

Journey of Faith



In Short:

- Many contemporary issues threaten human life.
- Some actions against life are intrinsically evil.
- Catholics are called to consistently defend all human life.



That blind, deformed, abandoned young woman made a difference in the world. Today, she is known as Blessed Margaret of Castello. Her life serves as a lesson about the sacredness and inherent value of *all* human life.

All Life Is Sacred

The Fifth Commandment clearly tells us, “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). Following this commandment involves more than not committing murder. We must recognize and promote the dignity and sacredness of all human life.

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin called this all-embracing reverence for life a “**consistent ethic of life**,” which includes opposition to abortion, massacre or genocide, capital punishment, and other sins against the dignity of the human person. It also includes support for social programs that feed the hungry, house the homeless, and help the elderly and immigrants.

A Consistent Ethic of Life

In 1287, Margaret was born into an Italian noble family. She was blind and had a humpback, one leg shorter than the other, and an enlarged, misshapen head. Her parents told people she hadn’t survived birth and banished her from the main rooms of their home. Margaret won the love of the servants with her intelligence and charm.

Fearing her identity might be revealed, her parents walled her into a tiny room in a chapel. Yet Margaret didn’t lose heart. With the help of a priest, she learned to make her prison into a contemplative cell.

Margaret’s parents took her to a city known for healing miracles. When no miracle occurred, they abandoned her at the church. Margaret didn’t despair. Instead, she showed the love her parents denied her by giving love to the poor and needy. She became a Third Order Dominican, working to feed the hungry, care for the sick, and visit those in prison.

“A consistent ethic...argues for a continuum of life which must be sustained in the face of diverse and distinct threats. A consistent ethic does not say everyone in the Church must do all things, but it does say that as individuals and groups pursue one issue, whether it is opposing abortion or capital punishment, the way we oppose one threat should be related to support for a systemic vision of life.”

*Joseph Cardinal Bernardin,
1984 address at Saint Louis University*

Many of us affirm the sacredness of life in particular spheres that touch our hearts. Some are attracted to initiatives that protect the unborn. Others are drawn toward international peace organizations. No matter our cause or passion, we can each take concrete action in a way that supports all life.

"We are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the 'culture of death' and the 'culture of life.' We find ourselves...with the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life."

*Pope St. John Paul II,
the Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae), 28*

- What life issue do you feel strongly about?
- What challenges, if any, do you face in becoming "unconditionally pro-life?"



The Unborn

God gives each of us infinite value—distinct from our circumstances, productivity, or chance of worldly success. Created in God's image and likeness, each person can say to God: "You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13). Jesus shows us that by receiving even little ones with love, we receive the Lord himself:

"Taking a child [Jesus] placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it he said to them, 'Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.'"

Mark 9:36–37

Catholics must witness to the unique preciousness of each baby in the womb and provide families with practical assistance before and after birth. A mother's trust in God will grow as she experiences our support for life—both hers and her child's.

The Church has consistently taught that *abortion* is an **intrinsically evil act**, an action absolutely opposed to the will of God and the laws of nature and therefore never permissible.

The Church's position on life issues is founded in the understanding that human life begins at *conception* or *fertilization*—the fusion of sperm and ovum. In this moment, a unique being with its own soul and dignity is created. This has moral implications for a number of scientific and medical practices:

- embryonic stem-cell research
- human cloning
- some reproductive technologies, including *in vitro* fertilization and artificial insemination

In general, these acts involve the creation and subsequent destruction of human embryos. Regardless of their purpose, intention, or method, they equate to murder and are therefore unacceptable.

"Because it should be treated as a person from conception, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed like every other human being."

CCC 2323

- How does your parish support efforts to end abortion and care for mothers in crisis pregnancies?



The Suffering and Disabled

For the ancient Greek doctor Hippocrates, facilitating a person's death played no part in the practice of medicine: "I will not give a lethal drug to anyone if I am asked, nor will I advise such a plan" (Hippocratic Oath).

Current medical practices have introduced challenges to the question of life and death. Faced with greater possibilities for treatment and pain management, many become confused about what's appropriate. When youth, pleasure, and autonomy are presented as ideals, suffering is viewed as preventable and without meaning. Some assert a "right to die," to choose the time, place, and method of one's own death.

Catholic teaching is clear that **euthanasia**, the deliberate killing of the sick or impaired, is an intrinsically evil act. Withholding ordinary treatment such as nutrition and hydration from babies or adults with disabilities with intent to kill them is never allowed.

"Nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying."

*Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,
Declaration on Euthanasia, II*

- How does allowing God to determine when life ends preserve the dignity of life?



The Innocent Victims of War

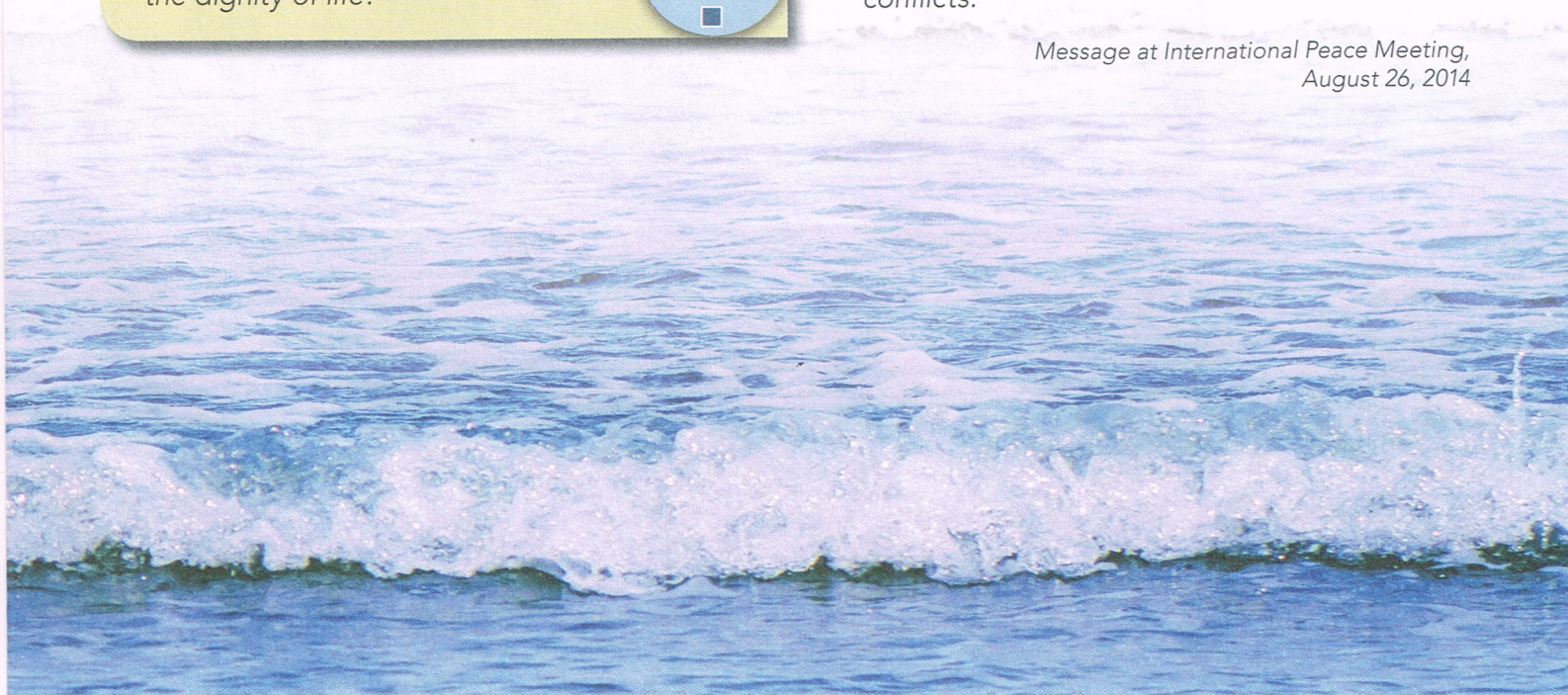
God created us to live in harmony. While Catholic teaching has always allowed for the legitimate defense of the innocent from unjust invasion, the nature of modern war has greatly increased the need to work for peace.

In the twentieth century, marked as it was by world wars and the use of atomic bombs, Catholic social teaching frequently turned to the topic of war and peace. Pope St. John XXIII's encyclical *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)* emphasized human dignity, rights, and duties as the only possible foundation for peace. Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) declared: "the arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree" (GS 81).

The twenty-first century has seen terrorist acts, civil wars, genocide, and wars between nations. In a January 2003 address to the diplomatic corps as the U.S. prepared for war against Iraq, Pope St. John Paul II stated: "War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity." Pope Francis said:

"War is never a satisfactory means of redressing injustice and achieving balanced solutions to political and social discord. All war is ultimately, as Pope Benedict XV stated in 1917, a 'senseless slaughter.' War drags peoples into a spiral of violence which then proves difficult to control; it tears down what generations have labored to build up and it sets the scene for even greater injustices and conflicts."

*Message at International Peace Meeting,
August 26, 2014*



The Convicted Criminal

The Catholic Church tries to balance justice and mercy. In the clear case of murder, justice would make punishment by death morally licit. Yet mercy counsels clemency.

While “the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor,” the ability of the state to enforce life imprisonment no longer makes the criminal a threat (CCC 2267).

“The dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform.”

Pope St. John Paul II, homily, St. Louis, January 27, 1999

Reflect on the following words of Pope Francis in light of your learning about the consistent ethic of life. Record your thoughts and feelings in your journal.

“The innocent victim of abortion, children who die of hunger or from bombings, immigrants who drown in the search for a better tomorrow, the elderly or the sick who are considered a burden, the victims of terrorism, wars, violence and drug trafficking, the environment devastated by man’s predatory relationship with nature—at stake in all of this is the gift of God, of which we are noble stewards but not masters. It is wrong, then, to look the other way or to remain silent.”

Pope Francis’ address to U.S. bishops,
September 23, 2015



- How do your parish and diocese defend and support life? What aspects of a consistent ethic of life are highlighted in their advocacy?
- How could you get more involved in promoting a consistent ethic of life? With which concern might you begin?

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