

From the desk of Fr. Jim

Stewardship of Life

October is “respect life month.” Everyone in this country has to make decisions about life and its sanctity. I have counseled young single women who find themselves in the surprising position of both being pregnant and having their parents or friends take the position that they should consider an abortion. This encouragement sometimes comes even if their family and friends are Catholic. Perhaps it is motivated by fear, confusion or shame but it is still surprising. If we are to be strong in our resolve as Catholics, we must have certain principals that will carry us through times of trial, when our integrity is tested.

It seems to me that we must first develop a kind of reflexive way of thinking so that we do not fall into temptations regarding what to do in certain circumstances. It is important, however, not to fall into the trap that this is merely theoretical or abstract. Unborn children, the elderly and sick, those who have committed capital crimes and the victims of war are not theories. They are real people, real lives.

The most powerful and sufficient attitude is to be obedient to God’s command: that we cannot take life. Many Catholics do not, however, completely support this idea. They allow for the idea that there are circumstances in which life can be taken. The Catholic teaching against capital punishment has a rare qualification that is based on the necessity of protecting society.

The life of one who is justly convicted can be taken if to do so is the only way that society can protect itself. The Catechism admits that the circumstances would be so rare that they are almost unimaginable. Nonetheless, there is an odd emphasis on this provision, even among those who are devoted to the protection of the unborn. The resolve that needs to be strengthened is that all life, without qualification, is precious and belongs absolutely to God.

Here, it seems, is the issue. Who owns our life? There are a surprising number of criminal cases in which the life of an unborn child was taken in a violent act without the consent of the mother. This is considered a homicide and a violation of a federal law enacted by the Unborn Victims of Violence Act (2004).

The issue, however, in the mind of most Americans has to do with ownership, both of one’s own body and their unborn child. The concept that our life (all life) comes from God and is under his domain and protection is one that is not dramatically held in our society. Even if given lip service, there is a kind of “circumstantial qualification” that requires that God’s domain be mitigated by “good sense”. The examples of rape, incest, poverty, handicaps all fit into what some regard as “good sense”.

In these circumstances, this way of thinking says that they can rightly take the life of the unborn. If we hold this attitude or opinion, we will probably not be able to faithfully withstand any of the various situations that face all of us. The life of faith has, as its very first characteristic, obedience to God. Even if we have only made the

first steps toward becoming obedient, we must assure ourselves that any maturity and confidence that we may experience comes as a result of being humble before God's authority.

If we are to develop a Catholic attitude about these and other issues, our approach must be holistic. The original use of the word "hypocrite" was to describe an actor on a stage. They were called hypocrites before the word was used exclusively to describe someone who pretended to be holy. For one who is (unfortunately) considered a "professional" Christian, there is nothing worse than the moniker of hypocrisy. It seems to me that the basis for it being a justifiable description is a selective approach to the call to be obedient. It is "smorgasbord Christianity."

We can go down the line of dogmas and doctrines and take a little of this or a little of that, but leave a few things, or most of it behind. To be Catholic is to strive to accept it all, everything that God has revealed to us through His Son.

Of course, I have to put my own opinions on trial if I am to be truly obedient, both to God and my words, as well. I am an intellectual pacifist. In other words, as long as I am not faced with the challenge to my own security, I will not fight. As long as I, or someone I love, is not terminally ill, I will choose always to protect their life, to the bitter end. As long as I, or someone I love, is not a victim of a violent crime, I will not advocate for a perpetrator's death. I will not choose convenience over the life of an unborn child. Of course, this is (strictly speaking) not hypocrisy. It is simply cowardice. As long as life includes no bumps or challenges, then I am a follower of Jesus ... as long as there is no cross.

When man usurps this power, being enslaved by a foolish and selfish way of thinking, he inevitably uses it for injustice and death. Thus, the life of the person who is weak is put into the hands of the one who is strong; in society the sense of justice is lost, and mutual trust, the basis of every authentic interpersonal relationship, is undermined at its root.

(John Paul II, Servant of God, Evangelium Vitae, 66)

The challenge of the Gospel is, indeed the cross. The fact is that Jesus' command was proactive. We are to pursue the cross in our life, take it up resolutely, not just accept it in bitterness. Sacrifice is at the heart of our respect for life. We have to give up those opinions that divert our attention from God's commandments. We have to be ready to spring into action when He calls. And when we are asked why we do not believe in taking life, our response is simple: "It is not ours to take."

The commandment "You shall not kill" thus establishes the point of departure for the start of true freedom. It leads us to promote life actively, and to develop particular ways of thinking and acting which serve life. In this way we exercise our responsibility towards the persons entrusted to us and we show, in deeds and in truth, our gratitude to God for the great gift of life.

(John Paul II, Servant of God, Evangelium Vitae, 76)