

On the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful

The inviolability of the person which is a reflection of the absolute inviolability of God, finds its primary and fundamental expression in the inviolability of human life. Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights—for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture—is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination. [\[1\]](#)

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights ... that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.” [\[2\]](#)

When we read the writings of Robert Bellarmine, such as *De Laicis*, his treatise on civil government, what do we find? “All men,” Bellarmine wrote, “are equal, not in wisdom or grace, but in the essence and nature of mankind” (Chapter Seven). Considering the origins of political power, Bellarmine taught, “Political power emanates from God. Government was introduced by divine law, but the divine law has given this power to no particular man. ... Men must be governed by someone, lest they be willing to perish. It is impossible for men to live together without someone to care for the common good. Society must have power to protect and preserve itself. It depends upon the consent of the multitude to constitute over itself a king, consul, or other magistrate. ... For legitimate reasons the people can change the government to an aristocracy or a democracy or vice versa” (Chapter Six). [\[3\]](#)

The political realities of our nation present us with opportunities and challenges. We are a nation founded on “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” but the right to life itself is not fully protected, especially for unborn children, the terminally ill, and the elderly, the most vulnerable members of the American family. We are called to be peacemakers in a nation at war. We are a country pledged to pursue “liberty and justice for all,” but we are too often divided across lines of race, ethnicity, and economic inequality. We are a nation of immigrants, struggling to address the challenges of many new immigrants in our midst. We are a society built on the strength of our families, called to defend marriage and offer moral and economic supports for family life.

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We are a powerful nation in a violent world, confronting terror and trying to build a safer, more just, more peaceful world. We are an affluent society where too many live in poverty and lack health care and other necessities of life. [\[4\]](#)

We must speak of man's rights. Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services. In consequence, he has the right to be looked after in the event of ill health; disability stemming from his work; widowhood; old age; enforced unemployment; or whenever through no fault of his own he is deprived of the means of livelihood. [\[5\]](#)

As the bishops of the United States of America have rightly pointed out, while the Church insists on the existence of objective moral norms which are valid for everyone, "there are those in our culture who portray this teaching as unjust, that is, as opposed to basic human rights. Such claims usually follow from a form of moral relativism that is joined, not without inconsistency, to a belief in the absolute rights of individuals. In this view, the Church is perceived as promoting a particular prejudice and as interfering with individual freedom" (USCCB, Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination (2006), 17). We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data-all treated as being of equal importance-and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment. In response, we need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values. [\[6\]](#)

From Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship

22. There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons. These are called "intrinsically evil" actions. They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned. A prime example is the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion and euthanasia. In our nation, "abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others" (Living the Gospel of Life, no. 5). It is a mistake with grave moral consequences to treat the destruction of innocent human life merely as a matter of individual choice. A legal

system that violates the basic right to life on the grounds of choice is fundamentally flawed.

23. Similarly, human cloning, destructive research on human embryos, and other acts that directly violate the sanctity and dignity of human life are also intrinsically evil. These must always be opposed. Other direct assaults on innocent human life, such as genocide, torture, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war, can never be justified. Nor can violations of human dignity, such as acts of racism, treating workers as mere means to an end, deliberately subjecting workers to subhuman living conditions, treating the poor as disposable, or redefining marriage to deny its essential meaning, ever be justified.

24. Opposition to intrinsically evil acts, which undercut the dignity of the human person, should also open our eyes to the good we must do, that is, to our positive duty to contribute to the common good and to act in solidarity with those in need. As St. John Paul II said, "The fact that only the negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances does not mean that in the moral life prohibitions are more important than the obligation to do good indicated by the positive commandment" (Veritatis Splendor, no. 52). Both opposing evil and doing good are essential obligations.

[1] John Paul II, Christifideles Laici. #38

[2] Declaration of Independence

[3] Drawn from: Bellarmine, Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, <http://www.ncregister.com/site/article/bellarmino-jefferson-and-the-declaration-of-independence> accessed 10-8-16.

[4] Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship #2

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Saturday, 29 October 2016 09:00 -

[\[5\]](#) John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*. #11

[\[6\]](#) Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*. no. 64