NON NEGOTIABLE

ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF A JUST SOCIETY AND HUMANE CULTURE
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Essential Principles of a Just Society
and Humane Culture
Dedicated to

Fr. Andrew Liaugminas
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PREFACE

We the people are losing our ability to think clearly or reason well. We are largely unable to have civil discourse and have virtually lost the art of argument. We no longer even have a common language with the moral grammar of our Founders, the grammar of ethics that formed the Judeo-Christian tradition which shaped and directed our nation. Religiously informed voices and politically motivated ones are talking past each other, apparently without realizing their mutual source and goal. In other words, the ideals of modern democracy are Christian in origin, and they form the pillars required to hold up a flourishing society.

The characteristically Christian element of our nation is its foundation upon the *inalienable dignity of the human person*. The human person is the pinnacle of God’s handiwork. God so loved this human creature that he sent his own Son to become one among its number—and not only that, but to give the ultimate sacrifice for human salvation. That was how much God loved humanity. And not just humanity in a vague, amorphous sense, but each and every human person—especially the smallest, the least, and the forgotten. No matter what state they are in, people have dignity and deserve to be treated accordingly. Period.

Of course, it takes a lot to live this out in practice. Far too easy it is to be like the character Pierrot in Edna St. Vincent Millay’s play *Aria da Capo* (1920) and see no incongruity in saying: “I love Humanity; but I hate people!” But it is real flesh and blood people, you and I, who make up humanity. So does the child in the womb, the person in the gutter, and the patient relying upon medical nutrition and hydration for life. When it comes to us humans, certain truths are so foundational for our life and flourishing that they are simply not open to debate or mitigation—they are *non-negotiable*.
One of the most important human values is doubtlessly the right to life, to be protected from the moment of conception up to the moment of natural death. However, it must be considered a serious paradox that this right to life is threatened precisely by today's highly advanced technology. Such a paradox has reached the extent of creating a "culture of death", in which abortion, euthanasia, and genetic experiments on human life itself have already obtained or are on the way to obtaining legal recognition. How can we not make a correlation between this culture of death in which the most innocent, defenceless, and critically ill human lives are threatened with death, and terrorist attacks, such as those of 11 September, in which thousands of innocent people were slaughtered? We must say that both of these are built on contempt for human life.¹

— Francis Cardinal Arinze

*The propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained.*²

— George Washington

Over a year into the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln had an epiphany on an issue that had nagged him to that point, something he had tried to reckon with in different ways, but he had been frustrated at each turn. Slavery, he came to realize, was not an issue tied up with other issues in the contentious debate and rhetoric dividing the nation. Slavery was at the heart of the rebellion, and it was a moral issue more than a military or political one. Dedicated to eliminating it


finally, Lincoln delivered the Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet and pushed past opposition on both sides in order to make emancipation and racial equality a central war effort by the beginning of 1863. Near the end of that year, his Gettysburg Address was dedicated to the equality of all people as a foundational issue for a moral union of states.

But he had to do more before the Civil War ended to eliminate the risk that slavery would be reinstated. Lincoln dedicated himself to securing emancipation once and for all through ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery. It was early 1865, and factions of Republicans and Democrats with different political goals justified pushing back on slavery for other issues they each considered more important. For Lincoln, nothing was more important, and this was not something he could not secure. In other words, it was for him not negotiable. In spite of politics, and through dedication to a singular principle of human dignity and equality, he secured just enough votes to get it done.

A few months later, in a meeting with former U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Campbell at the Confederate White House, “Lincoln listed three non-negotiable presidential demands: restoration of federal authority in the South; no retreat from his commitment to former slaves; and unconditional surrender of Confederate troops.”

He never wavered in his dedication to the principle of human dignity and equality as the core of a just nation. “Lincoln would never retreat from his pledge to keep slavery contained; indeed, his insistence on the gradual extinction of slavery was a non-negotiable element in his Unionism . . .”

How does a nation, or any large community of peoples, determine what is true, right, and good in structuring its governing documents? To what authority do drafters of those guiding principles refer, and to what end?

The Declaration of Independence appealed to “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” in its opening statement, “to assume among the
powers of the earth, the separate and equal station” to which God enti-
tles them. The very next line claims and orders that entitlement: “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
among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was drafted
by the Commission on Human Rights, which included the promi-
nent French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. It opens with this
Preamble:

> Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalien-
able rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of free-
dom, justice and peace in the world,

> Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in
barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the
advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech
and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the
highest aspiration of the common people, . . .

> Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaf-
fermed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth
of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have
determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger
freedom,

> Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-
operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect
for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

> Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of
the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

> **Now, Therefore the General Assembly proclaims this universal declaration of human rights** as a common standard of achieve-
ment for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual
and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind,
shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights
and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international,
to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both
among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples
of territories under their jurisdiction.\(^5\)

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Then it begins enumerating these rights:

Article 1.

- All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.

- Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Article 3.

- Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.\(^6\)

The United States as a nation and the United Nations as a body of global representatives have within them powerful forces passing laws and advancing agenda that totally violates a number of the principles established in both declarations.

How did this happen? How can a ruling class so boldly disregard “self-evident truths” and return to having “disregard and contempt for human rights”, ignoring declarations that should ground their every action? How can they have constructed a new set of priorities that violate their founding principles, and advance them under the language of “rights” based on nothing more than shifting cultural relativism?

Most people have never heard of Edmund Gettier, but he’s a perfect study for where we are right now with social, cultural, academic, political, and media elites controlling the message about who we are as a society and what constitutes our common good. Gettier presented to the established hierarchy of philosophers of the twentieth century a simple, three-page paper asking the right question: “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”\(^7\) He thereby challenged all that they intuitively called knowledge, and he inspired a great deal of work by philosophers attempting to recover a workable definition of knowledge.

We have an establishment hierarchy of culture-shapers today who hold a shared ideology treated as evolved knowledge, and it’s based on a

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\(^6\) Ibid.

secular humanist definition of the “person” that doesn’t hold up to the scrutiny of reason. It is mostly an atheistic, agnostic view of the universe relying mostly on science, with no concept of evil, no concept of the spiritual life or an afterlife, and not based on any doctrine but only on evolving cultural trends and experiences. It’s a relativistic and utilitarian ideology, mostly shielded from scrutiny by major media who happen to share it. They simply believe it is true and enlightened.

But what’s the gauge for truth? Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate and said, “For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.” But the powerful governor asked, “What is truth?” (Jn 18:37–38). He must have been worried about it, because he kept trying to find a way out of condemning a man in whom he found no fault.

Those who heard Christ’s voice then carried on his teachings unchanged throughout history, and Christians are still challenging other truth claims that don’t apply the whole Gospel or even make reference to it. Why? Because the profoundly human truths embodied in Christ are, “quite simply, the truth about everything”, in the words of the late scholar, theologian, human rights activist, and author Fr. Richard John Neuhaus. ⁸

Catholics imbued with the riches of teaching and Tradition should have a penetrating spirituality that pervades their decisions and actions, a devotion to God, to mankind, and to truth. In one of his Wednesday audiences leading up to Pentecost 2013, giving catechesis on the Creed, Pope Francis focused on the actions of the Holy Spirit. “We are living in an age when people are rather sceptical of truth”, he said.

Benedict XVI has frequently spoken of relativism, that is, of the tendency to consider nothing definitive and to think that truth comes from consensus or from something we like…. The truth is not grasped as a thing; the truth is encountered. It is not a possession; it is an encounter with a Person.

St Paul teaches that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3)…. We need to let ourselves be bathed in the light of the Holy Spirit so that he may lead us into the Truth of God, who is the one Lord of our life…. We are not Christian “part-time”, only at certain moments, in certain circumstances, in certain decisions; no one can be

Christian in this way; we are Christian all the time! Totally! May Christ’s truth, which the Holy Spirit teaches us and gives to us, always and totally affect our daily life.\(^9\)

But we don’t behave that way often enough. As Pope Benedict XVI also said often, we live in a culture unmoored from its Judeo-Christian roots, an increasingly secular culture with no reference to God. In this environment, he warned, tolerance has degenerated into indifference toward permanent values. But even though Christians are reluctant to make a public witness to faith in this prevailing secular culture, he also warned that resigning ourselves to public indifference to truth was the heart of the crisis of the West. If truth does not exist, Benedict said many times, then mankind cannot distinguish between good and evil.

That seems self-evident. But so did the truths declared by the Founding Fathers. They no longer are.

We have vast means of communication available today for engaging individuals and communities globally. These should invoke our passion, compelling us constantly to seek objective truth and share it with others, as we share so many other thoughts incessantly through social-networking media.

That’s very difficult in an increasingly radical secular culture that rejects the transcendent and ridicules claims of truth. At best, it’s relative. But as Pope Benedict calmly affirmed, even in a world of fallen-away Catholics and other Christians, the seeds of the future of the world remain in the faithful Church found even in small communities of faith. There are many communities of faith, who understand “Catholic social justice” or even “social justice” in their true sense, before these concepts became redefined by politics. Many of them have practiced it for decades, from years of delivering food and clothing to the poor, or visiting the blind or other disadvantaged people, or bringing relief to the suffering. Human dignity is etched in their consciousness without being a topic to single out for thought or study.

Until it is glaringly violated.

Decades ago, a little girl accompanied her father on his only business trip to the deep South, her first time to leave their Midwestern town.

Besides the new and different and “strange” sights, there was the ominous, the different way people reacted to each other. They were in a drugstore in Alabama, and she saw a fountain with the sign “No Coloreds Allowed”, and she was outraged. In the loud voice of an indignant child who doesn’t think of or care about the setting or context but only the boiling need to cry out, she shouted, “Dad! They can’t do that! They can’t treat people that way! That’s not right!”

That was her initiation into “social activism”. She didn’t know much about John F. Kennedy but was glad a Catholic was elected president and that he emphasized service. She followed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and admired his peaceful protests and soaring sermons and addresses. And his noble dignity. That impression left an imprint on this little girl’s conscience.

True story. That little girl was me.

I continued to work for peace and social justice through the Church and the profession of journalism. I landed in adulthood during a turbulent time when social morals and values, bedrock principles, and Gospel truths about human dignity and equality got contorted out of recognition. Why are we seemingly closer to world war than world peace, after the lessons of the twentieth century should have been so obvious that we could not repeat its mistakes?

Look at some of the events of 1963 as emblematic of the era of human dignity, rights, and freedom.

On April 11, 1963, Pope John XXIII issued his Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), which called attention to the “signs of the times” and built an appealing argument that *peace* will only be a word devoid of meaning unless it is made a cause based on the order “founded on truth, built up on justice, nurtured and animated by charity” and practiced in freedom.

On April 16, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King would issue his famous and eloquent Letter from Birmingham Jail to fellow clergymen about why he saw the need for the March on Birmingham, because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond
to the Macedonian call for aid. Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. . . . Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.10

The civil rights movement was fully engaged that year in activism intended to gain new rights and freedoms for African Americans, and the Kennedy administration averted a clash by announcing in June 1963 the proposal that the civil rights struggle confronted the country “primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.”11

In August 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders led the March on Washington. There he delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, making reference to Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, the Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution, which he claimed were still unfulfilled for black Americans.

In November 1963, President John F. Kennedy, Jr., was assassinated, having set civil rights legislation in motion.

And in December 1963, the Second Vatican Council, already fully engaged for a year, issued Inter Mirifica, the Decree on the Media of Social Communications. In it, Pope Paul VI and the Council Fathers recognized the power and influence of media and took “a moral outlook” at the use of media. “The first question has to do with ‘information,’ as it is called, or the search for and reporting of the news”, it stated, because “not all knowledge is helpful, but it is charity that edifies.”12

How far we have strayed from that and other standards of the common good, of recognizing the correlation between individual and legal acts of violence that happen in every abortion, and mass slaughter, as Cardinal Arinze stated in the quotation at the beginning of this introduction. And we fail to see the moral wrongfulness of a freedom, as Lincoln puts it, such as so-called “freedom of choice”, so analogous to slavery.


We are living, as both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have warned, as if God did not exist. The popes and bishops and other religious and moral leaders have warned of history repeating itself and the dangers of an elite class redefining humanity, freedom, rights, and even religion.

In his book *Memory and Identity*, Pope John Paul II likens what happened in Poland after the Marxists came to power with “the philosophical developments that occurred in Western Europe in the wake of the Enlightenment”, with its abandonment of Christianity as a source for understanding the human person. “All that remained was the idea of God,” he said, “a topic for free exploration by human thought.”

Therefore, “the foundations of the ‘philosophy of evil’ also collapsed.” This is a critical point, because as John Paul states, evil “can only exist in relation to good and, in particular, in relation to God, the supreme Good”. It was a gravely consequential collapse. “All this, the entire drama of salvation history, had disappeared as far as the Enlightenment was concerned. Man remained alone: alone as creator of his own history and his own civilization; alone as one who decides what is good and what is bad, as one who would exist and operate *ensi Deus non daretur*, even if there were no God.”

Competing ideas about what constitutes a good life are capturing the attention of contemporary Catholics alongside other members of modern society. The Church has been less of a reference point since the Council. Just after the election of Pope Benedict, the *Christian Science Monitor* ran an article that represented the general tenor of media coverage of a Church and Pope they handicapped with misperceptions. It suggested that observers “inside and outside the church . . . see his election as widening the global religious ‘red-blue’ divide between conservative moral absolutists and liberals of all faiths who say religion must be more inclusive.”

This is how his papacy and the Church were framed.

Against the dominantly secular and relativist mood in Europe, Benedict seems likely to present a firm Catholic conviction, rooted in a starkly black-and-white view of the world. That view is likely to clash with

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14 Ibid.
mainstream European thinking over many issues widely regarded here as human rights: birth control, gay unions, women’s rights, euthanasia, and stem cell research, all areas where European governments tend more and more to ignore Church teaching.\textsuperscript{16}

Since that was written, it has become more and more true of the United States as well. What is our response to each of these challenges? We can take Gettier’s approach and prod established opinion makers with rational arguments—the right questions—to provoke thought about matters they hold as prevailing “knowledge” of the common good.

How does the average Christian do that, at a time of such information explosion that the great wealth of teaching about philosophy, theology, the bridge between faith and reason, and anything else that requires a ready answer for hot-button, social moral issues seems so inaccessible to busy people with little time and short attention spans? We need our answers to be reachable, accessible, and easy enough to understand that we can make the argument in the public arena of ideas.

A very resourceful and knowledgeable scholar asked me to recommend a book for a Respect Life group heading into an election and confused by all the arguments they were hearing about the moral issues involved in candidates’ and parties’ positions. They needed a book on what the Church teaches and why, he said, with some frustration over the fact that people weren’t accessing the wealth of Church teaching in longer form.

“Sure, I have that”, I told him, and searched my shelves for what I was confident was there, having so many books. But I couldn’t locate such a book. The theological scholar had many books too, but he hadn’t found it yet either. I realized it needed to be written.

Lay people today are consumers of Internet news, cable news, talk radio, the blogosphere, and social-networking media especially. They get their information in quick sound bites with messages that appeal more to emotion than reason. Papal encyclicals and Church documents are not usually tailored to this kind of access. The average person wants current event–driven information.

Journalists cover a wide swath of news and read longer-form texts and legal documents and encyclicals, trying to find the nuggets in them, the hidden and salient points. Often, it’s surprising how common the

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.
threads are running through otherwise disparate stories. That represents what you will read in this book.

Chapter One asks a question of self-examination for us, essentially, “Who are we?” and considers what it means to be a nation of humane people. Chapter Two covers the most basic and fundamentally important question, “When does life begin?” It deals with the crucial topic of abortion. Chapter Three addresses end-of-life issues, especially euthanasia. And yet the fundamental issue is the sanctity of life, and they can’t be separated, so the issue of ending youngest human life comes up again in the third chapter along with ending other vulnerable human life, especially since it also covers embryonic stem cell research and cloning. Chapter Four on marriage by necessity considers its importance to children, so the themes continue to merge. Chapter Five covers the fundamental freedom of religion and its guarantee by the nation’s Founders. But since that liberty has been threatened by a government mandate to violate conscience and provide access to life-ending drugs, the sanctity of life topic permeates that chapter as well.

The ending is really a beginning, because we’re in a pivotal point in history in which we have to make bold choices about what our principles compel us to do to protect and advance what we believe. Complacency is not an option. Being a bleeding heart doesn’t mean holding a particular political persuasion, but it does mean making tough decisions about time and talent and resources well spent, at the service of others, according to a moral code and a well-informed conscience. The term political correctness is irrelevant because politics don’t determine what’s correct. Similarly, the term values voters is illogical, because everyone holds some set of values, and all voters choose whose values will prevail in government.

This is the beginning of a new era in America, in the Church, and culture, one that calls for the uprising of citizens committed to engaging the culture in the public arena of ideas. That starts with discernment of which ideas are relative and which derive from unchanging truth.

We need a reference that pulls together in one place the essential principles that shape a free, just, and moral society, showing that what the Church teaches is, by extension, the human truths affirmed by other religious and civil rights leaders and thinkers throughout time.

In a rightly ordered view, it’s not liberal or conservative, left or right, Democrat or Republican, nor political at all, though necessarily it involves the political process. If it requires a label, call it “Dignitarian”.
Chapter 1

Being a Dignitarian

Man is always more than what is seen or perceived of him through experience. Failing to ask questions about man’s being would lead inevitably to refusing to seek the objective truth about being as a whole, and hence, to no longer be able to recognize the basis on which human dignity, the dignity of every person, rests from the embryonic stage to natural death.¹

— Pope Benedict XVI

All human beings possess in themselves (by virtue of their existence alone) the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and property ownership; no government gives these rights, and no government can take them away.²

— Fr. Robert Spitzer

In his excellent book, Ten Universal Principles, Fr. Robert Spitzer clearly reveals the foundation of a well-ordered and civilized culture. The principles of that foundation have ancient origins, they are universal, and they concern objective truth, ethics, recognition of the dignity of men within society, and personal identity within culture. They are prerequisites for a free, just, and virtuous society, and the absence of any one of them leads to a decline in freedom, justice, and virtue in society.

“Some may say that it is the legal system or democracy or the courts that are the real protectors of individuals, culture, and society,” Spitzer writes at the outset, “but . . . without the ten principles, democracy could vote out the rights of human beings, court systems could legalize every form of indignity and harm, and legal systems would have nothing upon which to base their laws.”

Time and again, those scenarios have played out in this country, from the legalization and protection of slavery to the legalization and protection of abortion. The two are directly analogous, but that’s only evident to those who see the truth clearly and recognize human subjugation however and whenever it occurs. Others, people in the abortion movement and those who support it, deceive and have been deceived by the distorted, euphemistic language of “choice” and the tortured logic of “reproductive rights” to cover for the reality of denying a class of human persons their rights.

Spitzer lists the principles of reason as the first of the ten, not by an arbitrary ordering of his own, but by the shared wisdom of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle over two millennia ago in response to the irrational and deceitful arguments tossed out by the naysayers of their day, known as Sophists. These primary principles of reason have endured because of their truths, but sophists are still around today and continue to object to the application of reason when it counters or negates their views. Modern-day sophists work to deny natural law and moral order and revealed truth. They have a long history together with their ancient prototypes.

Take the famous Sophist Gorgias, for whom all knowledge was opinion. By his way of thinking, controlling opinion by good rhetoric makes the orator in control of knowledge itself, able to shape it to his whim. Plato shows how Socrates took him on in the dialogue simply titled Gorgias.

In Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power, Joseph Pieper noted that Plato had a lifelong battle with the Sophists, calling them “those highly paid and popularly applauded experts in the art of twisting words, who were able to sweet-talk something bad into something good and to turn white into black”.

3 Ibid., p. xii.
If you retool the vocabulary to change or camouflage the meaning of words, you can justify almost anything. As Joseph Pieper put it:

The place of authentic reality is taken over by a fictitious reality; my perception is indeed still directed toward an object, but now it is a pseudo-reality, deceptively appearing as being real, so much so that it becomes almost impossible anymore to discern the truth . . . .

For the general public is being reduced to a state where people not only are unable to find out about the truth but also become unable even to search for the truth because they are satisfied with deception and trickery that have determined their convictions, satisfied with a fictitious reality created by design through the abuse of language.5

In 1998, the bishops, concerned about this moral confusion, issued Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics (reissued in 2000). “The inherent value of human life, at every stage and in every circumstance, is not a sectarian issue any more than the Declaration of Independence is a sectarian creed”, wrote the bishops.6

That’s an excellent point, succinct and undeniable. They wrote:

We cannot simultaneously commit ourselves to human rights and progress while eliminating or marginalizing the weakest among us [my italics]. Nor can we practice the Gospel of life only as a private piety. American Catholics must live it vigorously and publicly, as a matter of national leadership and witness, or we will not live it at all.

Bringing a respect for human dignity to practical politics can be a daunting task. There is such a wide spectrum of issues involving the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity. Good people frequently disagree on which problems to address, which policies to adopt and how best to apply them. But for citizens and elected officials alike, the basic principle is simple: We must begin with a commitment never to intentionally kill, or collude in the killing, of any innocent human life, no matter how broken, unformed, disabled or desperate that life may seem.7

5 Ibid., pp. 34–35.
7 Ibid., nos. 19 and 20 (emphasis in original).
That basic principle should be, at core, one thing all people of goodwill can agree on, no matter what their faith or whether or not they profess one.

For fervent advocates of the sanctity and dignity of life for every human being, the details of political candidates’ principles on life and human rights matter above all else. A health care plan or national security policy or economic strategy or a jobs plan matters only to citizens who are living in this country. And the key to that is the word living. How can a list of rights be declared, claimed, demanded, or defended if the first right—for a human being to live—is denied? When it is denied, the rest is incoherent.

The bishops’ document warns of the urgent threat moral confusion poses to our democracy: “No one, least of all someone who exercises leadership in society, can rightfully claim to share fully and practically the Catholic faith and yet act publicly in a way contrary to that faith.” And yet many do.

This teaching is for them as much as for the Catholics in the pews who elect them. Again and again, the bishops restate Church teaching and fundamental moral issues for all people honestly working for human rights. And yet one election cycle after another shows how many Catholics don’t apply this teaching. Who even accesses it? Who takes it seriously as opposed to as an option for a subset of Catholics?

Parsing the document for key clarifications helps. Intellectual honesty requires looking at how these moral truths line up with public policies.

Catholic public officials are obliged to address each of these issues as they seek to build consistent policies which promote respect for the human person at all stages of life. But being “right” in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life. Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community [my italics].

This seems to be stating the obvious, but only to those who already see the order of priorities the Founders not only gave to the nation in their documents but also revealed as truths that preexist the State. If you can’t assure the right to life, you can’t claim to protect the “right” to anything a good life requires.

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8 Ibid., no. 7.
9 Ibid., no. 22 (emphasis in original).
However, many citizens—many Christian citizens—don’t see that. Shifting cultural ideology prevails over Church teaching. The bishops know that and reflect awareness of it in this document and make this incisive statement: “American Catholics have long sought to assimilate into U.S. cultural life. But in assimilating, we have too often been digested. We have been changed by our culture too much, and we have changed it not enough.”

That was certainly true in 2000, and it has only grown more demonstrably true since then. “Catholic public officials who disregard Church teaching on the inviolability of the human person indirectly collude in the taking of innocent life.” Do they think of that? We can’t know or judge. But we can call on them to act according to their constituents’ concerns. And we can vote, with well-formed consciences, ready and willing to apply reason to the determination of rights.

The Gospel of Life must be proclaimed, and human life defended, in all places and all times. The arena for moral responsibility includes not only the halls of government, but the voting booth as well. Laws that permit abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide are profoundly unjust, and we should work peacefully and tirelessly to oppose and change them. Because they are unjust they cannot bind citizens in conscience, be supported, acquiesced in, or recognized as valid.

That is a restatement of the constant, unbroken teaching of the Church. It’s a restatement of Saint Thomas Aquinas on the natural law, cited and claimed by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in his Letter from Birmingham Jail. Dr. King wrote it as a response to Christian clergymen, and he opened it by answering the question of why he had come to Birmingham in the first place, since they had warned him not to bring his peaceful protestors there.

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

10 Ibid., no. 24 (emphasis in original).
11 Ibid., no. 28.
12 Ibid., no. 32 (emphasis added).
Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.\textsuperscript{13}

This is a lesson for us now. As laws affecting abortion, euthanasia, marriage, and conscience protection change in some states, laws are challenged in other states. Activists for large-scale, cultural sea change look for federal law to establish it, by government mandate or judicial fiat, as \textit{Roe}—in one decisive stroke—nullified all fifty state laws and subsumed them under its new, and newly fabricated, right to abortion.

Dr. King continues:

\begin{quote}
How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

That applies as much to the issues of today, and it is deeply instructive.

In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: “Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.” And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.\textsuperscript{15}

That rings so true now because it reflects the false divide today between Christians committed to “peace and social justice” and those committed to “pro-life causes”, as if it’s an either/or proposition instead of applying the Gospel to a “both/and” activism for the \textit{whole life} cause of dignity and justice. This divide has a long history, and King cited it to make his point understood.

\textsuperscript{13}Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (Apr. 16, 1963), African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania, http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html, © 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., © renewed 1991 Coretta Scott King, reprinted by arrangement with The Heirs to the Estate of Martin Luther King Jr., c/o Writers House as agent for the proprietor New York, N.Y.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.
Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were “a colony of heaven,” called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be “astronomically intimidated.” By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.  

Many of today’s Christians and secular social-justice activists have dropped the “evils of infanticide” from their causes. Even though many of them stand on the shoulders of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, they do not carry on the fullness of his teaching and tradition on justice and the truth of human rights “for all God’s children”.

His niece, Dr. Alveda King, has dedicated herself to carrying on his teaching, elaborating on his belief of inclusivity for all. If her uncle were here today, says this Dr. King, he would not claim the political views some of his avid followers ascribe to him.

In a post on Alveda King’s page on the Priests for Life website, a blog devoted to her work as the group’s Director of African-American Outreach, she suggests reading advice columns written by her uncle for *Ebony* magazine in 1957–1958 that reveal a man who today would be regarded as a social conservative.

“In advising men and women on questions of personal behavior 50 years ago, Uncle Martin sounded no different than a conservative Christian preacher does now,” said Dr. King. “He was pro-life, pro-abstinence before marriage, and based his views on the unchanging Word of the Bible. Today, Planned Parenthood would condemn Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as part of the ‘religious right.’”

That may be a startling thought to a lot of people. But Alveda King has been saying this for decades. On another occasion honoring her uncle’s memory, she issued this statement:

Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of a Beloved Community where all are treated with respect and dignity. . . . He fought against society’s exclusion

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16 Ibid.
of people who were treated as less than human because of their appearance. Today, we are compelled to continue Uncle Martin’s fight by standing up for those who are treated as less than human because of their helplessness and inconvenience.

The unborn are as much a part of the Beloved Community as are newborns, infants, teenagers, adults, and the elderly. Too many of us speak of tolerance and inclusion, yet refuse to tolerate or include the weakest and most innocent among us in the human family. As we celebrate the life of Uncle Martin, let us renew our hearts and commit our lives to treating each other, whatever our race, status, or stage of life, as we would want to be treated. Let us let each other live.\textsuperscript{18}

That, fundamentally, constitutes the civil rights movement today. It is the core of all other rights and therefore the natural extension of Rev. Dr. King’s mission, carried on by his colleagues who marched at his side. One prominent colleague was Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, who summed up the legacy of the movement in a now-famous address he delivered in his final year of life. It captures the spirit, mission, and legacy of the movement Neuhaus joined King in serving. Providentially, the life cause converging with the civil rights cause is most glaringly obvious within one week of national observance each January. The federal holiday recognizing Martin Luther King Jr. Day falls within a few days of the anniversary of the infamous \textit{Roe v. Wade} Supreme Court ruling legalizing abortion. They cannot be separated.

Neuhaus embodied the mission of the two movements as one, having marched with King and marched with the pro-life movement and speaking out for both, most eloquently in his address, “We Shall Not Weary, We Shall Not Rest”.

It has been a long journey, and there are still miles and miles to go. Some say it started with the notorious \textit{Roe v. Wade} decision of 1973 when, by what Justice Byron White called an act of raw judicial power, the Supreme Court wiped from the books of all fifty states every law protecting the unborn child. But it goes back long before that... It goes back to the movements for eugenics and racial and ideological cleansing of the last century....

“We the People” have not and will not ratify the lethal logic of \textit{Roe v. Wade}. That notorious decision of 1973 is the most consequential moral

and political event of the last half century of our nation’s history. It has produced a dramatic realignment of moral and political forces, led by evangelicals and Catholics together, and joined by citizens beyond numbering who know that how we respond to this horror defines who we are as individuals and as a people.\(^\text{19}\)

That statement perfectly explains the coalition of Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, and Evangelical religious leaders and scholars who met in Manhattan in late September 2009 to start a movement, and why they did.

**The Manhattan Declaration**

The unique *Manhattan Declaration* is a statement and a movement based on the premise “Ours is, as it must be, a truly consistent ethic of love and life for all humans in all circumstances.”\(^\text{20}\)

Their premise is “principle over policy”, the belief that social moral issues come first, and we have to get them right. Then and only then, follow policy decisions on matters like taxes, the economy, trade, and other such issues that affect the common good.

The drafters were Princeton Professor Robert P. George, Beeson Divinity School Dean Timothy George, and the late Chuck Colson of Prison Fellowship and the Colson Center. The *Manhattan Declaration* is not politically partisan. It is morally grounded in Christian values. In an exquisite economy of words, the drafters brought all important concerns about human dignity to three primary points: the sanctity of life, the preservation of traditional marriage, and the protection of conscience rights of religiously informed citizens.

**Sanctity of Life**

“A culture of death inevitably cheapens life in all its stages and conditions by promoting the belief that lives that are imperfect, immature

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\(^\text{20}\)Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience (Nov. 20, 2009), p. 4, http://manhattandeclaration.org/man_dec_resources/Manhattan_Declaration_full_text.pdf. This quotation also forms the banner on each webpage of the Manhattan Declaration website, http://manhattandeclaration.org/.
or inconvenient are discardable.”21 That sentence captures our society’s decline over the past several decades, and those in many other countries of the world. Pope John Paul II put the term “culture of death” into popular use among people of faith in modern times, but it goes back to the Didache, the early Christian writing considered to be the teaching of the twelve apostles. The Didache begins with a teaching on Two Ways: The Way of Life and the Way of Death, which explicitly prohibits killing or putting a child to death by abortion or killing the child after it is born.22

The Manhattan Declaration drafters cited Mother Teresa’s plea at the 1994 U.S. National Prayer Breakfast to “not kill the child” as a fundamental outcry for the “immature, inconvenient and discardable” in a society that takes recourse to the abortion license with alarming frequency. At that august event, speaking to a congregation that included political leaders who support abortion on demand, she famously said: “Please give me the child. I am willing to accept any child who would be aborted and to give that child to a married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child.”

Dignity of Marriage

The webpage summing up the main points of the declaration says of marriage: “The Union of one man and one woman. Marriage is the first institution of human society—indeed it is the institution on which all other human institutions have their foundation.”23

This statement is abundantly reinforced and grounded in references Dr. Robert P. George and his coauthors cited in their book What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense, references that include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and numerous court rulings, which include many Supreme Court decisions.24

The Manhattan Declaration also quotes President Lyndon B. Johnson’s view of the institution of marriage as primary: “When the family collapses, it is the children that are usually damaged. When it happens on a massive scale, the community itself is crippled.”25

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22 Didache, I.
Freedom of Religion

The *Manhattan Declaration’s* summary here is concise and clear again:

No one should be compelled to embrace any religion against his will, nor should persons of faith be forbidden to worship God according to the dictates of conscience or to express freely and publicly their deeply held religious convictions.

“Religious freedom, an essential requirement of the dignity of every person, is a cornerstone of the structure of human rights, and for this reason, an irreplaceable factor in the good of individuals and of the whole of society as well as of the personal fulfillment of each individual.”

— Pope John Paul II

The Preamble of the *Manhattan Declaration* recalls Christianity’s heritage:

Christians are heirs of a 2,000-year tradition of proclaiming God’s word, seeking justice in our societies, resisting tyranny, and reaching out with compassion to the poor, oppressed and suffering, … rescuing discarded babies from trash heaps in Roman cities and publicly denouncing the Empire’s sanctioning of infanticide, … remaining in Roman cities to tend the sick and dying during the plagues, and [dying] … rather than deny their Lord.

Christian monasteries saved Western civilization after Europe was overrun by barbarian tribes, the drafters continue, preserving “not only the Bible but also the literature and art of Western culture”. Christians vigorously fought the evil of slavery, with popes excommunicating anyone involved in the trade, while Evangelical Christians in England, led by John Wesley and William Wilberforce, ended slavery and “formed hundreds of societies for helping the poor, the imprisoned, and child laborers chained to machines”.

In Europe, Christians challenged the divine claims of kings and successfully fought to establish the rule of law and balance of governmental powers, which made modern democracy possible. And in America, Christian women stood at the vanguard of the suffrage movement. The great civil rights crusades of the 1950s and 60s were led by Christians claiming the Scriptures and asserting the glory of the image of God in every human being regardless of race, religion, age or class.

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
This same devotion to human dignity has led Christians in the last decade to work to end the dehumanizing scourge of human trafficking and sexual slavery, bring compassionate care to AIDS sufferers in Africa, and assist in a myriad of other human rights causes from providing clean water in developing nations to providing homes for tens of thousands of children orphaned by war, disease and gender discrimination.29

This condensed history is a stark reminder of the heritage Christians carry on today and why they claim the right to continue the great tradition of fighting for human rights and defending the faith that informed such a profoundly inherent cause, the drafters declared in the Preamble. “Christians today are called to proclaim the Gospel of costly grace, to protect the intrinsic dignity of the human person and to stand for the common good. In being true to its own calling, the call to discipleship, the church through service to others can make a profound contribution to the public good.”30

It is bold and unapologetic. It is clarity with charity. The declaration is firm and fixed on restoring moral order in the temporal order. The drafters conclude: “We will fully and ungrudgingly render to Caesar what is Caesar’s. But under no circumstances will we render to Caesar what is God’s.”31

Manhattan Declaration Echoes U.S. Bishops’ Teaching

The three primary concerns of the Manhattan Declaration—“Sanctity of Life”, “Dignity of Marriage”, and “Freedom of Religion”—concisely subsume five major issues the United States bishops emphasize about Catholic social teaching. They are abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning, and homosexual “marriage”, all of which must be universally opposed by Catholics. First among these unchangeable principles, according to the United States bishops’ document Faithful Citizenship (as in the Manhattan Declaration and the Declaration of Independence), is that of life.

The consistent ethic of life provides a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and, rightly understood, neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 9.
or two issues. It anchors the Catholic commitment to defend human life, from conception until natural death, in the fundamental moral obligation to respect the dignity of every person as a child of God. It unites us as a “people of life and for life” (Evangelium Vitae, no. 6) pledged to build what Pope John Paul II called a “culture of life” (Evangelium Vitae, no. 77). This culture of life begins with the preeminent obligation to protect innocent life from direct attack and extends to defending life whenever it is threatened or diminished.32

This teaching from the bishops is an important clarification because Catholics certainly get confused about political responsibility and the place of conscience in voting.

In 2006, a group of fifty-five Catholic members of the House of Representatives issued a “Statement of Principles” claiming a commitment to “the basic principles . . . at the heart of Catholic social teaching”, but refusing to accept the Church’s opposition to abortion. They claimed “the primacy of conscience” as their excuse.33

Chicago’s Cardinal George had a clear response. “A Catholic politician who excuses his or her decision to allow the killing of the unborn and of others who can’t protect themselves because he or she doesn’t want to ‘impose Catholic doctrine on others’ seems to me to be intellectually dishonest.”34

On the basis of reason alone, he was saying, if you follow the argument through to its logical conclusion, the position doesn’t hold up. “The protection of every innocent human being’s right to life is a principle of reason, even though it is also a stand supported by Catholic moral teaching”, he continued.

Everyone understands, by way of example, that the state should protect property by forbidding stealing. This is a matter of the common good. It is not imposing Catholic morality on anybody, even though the Church teaches that stealing is a sin. Our present legal system protects stocks and

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bonds, as well as dogs and cats, more than it protects unborn human beings. This is contrary to the common good.\textsuperscript{35}

As for the “primacy of conscience”, Cardinal George wrote:

Conscience is not an excuse for doing something irrational. We are to form our consciences according to the social teaching of the Church and use that formation to make political choices. This is not easy, because principles are clear but practice often is clouded by confusion of fact and the distraction of various forms of self-interest. The first and most essential principle of Catholic social teaching is the dignity of every human person and one’s basic right to life from conception to natural death. Respect for human dignity is the basis for the fundamental right to life. This is a non-negotiable principle that is supported by our beliefs but is logically independent of our faith. Many non-Catholics think a society dedicated to the common good should protect its weakest members.\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{A Continuation of the Civil Rights Movement}

Many are in the movement started by the \textit{Manhattan Declaration}, and they are concerned that the definition of the “common good” has become politically malleable. “Important decisions are now being made or soon will be made [in policy and law that] … will either uphold or undermine what is just and good”, Princeton Professor Robert George told interviewer Kathryn Jean Lopez.\textsuperscript{37}

We believe in law and the rule of law. We recognize an obligation to comply with laws, whether we like them or not. That obligation is defeasible, however. Gravely unjust laws, and especially laws that seek to compel people to do things that are unjust, do not bind in conscience. Certainly, one must never perform a gravely unjust act, even when “following orders” or compelled by law. Christians believe—and they are far from alone in this—that one must be prepared to pay a price, sometimes a very high price indeed, for refusing to do what one’s conscience tells one is wrong.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
If it came to civil disobedience in the face of gravely unjust laws, the movement set in motion by the Manhattan Declaration would be carrying on the tradition and cause of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, when peaceful noncompliance led to clashes with authorities. The earlier movement was considered liberal at the time, though liberalism has changed dramatically over the decades since, as has the rights movement.

The Manhattan Declaration movement today claims the same causes of human and civil rights, social justice, and principles that best serve the common good. Yet it has been seen as conservative. For many leaders committed to these historical causes, and many who line up in concert with them, the issues and efforts to promote and defend them transcend partisan politics. Robert George clarifies in that National Review Online interview:

Actually, not all of the signatories are conservatives. Ron Sider, for example, who leads Evangelicals for Social Action, is an unabashed liberal. On matters of economics and foreign policy, he would be more comfortable in the company of the editors of The Nation than in the company of the editors of National Review. Several other signatories fall into that category. But they are strongly pro-life, pro-marriage, and pro-religious liberty. I would add that many conservatives certainly have resisted tyranny and reached out to the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering. Conservatives fought Soviet tyranny and worked for the liberation of millions of oppressed and suffering Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Russians, Romanians, and others.

Many conservatives have been in the forefront of the fight against poverty and disease in Africa, the trafficking of women and girls into sexual slavery at home and abroad, and the fight for human rights across the globe. Are there many liberals who have accomplished nearly as much as has been accomplished by the conservative activist Michael Horowitz on any of these fronts? Moreover, it is worth noting that many people who are today “conservatives” were civil-rights activists in the 1960s. Start that list with Mary Ann Glendon, Leon and Amy Kass, and the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus. They have not changed their views about racial justice. They are today “conservatives” and no longer “liberals” because mainstream liberalism has embraced a combination of statism and moral libertarianism that they regard—rightly in my view—as deeply misguided.39

What, after all, is a rightly ordered society? It is one that begins with recognition of and respect for the dignity of all men.

**Peace on Earth, Order in the Universe**

Pope John XXIII based his 1963 Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* on the premise that mankind has always sought and longed for peace, but it “can never be established, never guaranteed, except by the diligent observance of the divinely established order”. The entire encyclical builds on that foundation, starting with “Order in the Universe”.

That a marvelous order predominates in the world of living beings and in the forces of nature, is the plain lesson which the progress of modern research and the discoveries of technology teach us. And it is part of the greatness of man that he can appreciate that order, and devise the means for harnessing those forces for his own benefit.

But what emerges first and foremost from the progress of scientific knowledge and the inventions of technology is the infinite greatness of God Himself, who created both man and the universe . . .

Moreover, God created man “in His own image and likeness,” endowed him with intelligence and freedom, and made him lord of creation. All this the psalmist proclaims when he says: “Thou hast made him a little less than the angels: thou hast crowned him with glory and honor, and hast set him over the works of thy hands. Thou hast subjected all things under his feet.”

Clearly, human dignity is preeminent. Social order is based on that principle, Pope John stated, and the human rights it yields begin with the right to life. Though he enumerated a list of others, and eloquently elaborated on them, Pope John said the common good can never exist completely unless the rights of the human person are safeguarded, starting with the first. This is quite an important and timely document, and considered so since it was issued. The idea that the Church would make this weighty pronouncement on such a modern human rights project at that time, in terms that very closely aligned with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, was new.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was a magnificent document as well, with significant contributions in its drafting by French .

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41 Ibid, nos. 2, 3.
Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. It was commissioned by the United Nations after the Second World War and went farther than the U.N. *Charter*, which reaffirmed “faith in fundamental human rights, in dignity and worth of the human person”. The *Universal Declaration* magnified the provisions on human rights.

Pope Benedict XVI made an apostolic visit to the United States in April 2008, primarily to address the United Nations General Assembly and observe the sixtieth anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

The pope presented the idea that there are universal values that transcend the diversity—cultural, ethnic, or ideological—embodied in an institution like the United Nations, founded to help prevent the devastation of another world war. Those values are the foundation of human rights, he said, and religion is key.

He began in French, the official language of the United Nations, and only in reading the transcript do you see the rich defense he makes, repeatedly, of the dignity of the human person and the protection of the human family.

The founding principles of the organization, “the desire for peace, the quest for justice, respect for the dignity of the person, humanitarian cooperation and assistance express the just aspirations of the human spirit, and constitute the ideals which should underpin international relations”, said Pope Benedict.

The United Nations embodies the aspiration for a “greater degree of international ordering” (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 43), inspired and governed by the principle of subsidiarity, and therefore capable of responding to the demands of the human family through binding international rules and through structures capable of harmonizing the day-to-day unfolding of the lives of peoples.

First he affirmed them. Then he challenged them. “This is all the more necessary at a time when we experience the obvious paradox of a

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44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.
multilateral consensus that continues to be in crisis because it is still subordinated to the decisions of a few, whereas the world’s problems call for interventions in the form of collective action by the international community.” Consensus, “decisions of a few”, has replaced truth and right order, he was saying. “Recognition of the unity of the human family, and attention to the innate dignity of every man and woman, today find renewed emphasis in the principle of the responsibility to protect. . . . This principle has to invoke the idea of the person as image of the Creator, the desire for the absolute and the essence of freedom.”

Repeatedly throughout the address, he called the United Nations to its origin and responsibility grounded in the Universal Declaration, and he reminded that body of the importance of the transcendent as the central reference point for human ordering in a just world.

The founding of the United Nations, as we know, coincided with the profound upheavals that humanity experienced when reference to the meaning of transcendence and natural reason was abandoned, and in consequence, freedom and human dignity were grossly violated. When this happens, it threatens the objective foundations of the values inspiring and governing the international order and it undermines the cogent and inviolable principles formulated and consolidated by the United Nations. When faced with new and insistent challenges, it is a mistake to fall back on a pragmatic approach, limited to determining “common ground”, minimal in content and weak in its effect.

They were losing their moral compass, he was telling them, and without it, they could not carry out their “duty to protect”, something he repeated throughout the address. “This reference to human dignity, which is the foundation and goal of the responsibility to protect, leads us to the theme we are specifically focusing upon this year, which marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

What followed was a very important reminder:

This document was the outcome of a convergence of different religious and cultural traditions, all of them motivated by the common desire to place the human person at the heart of institutions, laws and the workings of society, and to consider the human person essential for the world of

40 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid. (emphasis added).
culture, religion and science. Human rights are increasingly being presented as the common language and the ethical substratum of international relations. At the same time, the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights all serve as guarantees safeguarding human dignity. It is evident, though, that the rights recognized and expounded in the Declaration apply to everyone by virtue of the common origin of the person, who remains the high-point of God’s creative design for the world and for history. They are based on the natural law inscribed on human hearts and present in different cultures and civilizations.\textsuperscript{49}

Though his address was widely covered by the media, they missed Pope Benedict’s elegant nuances in their reporting. One hopes the members of the General Assembly did not. He parsed the issue and language of “rights” to direct attention to how they are used and misused. “Experience shows that legality often prevails over justice when the insistence upon rights makes them appear as the exclusive result of legislative enactments or normative decisions taken by the various agencies of those in power.”\textsuperscript{50}

He referred several times to the concepts of “those in power”, the “majority consensus”, and the “decisions of a few”, and he reminded them of their duty to protect human dignity and rights. This is particularly incisive.

When presented purely in terms of legality, rights risk becoming weak propositions divorced from the ethical and rational dimension which is their foundation and their goal. The Universal Declaration, rather, has reinforced the conviction that respect for human rights is principally rooted in unchanging justice, on which the binding force of international proclamations is also based. This aspect is often overlooked when the attempt is made to deprive rights of their true function in the name of a narrowly utilitarian perspective.

Since rights and the resulting duties follow naturally from human interaction, it is easy to forget that they are the fruit of a commonly held sense of justice built primarily upon solidarity among the members of society, and hence valid at all times and for all peoples. This intuition was expressed as early as the fifth century by Augustine of Hippo, one of the masters of our intellectual heritage. He taught that the saying: Do not do to others what you would not want done to you “cannot in any way vary

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
according to the different understandings that have arisen in the world” (De Doctrina Christiana, III, 14). Human rights, then, must be respected as an expression of justice, and not merely because they are enforceable through the will of the legislators.\(^{51}\)

In other words, might does not make right. That’s one of the misunderstandings that have arisen in this society and throughout the world. It’s going to take a lot of exposure to clear expression of sound reasoning and moral grammar to recall what we should know as true.

The universal principle of natural human rights and dignity is one of those fundamental truths. If we can make that a starting point for conversation with anyone, the understanding that all men have dignity and deserve respect, we can hope to build on that logic when we discuss the next issue of the day.

**Let’s Be Clear:**

1. Certain universal principles are required for a society to be free, just, and humane. Moral confusion over those principles threatens freedom and justice for the citizens of that society. “Human life is sacred. The dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society.”\(^{52}\)

2. All men are created with dignity and deserve to be treated accordingly. We can’t be for human rights and yet deny the most basic one that all others depend on. The right to a good life depends on the right to life. “The inherent value of human life, at every stage and in every circumstance, is not a sectarian issue any more than the Declaration of Independence is a sectarian creed.”\(^{53}\) “The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching… We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.”\(^{54}\)

\(^{51}\) Ibid. (emphasis added).

\(^{52}\) USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 44.

\(^{53}\) USCCB, *Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 6.

3. Each in his own way is called to contribute to the common good.

The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society . . . is proper to the lay faithful. As citizens of the State, they are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity. So they cannot relinquish their participation “in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good.”

The Gospel of Life must be proclaimed, and human life defended, in all places and all times. The arena for moral responsibility includes not only the halls of government but the voting booth as well. . . .

Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts.

4. We can’t claim to be Catholic and publicly contradict, reject, or betray the teachings of the faith. Details of political candidates’ principles on foundational issues such as life and human rights matter more than their party.

5. The claim to be guided by “conscience” cannot be used as an excuse for irrational or immoral decisions. We are to form our consciences according to the teaching of the Church and use that formation to make political choices.

6. The “personally opposed but . . . ” argument is intellectually dishonest. Some laws are inherently unjust and immoral, such as those that permit abortion, euthanasia, and assisted suicide. They can never be accepted, supported, or obeyed under the guise of political expediency or cultural compromise. Such acquiescence means compliance with gravely immoral acts.

The consistent ethic of life provides a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and, rightly understood, neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues. It anchors the Catholic commitment to defend human life, from conception until natural death, in the fundamental moral obligation to respect the dignity of every person as a child of God.

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56 USCCB, Living the Gospel of Life, nos. 32, 33.
57 USCCB, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, no. 40.