are the forlorn acts of a society which has forgotten or rejected fidelity to its own. They are signs of a need for conversion.

The Spirit once spoke to the ancient Church in Laodicea and could speak the same words to us today:

You say to yourself: 'I am rich, I have made a fortune and have everything I want,' never realizing thatyou are wretchedly and pitiably poor, and blind and naked too. I warn you, buy from me the gold that has been tested in the fire to make you truly rich, and white robes to clothe you and hide your shameful nakedness, and ointment to put on your eyes to enable you to see (Rv. 3:17-18).

When we turn a blind eye and a deaf ear toward those who are so helpless they cannot even appeal for help, we sustain an injury even more grievous than theirs. This is one of the insights that has most helped Christians focus their faith in this often violent world (Gaudium et Spes, 27). By closing ourselves off to the needs of others we most surely deprive ourselves of life.

The Lord Jesus gave up his life that we may have life, and have it more abundantly (Jn. 10:10). The life he forfeited to violence, the mortal life we all share in this world and which each of us will yield up someday, is a temporary life. It is our only pathway to the life that Jesus entered through his death and resurrection. The transformed and eternal life which he makes possible for us—forever, but starting here and now—is the ultimate life.

The Lord did not say: "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Our love must be of another kind: "Love one another as I have loved you." His gift was not to love those who are deserving of it, and to withhold love from those who are not. This would be an act of mere justice. No, he gave us his own Spirit, empowering us to love as he loves regardless of who deserves what. This is fidelity (Jn. 13:34-35; 1 Jn. 2:7-8; Mt. 5:20-48; 1 Jn. 4:9-21; Rom. 5:6-11; 1 Jn. 3:16).

Like many Americans, we Catholics can be tempted to lose our faith in the virtue of fidelity. But we can scarcely live up to our baptismal fidelity unless we are faithfully committed to persons in need, for better or for worse.

Civil Protest

Our public statements on abortion and euthanasia have often responded to events in the legislative and social order. This has unfortunately fed a misunderstanding, both within the Church and without, that we look only to laws and government to assure society of justice. Quite the contrary. Helping to inform the consciences of our Catholic people is our first priority. To them we say: our obligation in Christ is to speak the truth to your mind, your sensibility, and your moral judgment, no matter what the civil and criminal laws may be. The violations of human life wrought upon the most helpless are not merely illicit; they are, from a Christian perspective, betrayals of trust.

But we are also citizens, and we share the right—indeed, the duty—of all citizens to insist that the laws and policies of the United States be faithful to our founders' conviction that the foremost "unalienable right" conferred by our Creator on all of us is life itself. When disadvantaged or disenfranchised people have their pursuit of happiness, their liberty, and even their lives threatened by their nearest neighbors, we are bound to stand up for them and with them.

Years ago in our nation, African Americans were declared "property" and not "a portion of this people" (Dred Scott v. Sandford, 1857). So their servitude, their enslavement, was then elevated to the stature of a constitutional right. More recently, the Nazis classified the mentally ill and physically disabled as "useless eaters," and Jews, Slavs and Gypsies were called "subhuman." So they were exterminated. Is it any different today when the law treats unborn children as "non-persons" and those who are senile are seen as possessing insufficient "quality of life" to go on living? How can we not hear in our time echoes of those other times, never to be forgotten, when some were considered less than human and others said to have lives "not worth living"?

As bishops, as Catholics, as citizens, we speak against the injustice of destroying children by abortion and eliminating elderly or impaired people by euthanasia. And we speak against the ultimate disgrace of doing these deeds under the sanction of law.

Christ has charged us with a special care for the widow and the orphan, the refugee and the pauper, the sick and the disabled, the accused and the outcast. Those who serve as public leaders have a special responsibility to make courageous choices in support of life, especially through legislative measures (*Evangelium Vitae*, §90)--measures that protect the unborn, the elderly, and the enfeebled who are so mortally threatened today.

What Then Shall We Do?

As Christians, we know our true calling is to find Christ's way, not simply to get our way. If we fail to keep faith with one another we fail in our loyalty to the Lord himself.

Sometimes we Catholics are slow to admit that fidelity to the Gospel is alien, even hostile, to many selfish understandings prevalent in society today. Many today regard Jesus' call to irrevocable commitment as a hard saying. an "ideal" but not an imperative. Yet this Gospel teaching and ancient discipline requires Catholics to take a courageous, even if lonely, stand. It also requires that we apply our beliefs to all our ministries with conviction and intensity.

Within our dioceses the Catholic community is served by a wide variety of agencies that influence and pass on our shared understanding of familial fidelity. Each addresses the protection of human life from its own specialized perspective, witnessing always to the ultimate obligations of open-ended fidelity.

When pregnant women and girls don't know where to turn, thousands of committed Catholics in our dioceses—and others to be sure—are there both to sustain and to challenge them. Ten to 15 million people each year, including many experiencing distressed pregnancies, turn to Catholic Charities for social and emergency services. Across this nation there are more than 3,000 emergency pregnancy centers that offer assistance for prenatal care and related needs,

as well as numerous programs of reconciliation and healing to help women and men deal with the emotional and spiritual aftermath of abortion. When families are caught in a bewildering health crisis, our health care professionals and facilities offer them committed service. Our schools and religious education programs offer young people authentic education in chastity to provide them with a more generous and responsible perspective than society offers. When terrifying moral questions confront families in life-threatening crises, we seek to offer competent and compassionate counsel to them. When those who adhere to belief in the sacredness of life express that belief publicly by their words, public witness, and peaceful protest, we bishops are heard among them—as we have been heard on workers' rights, and civil rights, and in the struggle for peace—urging prayerful, non-violent and even exemplary witness that respects every single human life.

We repeat together what we have stated individually: no woman in need with a child, born or unborn, whether she is Catholic or not, should feel herself without help. We pledge the heart and hands of the Church to help mothers and fathers in need to find pregnancy counseling, pre- and post natal care, housing and material support, and adoption services.

In preaching Christ's Gospel, all of us must speak these things aloud. Abortion and euthanasia are crimes and betrayals which, repeatedly and consistently over the ages, the Church has condemned as contrary to Catholic faith. The deliberate decision to deprive an innocent human being of his or her life is always morally wrong; it can never be a licit means to a good end (Evangelium Vitae, §57). In speaking about this basic teaching, we must also make known from every pulpit the Church's sincere and open welcome to those who seek reconciliation with the Lord and peace with his Church. But let us be clear: No person who subverts this teaching privately or publicly speaks in the name of Catholicism. Nor can anyone who seeks to promote the cause of life through hatred or violence have any part with us.

Who Is This Neighbor?

We are called to be neighbors to everyone, and to "show special favor to those who are poorest, most alone, and most in need. In helping the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned—as well as the unborn baby and the old person who is suffering or near death— we have the opportunity to serve Jesus. He himself said: 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'" (*Evangelium Vitae,* §87).

When God inquired after the missing Abel, Cain asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" "Your brother's blood," the Lord rejoined, "is crying out to me from the ground" (Gn. 4:9-10). This prompted early Christian writers to list similar deeds that "cried to heaven for vengeance." They included violating resident foreigners, mistreating widows and orphans, and cheating laborers of their wages. What gave each of these sins voice before God was not only the exploitation of the vulnerable by the powerful, but the misuse of the helpless by those who should have been their protectors.

Cain's response also makes one think of modern refusals to accept responsibility for our brothers and sisters. Often we see a lack of solidarity towards our society's weakest members — the old, the sick, immigrants, children—and an indifference toward the world's peoples

even when basic values such as survival, freedom, and peace are involved (*Evangelium Vitae*, §9).

Jesus has shown us that his Father's only desire for sinners is forgiveness and restoration, for those who will accept it. Our cry to heaven over violations of trust must include an appeal for the forgiveness and salvation of any who have failed to be their brother's or sister's keeper. Abortion and euthanasia are betrayals of fidelity for which we Catholics should show a special dismay, while showing a specifically Christian compassion for those involved.

Fellow disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to be a welcoming community to all—both those we choose and those who are sent to us. Abraham offered hospitality to three strangers who emerged from the wilderness. Mary offered life and birth to a Child sent by God, and Joseph offered a home to them both. St. Martin of Tours shared his winter cloak with a shivering beggar, and St. Francis of Assisi kissed the open sores of a leper. They all realized the same thing: It was the Lord! When we take another into our keeping, it is not just our brother or our sister. When we go out of our way to help, it is not just our neighbor we serve. We serve the Lord of life, and we become truly alive ourselves.

The Samaritan who was making his perilous way from Jerusalem to Jericho had every reason to be preoccupied with his own endangerment and survival. But the sight of a stranger in more urgent need made that stranger a neighbor! It is often when we feel most at a loss that we encounter the Lord who comes in the guise of a stranger. At such times he comes as if his very life depends upon our welcome; but it is our lives, not his, that most depend upon it.

As Pope John Paul II has said in his encyclical letter Evangelium Vitae: "A great prayer for life is urgently needed, a prayer which will rise up throughout the world" (No. 100). And so we take his prayer as our own and invite all to pray:

O Mary,

Bright dawn of the new world,

Mother of the living,

To you do we entrust the cause of life:

Look down, O Mother,

Upon the vast numbers

Of babies not allowed to be born,

Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,

Of men and women

Who are victims of brutal violence,

Of the elderly and the sick killed

By indifference or out of misguided mercy.

Grant that all who believe in your Son

May proclaim the Gospel of life

With honesty and love

To the people of our time.

Obtain for them the grace

To accept that Gospel

As a gift ever new,

The joy of celebrating it with gratitude

Throughout their lives

And the courage to bear witness to it

Resolutely, in order to build,

Together with all people of good will,

A civilization of truth and love,

To the praise and glory of God,

Creator and lover of life.

(*Evangelium Vitae*, §105)

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