

What our faith says about living and dying

In his inaugural Mass, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us:

"We are not some casual or meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary."²

Ten years ago, Pope John Paul II put it this way: Human beings have been given "a sublime dignity, based on the intimate bond which unites [us] to [our] Creator."³ We are a sign of God's love, "a trace of his glory."⁴ From the moment of conception through death and into eternity, each of us lives in relation to God, the Lord of life. The value and dignity of human life do not change according to health or other circumstances. A man, even if seriously ill or disabled in the exercise of his highest functions, is and always will be a man, and he will never become a "vegetable" or an "animal."⁵

The journey away from a culture of death and toward following Christ to eternal life goes by way of the Cross: Loving others to the point that we die to our personal pride and selfishness, our tendency to view others as obstacles or things to be used.

A rich young man asked Jesus, "What good must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus replied that one must learn to love God, and "love your neighbor as yourself."⁶

This is the model God has given us - a model of love and solidarity with those entrusted to our care, and those we meet on the way. By witnessing this model in our own lives - by holding fast to the moral truths preserved by our faith, and "going out of"⁷ ourselves for others - we can inspire others to do the same, and help **"build a world where human life is always loved and defended, every form of violence banished."**⁸

¹ *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833, 851 (1992).

² Homily, Mass for the Inauguration of the Pontificate, April 24, 2005.

³ *The Gospel of Life*, no. 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ John Paul II, "Address to the Participants at the International Congress on 'Life-Sustaining Treatments and the Vegetative State,'" March 20, 2004; emphasis in original.

⁶ Mt 19: 16, 19.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *God and the World*, p. 322.

⁸ John Paul II, Papal Meditation on the Blessed Virgin Mary, Dec. 8, 2004.



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In March 2005 a Florida judge ordered the removal of food and water that had sustained Terri Schiavo's life. The 41-year-old brain-damaged woman died 13 days later of dehydration. Her death was approved because her husband claimed she once said she would not want to live as "a burden to anybody."

While Mrs. Schiavo lay dying, another Florida judge jailed a rancher for the crime of starving his cattle. The rancher faces up to 5 years in prison for each felony count of animal cruelty.

How is it that our legal system treats failing to feed animals as a crime, but sees nothing wrong in ordering that a human being with severe disabilities be denied nutrition and even a drop of water?

How have we come to be a society in which incapacitated and terminally ill persons are helped *not* to live to the fullest, but only to die sooner, often with the consent of the family?

How is it that so many citizens believe it's okay to kill living human embryos to harvest their stem cells for speculative research? And that it's okay to force taxpayers to pay for it?

Standing as a background for all these developments is the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973 which legalized abortion throughout all nine months of pregnancy for any reason. Since then over 40 million children in the United States have died from abortion. Today, the Court insists abortion must be legal even when a child is in the process of being born.

How did we get here?

In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II called these trends part of a culture of death. He traced that culture's roots to three attitudes in particular: extreme personal autonomy, seeing some lives as not worthy of living, and avoidance of suffering at all costs. Reflecting on these, we can see that our society has absorbed many attitudes hostile to life without even realizing it.

Free to be me, or personal autonomy run amok. Many people think the question of what is morally right depends on their own preferences and circumstances, that there is no objective moral yardstick such as the Ten Commandments. In the name of tolerance, it is said that people have a right to make up their own personal morality, except in extreme cases like torturing

children or flying jets into occupied buildings. After all, who has the right to "impose" his values on others?

In 1992 the Supreme Court reaffirmed *Roe v. Wade* using precisely this attitude of "anything goes" as long as it is chosen by the individual. In *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the Court declared:

"At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."¹

Many legal scholars rightly deride this "mystery of life" passage, and Justice Antonin Scalia has called it "the passage that ate the rule of law." For if blind self-assertion can define the meaning of life, the lives of everyone – especially the weakest and most vulnerable – become mere instruments for those who can assert themselves the loudest. But, what is good for society is upholding the good of *every* individual. Respecting the lives of the weak and defenseless – unborn children, human embryos in laboratories, the disabled, the dying, victims of violence – contributes to a just society where all can flourish.

Lives unworthy of living. Another dangerous attitude prevalent today is that the value of a human life is not inherent, but depends on the extent to which a person is conscious, capable of exercising his autonomy and of performing actions which benefit society. On this theory, some prominent ethicists have promoted infanticide as a legal option for parents who do not want to raise a child with a disability. Ours is a culture which values efficiency and productivity, so the idea of eliminating the "unproductive" and "burdensome" sounds reasonable.

This utilitarian ethic explains why many people want to allow scientists to create human embryos solely to destroy them, to use their stem cells in research seeking treatments for diseases. And it explains why a federal appeals court ruled in favor of a "right" to assisted suicide, and why some approve causing helpless individuals to die by withholding food and water from them.

Avoiding suffering at all costs. Our culture's desire to avoid suffering – including sacrifice, hardship, and even inconvenience – leads many to view death as a form of release. Many balk at the personal sacrifice involved in loving and caring for a family member who needs special assistance. Unplanned children are aborted to escape the disruptions and sacrifices entailed in raising a child. And when we can no longer enjoy life the way we once did – like the "Million Dollar Baby" boxer who couldn't endure a life without crowds chanting her name – death is seen as a way to eliminate psychological suffering.

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