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The Right to Life—
A Gauge of U.S. Values*

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A year ago discussions of national purposes and goals were widespread in the media and other public forums. To a great extent these discussions were associated with the bicentennial and marked an effort — admittedly with some overtones of faddishness — to observe the nation’s two hundredth birthday by returning to the roots of our national heritage and tradition. Partly, too, they were a response to some of the searing events of recent years — events summarized by the words “Vietnam” and “Watergate” — which deeply disturbed thoughtful Americans and caused them to undertake what can rightly be called a national examination of conscience.

At the present time one hears less talk of national purposes and goals. To some extent this is a natural result of the passing of the bicentennial. To some extent it may reflect the fact that the trauma of Vietnam and Watergate have begun to fade from people’s consciousness. And to some extent it may simply be due to the inability of most of us to sustain this kind of abstract discussion for very long in the face of other, apparently more pressing and more workaday, problems and concerns.

The consideration of national purposes and goals is, however, always valid and pertinent. Purposes and goals point to fundamental values — in this case, the values we share as a people. Continuing reflection of this kind is necessary in order for us to affirm and strengthen our sense of national unity and commitment or to restore it where it has grown weak. In reality this is no mere abstract intellectual exercise, unrelated to real life and the issues before us as a nation. On the contrary, to the extent that the nation’s vision of shared values

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and commitments may have grown dim, our unity as a people is itself a fragile thing, based either on mere convenience or, perhaps more likely, on an exploitive system of relationships, in which some persons and groups have over a period of time come to enjoy a superabundance of privileges and goods at the expense of the basic rights of others.

This question of national purposes and goals may be less discussed now than in the recent past for another reason also. Thanks in great part to the present administration, the theme of human rights has lately emerged as a dominant factor in formulating and carrying out foreign policy.

"Human rights" is admittedly not a specific term or concept. Evidently policy makers themselves have difficulty determining its precise implications in regard to particular issues and circumstances. But all the same, I think Americans generally have welcomed this new emphasis. Spontaneously and intuitively, they have recognized it as expressing their best values as a people. It places the emphasis in foreign relations where it belongs: upon persons and upon what is required to ensure their dignity and freedom. It makes it possible for the nation to consider things like foreign assistance and defense policy, not as if these were ends to be served for their own sake, but, realistically, as what they are: instruments intended to serve persons by fostering the conditions in which they can exercise their fundamental rights and develop their God-given potential as fully as possible.

Up to this time human rights have been viewed for the most part as a key element in foreign policy. Certainly the concept does apply in the international arena — for, as we are all aware, in many places in the world today human rights are flagrantly violated. It is entirely appropriate that the United States, in its relations with other nations — both those which are our friends and those which are not — act consistently and forthrightly. It is understood that this must be done in a prudent manner, which takes into account the complexities of real-life situations and which truly encourages other governments to respect the human rights of their people. Sometimes this will take the form of moral suasion. In other situations, it may require more direct measures. In either case the nation is on the right track, in principle, in making it clear to all that the United States, in exercising its international responsibilities, seeks a world in which human rights are universally respected.

At the same time, I suggest that the concept of human rights is also pertinent to the nation’s domestic affairs. The United States cannot effectively preach to others what it does not consistently practice at home. More than that, the values embraced by the concept constitute a positive, wholesome, forward-looking basis for building a just and compassionate social order in this country. For example, human rights should be the primary focus as the nation goes about the task of
forging and evaluating economic and energy policy. It should not view such matters merely as exercises in pragmatic problem solving but as challenges to our sensitivity and decency in relation to other persons, especially the oppressed, the needy, and the dependent.

Right to Life, the Starting Place

Where then might this country begin in attempting to apply the concept of human rights to domestic concerns and problems? To me, at least, it seems clear that pride of place ought to be given to the most fundamental of rights: the right to life. When this right is violated — as it is in many ways in the United States today — discussion of other rights becomes hollow and even cynical.

Abortion is a crucial test case of the society's respect for the right to life. In recent weeks the Supreme Court has once again spoken significantly on this subject. In contrast with its other rulings in this area since 1973, the Court has now placed some limits, if not precisely on abortion itself, then at least on the funding of abortion. It has concluded that government has no constitutional obligation to pay for medically unnecessary abortions and that public hospitals have no obligation to provide for them.

These are welcome rulings, especially in light of what had previously seemed the same Court's almost unqualified commitment to abortion. It is also encouraging that, in contrast with its earlier rulings, the Supreme Court has recognized a strong and legitimate state interest in fetal life at all stages of pregnancy — although even this interest, it seems, is not to be regarded as sufficiently compelling to rule out virtual abortion on demand in the early months of pregnancy.

Welcome — though limited — as these developments may be, however, it is important that the Court's recent decisions not be regarded as the basis for an acceptable social compromise on abortion. The fact that the Court recognizes that government is not obligated to pay for medically unnecessary abortions does not correct the Court's tragic, fundamental error in legalizing abortion in the first place. It is important to be quite clear about both the immediate and the long-range implications of what the Court has done — specifically, the implications for those who are committed to the proposition that respect for the fundamental right of life demands efforts to eliminate the evil practice of abortion from our country.

The Court's new rulings point to the need for a five-part program in this regard.

First, vigorous efforts should be made, in line with the recent decisions, to oppose existing or proposed legislation that would require the expenditure of taxpayers' money for elective abortions. In this connection it is important to understand that abortion is urged as an
effective way of cutting down on the number of poor people in this country and so saving money. The issue is human life, however, and not saving money. The argument that abortion is an effective cost-cutting measure is intolerably callous and morally obnoxious. In this connection President Carter's policy of opposition to federal funding of elective abortion deserves our support, especially in light of the sharp and often unfair attacks directed against it by proabortion groups. At the same time one must hope that the administration will not proceed to press for massive federally backed family planning programs as an alternative to abortion, for these would represent an unprecedented and unacceptable governmental intrusion into family life.

Second, support should be given to legislative efforts to provide effective and acceptable alternatives to abortion, including improved prenatal and postnatal maternity and child care and improved programs for adoption and foster care.

Third, efforts should be stepped up in the private sector, including church institutions and programs, to provide similar supportive services to women before and after childbirth, as well as to their children. As the bishops have emphasized on a number of occasions, this is a moral imperative of the highest order for the Church.

Fourth, strong and active support should be given to legislation and public policy that will deal with social problems that influence some women to consider abortion as a solution to personal or family difficulties. I refer specifically to new initiatives in such areas as employment, housing, health care, welfare reform, and the eradication of poverty. A concrete test of the seriousness of the commitment to the basic human right to life is the energy and urgency with which the society addresses itself to such matters.

Finally, efforts must be continued and increased to obtain the early enactment of a constitutional amendment restoring full legal protection to human life at all stages of development, before and after birth. Efforts to limit abortions, to eliminate government involvement in abortion, and to remove the problems which may influence some to turn to abortion are all necessary and desirable. But they are also partial measures and interim solutions and in no way reduce or remove the need for an amendment.

Other Violations of Right to Life

The concern for abortion as a preeminent violation of the fundamental human right to life should make the society sensitive to other violations, or threatened violations, of this right. Dismaying evidence exists that disrespect for life extends not only to the unborn but, at the other end of life's spectrum, to the aged and infirm. The depriva-
tion and neglect in which many elderly persons in this country live is a standing indictment of the moral insensitivity of our society. As the bishops said in a statement on the aging last year: "America today faces a great paradox: It is an aging nation which worships the culture, values and appearance of youth. Instead of viewing old age as an achievement and a natural stage of life with its own merits, wisdom and beauty, American society all too often ignores, rejects and isolates the elderly." *(Society and the Aged: Toward Reconciliation, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, DC, May 5, 1976, section 1)*

But some persons would do even more. Not long ago a disturbing memorandum written by an official of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare came to light. Though perhaps of limited importance in itself, it betrays a mentality of which citizens should be aware, for it is a mentality which underlies many other legislative and programmatic proposals at the present time. The document was a review of possible cost-cutting measures. Among these, it suggested that the federal government put pressure on the states — by positive encouragement or even by the withholding of federal funds — to adopt legislation authorizing so-called living wills. “The cost-savings from a nationwide push toward ‘living wills’ is likely to be enormous,” the writer explained. “Over one-fifth of Medicare expenditures are for persons in their last year of life. Thus, in (fiscal year) 1978, $4.9 billion will be spent for such persons, and if just one-quarter of these expenditures were avoided through adoption of ‘living wills,’ the savings under Medicare alone would amount to $1.2 billion.”

Take away the bureaucratic language, and the message is clear: Government can save money by encouraging old people to die a little sooner than they otherwise would. Instead of being regarded with reverence and cherished, human life is subject in this view to a utilitarian cost-benefit calculus and can be sacrificed to serve fiscal policy and the sacred imperatives of trimming a budget.

As in the case of abortion, mere opposition to the abuse is not enough for those who reverence the human right to life of the aged. Such persons must also be forthcoming with generous and compassionate policies and programs that meet the real needs of the aged — not the need for early death, but for a rich and fulfilling life. This also calls for specific steps in such matters as health care, income maintenance, employment and retirement policy, housing, transportation, and many other areas that directly affect the well-being of elderly persons. Called for, too, is a comparable response by private institutions and agencies, especially the family and the Church, expressing a renewed commitment to the aged in our midst. To quote the bishops again: “Healing the rupture between society and its elderly members requires a major effort to change attitudes as well as social structures. In undertaking this task we are not simply meeting the demands of charity and justice. We are accepting our own humanity, our link with... the
I have singled out for mention two groups—the unborn and the aged—to illustrate both the tragic problem of disrespect for the fundamental right to life in our society today and the need for a comprehensive approach to the solution of this problem: an approach that deals not only with direct abuses and violations of the right but with social and human factors which help make abuses more likely. Much the same might be said with respect to other groups—the handicapped and the poor, for example. One is aware in our times of a frightening and morally obtuse tendency to think and to speak in terms of inferior lives, unwanted lives, lives subject to being demeaned and even destroyed because, in the estimate of some, to reverence and to sustain them is too costly or simply too inconvenient for the rest of society.

By contrast, one is reminded of the words of the Second Vatican Council (“The Church in the Modern World,” section 27)—words which help give content to a renewed commitment to defend and foster human rights:

All offenses against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, and willful suicide; all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures; all offenses against human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working conditions where men are treated as mere tools for profit rather than free responsible persons: all these and the like are criminal: they poison civilization; and they debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honor of the Creator.

Finally, one is reminded more simply of the words of Christ Himself—words Christians must make their own in belief and action: “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)