

RCIA CLASS 22 – THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT AND THE RIGHT TO LIFE

I. The overall premise of the Catholic (and in fact generally Judeo-Christian) teaching on the right to life is that human life is a gift from God, given for a time, so that we may become able to enter eternal life.

A. The Old Testament, although not fully developing moral theology, does emphasize this point.

1. The first crime recounted after the Fall is the murder of Abel by Cain. But even after that murder, God cared for the life of Cain, for he wanted to bring him to repentance.

2. After the Flood, the one central commandment God gives is the prohibition on murder. See Gen. 9:4-6.

3. It is true that the Jewish law had capital punishment for various offenses (e.g., murder, false prophecy, adultery), for they would tear apart the community at a time when the community was in danger from foreign pagan nations. God could call for these punishments because, being the author of life, He give it or take it at will. However, the pardoning of the adulterous woman, recounted in the Gospel according to John 8:1-11, indicates that there should be a reluctance to impose such penalties, even if deserves.

- Moses likewise prayed for the people when God threatened to destroy them, indicating the call to redemption, even if destruction is deserves. See Ex. 32:7-14; Num 14:11-25.

- In addition, the animal sacrifices of the ancient Jews were partially meant to deflect the desire for such sacrifices away from human sacrifices common in the ancient world.

B. Jesus raised the Fifth Commandment to a higher level, calling for people to see goodness in the people we would like to see as fools and enemies. Matt. 5:21-16.

1. In expanding the second of the greatest commandments to all people, Christ indicated that there must be a concern for all. Matt. 5:42-48; Luke 6:27-36, 10:25-37.

2. This concern is not only a negative one, avoiding injury to others, but a positive one, calling for care of others. See, e.g., Matt. 25:31-46; James 1:27, 2:14-17.
3. This concern is not only physical, but even more moral, calling for us to bring the light of salvation to others, and of course, to avoid doing anything that may tempt other people. See, e.g., Matt. 5:14-16, 18:7-9; Luke 17:1-4.

C. All of this life should be seen as a pilgrimage of faith, that we may have time to become God's sons and daughters.

1. This life is like the five talents or gold coins that Jesus spoke of in His parables. We are meant to use them well, that we may enter into everlasting joy. It is for God to decide when this time of development, this story of our earthly life ends, not us. See Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-28. If one has lived well, death can be accepted as the end of a successful contest. See, e.g., 2 Tim. 4:6-8. But this conclusion must not be rushed.

2. Life also affords us a time for repentance, so that we may become a more and more holy person, ready to meet God. The Book of Wisdom, and later the second letter of Peter, indicate that God gives us time for repentance, although we must not presume upon his patience, as such parables as that of the rich fool indicate. See, e.g., Wis. 11:21-12:2; 2 Pet. 3:8-9; Luke 12:13-21.

D. We should, therefore, maintain the life and health of ourselves and others on earth, seeing them, not as the final good, but as the gifts God has given us for our time here.

1. There are several good images for the relationship between the body and soul. The implication of all of them is that we become more fully the person God wants us to be (or draw away from Him) through how we treat our physical life.

a. St. Paul compares the body to a tent that will be folded up, but then made into a Temple. See 2 Cor. 5:1-5.

b. St. James compares the body to a horse that is controlled by a bridle (namely pure speech). See James 3:3. Later St. Gregory the Great and St. Francis, compare the body to a donkey, difficult to control, but necessary. The donkey will one day be taken away, but made into a glorious horse.

c. St. Gregory the Great also compares the human body to an instrument upon which we learn to play music to God. The very imperfect harp now will be transformed so that we can play wonderful music to God.

d. Plato compares the body to a city whose inhabitants (the passions, emotions, desires) we must control to make it a glorious kingdom.

2. Physical needs and desires are thus naturally good, for are meant to draw us together as people of God. However, they can become an evil if made into gods.

a. For example, physical needs allow us to serve each other more perfect, an opportunity for charity.

b. Eating or working together is a common form of companionship, building family and friendships. Team-building exercises, or struggling together on a project, brings people together.

c. It is when such desires lead people to be selfish, prideful, violent, etc., that they become evils. As with all things other than God, when they are made into gods, they become demons.

E. This philosophy and culture of life gives us a very positive image, seeing each day of life as a gift from God, during which our souls develop, and each person as a person whom we can help each day to be a prince or princess in the kingdom of God. See Luke 7:28; 2 Cor. 4:17-18.

II. This vision of life leads to moral conclusions, positively about serving others, negatively about avoiding injuries to others,

and overall regarding the sacred vision of each person.

A. Positively, we are called to provide for the needs of others, whether physically, emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually. We see in the service of others, not only a good in itself, but also a way of serving God and being a witness to the world.

1. This vision gives us a more positive sense of those most in need. They are not primarily burdens, but means of serving Jesus Christ most perfectly, gaining rewards from Him most purely. There is a grave obligation to care for others, especially those closest to oneself. See, e.g., Catechism 2269; Matt. 25: 31-46; 1 Tim. 5:8.

2. Likewise, even suffering can be seen as an offering to Christ, in union with His sacrifice on Calvary. See, e.g., Col. 1:24; Heb. 12:7-11.

3. There is also the concern to take care of one's health without worshipping the body. While health is in itself not a spiritual good, and graces can come from illness, as long as one can maintain good health and thus contribute more to the kingdom of God, one should use reasonable means of doing so. See Catechism 2288-89. Gluttony (the excessive desire for food, drink, and other things) tends both to make earthly things an idol and to diminish one's ability to serve God and others. See, e.g., Phil 3:19; St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II q. 15, art. 3 q. 148, art. 1-2.

4. We are also meant to take care of our minds, for reason is a gift given to us to develop our ability to understand God, each other and His creation. Thus, while a person of limited intellect can be holy, neglecting the intellect is an offense against the God who gave it. See, e.g., Vatican II Council, Gravissimum Educationis (Declaration on Christian Education) (1965) 1, 6; Dignitatis Humanae (Declaration on Religious Liberties) (1965) 2.

- Thus, deliberate drunkenness or drug use, which involves the forfeiture of reason to their influence, is gravely wrong. See 1 Cor. 6:10; Gal. 5:19-21; Catechism 2290-91; St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II. q. 150, art. 2.

B. The Fifth Commandment, and the culture of life generally, obviously forbids the killing of innocent life, and even a respect for the life of those who are guilty of grievous sins.

1. Thus, abortion, the intended killing of an unborn child (whether directly by violence or by "terminating" the pregnancy) is always and everywhere a grave wrong. Such actions not only take the most vulnerable of lives, but also contradict the deepest of human loves, that of a mother for her child.

a. The Pharaoh who tried to kill all of the infant boys among the Hebrews at the time of Moses, and King Herod, who tried to kill all the young boys of Bethlehem at the time of Christ, are the images of all who would kill the unborn to eliminate a "burden." See Ex. 1:15-16; Matt. 1:16-18.

b. There is, of course, an obligation of society to support pregnant women, and especially those in need. The Catholic Church runs numerous centers, including the Tepyac Center in Fairfax, Hope of Northern Virginia in Falls Church, and The Gabriel Project in this area, for helping pregnant women.

c. However, while people do rightfully have a certain autonomy over their lives, this right does not extend to the killing of other innocent people. Furthermore, if the law does not support the right to life of an unborn child, it is failing in its fundamental duty of protecting its citizens. See, e.g., Catechism 2373; Gaudium et Spes 51.

d. It is true that, in the history of the Church, there has been some debate about whether "ensoulment" takes place at conception or later. For example, St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, thought that ensoulment occurs 40-80 days after conception. However, Church theology has unanimously agreed in classifying abortion as gravely wrong and, at a minimum, "akin to homicide." See Tertullian, Apologia chapter 9, St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Sentences, book 4, distinction 1, article 3.

e. In any case, modern genetics indicates that the full genetic code of a human is present from conception onwards, and that there is no sudden change later that could justify classifying anyone before that age as not human. Furthermore, as Pope John Paul II argued in Evangelium Vitae 60, even if there were doubt, one should surely not gamble with the possibility of murder.

f. It should be noted that a procedure, such as chemotherapy that is needed to preserve a pregnant woman's life, but that would endanger or even kill the unborn child, is still permissible. For such procedures are not meant to kill the child, and are needed to prevent a grave evil. It is heroic, but not required, for a pregnant woman to forgo such

a procedure for the sake of her unborn child, as St. Gianna Molla did.

g. For women who have had an abortion, or others involved in this crime, the Church always offers forgiveness. (St. Longinus, who presided at the crucifixion of Christ, is now honored as a saint.) The ability of God to forgive sins is greater than any human guilt. Project Rachel helps women who have had abortions or suffered from miscarriages.

2. Obviously, murder and seriously injuring other innocent people is gravely wrong. But that prohibition extends, not only to physical harm, but also to emotional or intellectual harm (as well as harm to a person's reputation, dealt with in the Eighth Commandment.) In addition, scandal is a sin and often a grave one. Scandal means tempting another person to commit a sin. A person who commits scandal is guilty of a double sin: the sin itself and causing another person guilt; he is therefore, in the eyes of God, more guilty than the person committing the sin. See Matt. 18:5-9; Catechism 2284-87.

- Such things as "undercover operations" or probably even "sting" operations can be done as long as the person is simply investigating a person already determined to commit a crime, and is not causing a sin that would not otherwise occur.

3. Euthanasia, or any form of suicide, is also gravely wrong, for it rejects the life that God gave us to develop our soul and the souls of others. No person is without value, and thus no life should be taken. See Catechism 2276-771 John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae 65. The struggles of illness or old age give a unique opportunity to witness to the faith and charity. See Pope John Paul II, On The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering (1983)

- People should thus care for their lives. However, if "extraordinary means" are needed to preserve a life (e.g., artificial respirators, major surgery, chemotherapy), they can be rejected if the benefit is less than the burden. See Catechism 2278.

- The Church encourages advanced medical directives to ensure that a trusted person makes ethical moral decisions when an individual cannot do so for himself. We generally avoid using the term "living will" because that tends to imply a direction toward death.

4. In addition, recklessness, i.e. creating the potential for great injury to oneself or another without justifiable reason (e.g.,

driving under the influence) is a grave sin. See [Catechism 2269](#); St Thomas Aquinas, [Summa Theologica II-II q. 64, art. 8](#).

5. There can be a justifiable use of force against an aggressor if necessary to prevent a greater harm to an innocent person. See Rom. 13:4; [Catechism 2265](#). However, non lethal force should always be used if possible, for even the aggressor's life is sacred in God's eyes, in large part to leave time for repentance. See Romans 12:18-21.

- a. Thus capital punishment can only be justified if it is: (1) imposed by a legitimate authority and after guilt for a particularly grave crime has been established; and (2) carried out for the sake of protecting the public, and not out of passion or prejudice. Pope John Paul II has stated the principal, included in the Catechism that (1) capital punishment should be used only if absolutely necessary to defend the public because lesser means are unavailable; and (2) with modern means of imprisonment, such a condition rarely if ever exists in industrialized societies. Pope John Paul II, [Evangelium Vitae 68](#); [Catechism 2267](#). See also St. Thomas Aquinas, [Summa Theologica II-II q. 64, art. 2](#).
- b. There is such a thing as the just declaration of war. However, it should only be done if: (1) an aggressor is threatening grave, imminent harm; (2) peaceful means of putting an end to the threat are not available; (3) there is a reasonable prospect of success in avoiding the evil; and (4) the likely harm done by the war is less than the likely harm prevented. See [Catechism 2309](#). In addition, even if a war is justified, that fact does not justify illegitimate means to win it, such as targeting civilians, torture, or deceit.
 - The Church has tended to discourage war, but has also honored those in the military, whose strength prevents aggressors from provoking tyranny and/or war. See [Catechism 2310](#).

C. The emotion of anger is usually excessive, but can sometimes be justified. See, e.g., Eph. 4:26. However, even when there is justifiable anger, there should not be hatred of another person, for God loves each person and want the good for them. See [Catechism 2203-04](#). And we should, always and everywhere, try to see the goodness God has for other people. That vision is

central in the highest Christian virtue, i.e., love.

D. We can honor God, both in life and in death.

1. Martyrs who offer their lives to God for the faith, and other people who sacrifice for loved one's country, etc. are not rejecting God's gift of life. Rather, they are willing to let the gift they have received be taken by another so that a greater goal may be achieved. See, e.g., 2 Macc. 7; Catechism 2373-74.
2. The care for the dead, a duty recognized by most societies, helps to connect the generations and gives us a sense of the communion of saints between the living and the dead. See, e.g., Tobit. 1:16-18.