

CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO
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STATEMENT ON “THE CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE” – June, 1988

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

We, the bishops of the dioceses of the state of Ohio, welcome you to this Convocation on the Consistent Ethic of Life. It is our prayer that, during these days of deliberations, you will deepen your knowledge and commitment to this framework of moral principles, now firmly established within our National Conference of Catholic Bishops as a most viable way to teach the inner consistency of all the many Respect Life issues in our times.¹

CHALLENGE TO AFFIRM DIGNITY AND APPLY MORAL PRINCIPLES

Besides welcoming you, the participants, we intend also to address a challenge to all the Catholic faithful in Ohio. Like you, the Catholic faithful in the State of Ohio seek ways in which to affirm the dignity of the God-imaged human person. Like you, our Catholic people look for the application of our moral principles in both the private and public arena and desire to collaborate with those of other religious faiths in promoting the reign of God.

Over the past years the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Bishops of Ohio have addressed such subjects as: hunger, farm labor, the aged, abortion, sexuality, racism, Communism, health care, arms race, peace, Apartheid, the economy, AIDS, political responsibility, handgun violence, migration and refugees, religious liberty, native Americans, the handicapped, human rights, religious liberty, international conflict, military service, cultural pluralism, capital punishment, and women's issues.

What binds these issues together in a cohesive and coherent manner is the concept of human dignity. This “Consistent Ethic of Life” represents the foundation on which we can dialogue about the moral and philosophical import of these topics.

These issues, however, have a human face. The issue may be poverty, but *people* are poor; the issue may be the destruction of human life, but *people* are destroyed; the issue may be racism, ethnicity, or sexism, but *people* are excluded. The issue may be the distribution of wealth, but *people* are unemployed, homeless, and hungry.

¹ As the U.S. Bishops have stated:

Within this vision [of the Consistent Ethic of Life], different issues are linked at the level of moral principle because they involve the intrinsic dignity of human life and our obligation to protect and nurture this great gift. At the same time, each issue requires its own moral analysis and practical response. In addressing a specific issue ..., the Church highlights a particular aspect of the Christian message, without forgetting its place within a larger moral framework. Taken together, the Church's diverse pastoral statements and practical programs constitute no mere assortment of unrelated initiatives but a consistent strategy in support of human life in its various stages and circumstances. (“Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Reaffirmation,” November 14, 1985, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, p. 4).

All these human faces in varying degrees are powerless and voiceless and differ in their capacities to speak and stand up for themselves.

These human faces, in fact, have only one face: *“In the faces of the poor I see the face of Jesus Christ. In the life of the poor I see reflected the life of Christ,”* Pope John Paul II has reminded us.² Jesus told us that insofar as we neglect the least among us, we neglect Him. In the face of those who are utterly defenseless, without power, cast onto the margins of society, economically, educationally, or medically disadvantaged, there we see the face of Christ.

“Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.” Matthew 25: 45-46.

OUTRAGED BY ABORTION

We see the face of Christ in the millions of unnamed, unborn children, killed through legalized abortion, torn from us before they even have a chance to experience human life outside the womb. Abortion is an atrocity, a moral outrage, a social sin, a tragic miscarriage of justice, *“an unspeakable crime.”* The unborn child is the most innocent and defenseless of the poor among us. We will never rest until the laws of our nation are changed to protect unborn children from legalized abortion.

STRIVING FOR PEACE

We see the face of Christ in the millions of people subjected by totalitarian governments or forced into poverty and homelessness due to the ravages of regional conflicts all over the world. The face of Christ is no less worn by those who long for a peace that will allow us to destroy implements of war, especially the nuclear weapons whose destructive force threatens the very existence of our planet. We see the face of Christ in children who look to our leadership in finding ways to eliminate threats of nuclear disaster.

SUFFERING THROUGH EXCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION

We see the face of Christ in people whose color, ethnic background, culture, or gender, are used as cause for exclusion and violence. Systematic discrimination often makes it difficult for these sisters and brother to have equal access to opportunity and participation both in our church and our society.

To the extent that these issues represent human faces that bear the face of Christ, they are all important – because it is the one same Christ who suffers. As we look at the one Christ suffering in the lives of his people, the pain of Christ is more apparent and immediate in some than in others. When, in the suffering of some, the powerlessness and voicelessness is so explicit, it is then the suffering Christ experiences the wounds and

² “The Beatitudes: For All Ages, All Classes, All Christians,” Homily of Pope John Paul II to the residents of Tondo, Manila, the Philippines, February 18, 1981, as found in *Origins*, March 12, 1981, Vol. 10: No 39, paragraph 3, page 615.

nails more intensely. In such people we believe that Christ cries out with a loud voice, *“My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?”*

CALL TO REVERENCE AND ACTION IN BEHALF OF JUSTICE

But, it is not enough to see the face of Christ. The challenge is even greater! The face of Christ in every human person commands respect and demands reverence. Social participation by our Catholic people can enable us to help translate the moral principles of respect for human life into social policy recommendations and action in behalf of justice.

This zeal for the dignity of the person can attract the attention and interest of many citizens and civic leaders. The fifth century Saint John Chrysostom poetically and dramatically helps us reflect on this reference due to the human person:

Do you want to honor Christ’s body?
Then do not scorn him in his nakedness, nor honor him here in the church with silken garments while neglecting him outside where he is cold and naked.

For he who said, ‘This is my body,’ and made it so by his words, also said: ‘You saw me hungry and did not feed me...’

Of what use is it to weigh down Christ’s table with golden cups, when he himself is dying of hunger? First, fill him when he is hungry; then use the means you left to adorn his table...

Once again I am not forbidding you to supply these adornments; I am urging you to provide these other things as well, and indeed to provide them first.

No one has ever been accused for not providing ornaments, but for those who neglect their neighbor a hell awaits with an inextinguishable fire and torment in the company of demons. Do not, therefore, adorn the church and ignore your afflicted brother, for he is the most precious temple of all.³

CALL TO TRANSLATE FAITH INTO COMMITMENT OF SERVICE

Brothers and Sisters, it is to this task of promoting and sustaining a reverence for life that we believe the Ohio Catholic Conference on the Consistent of Life is directed. The call to justice is a universal call to life in a world in which the Great Commandment to love our neighbor is seen as an invitation to gaze into the face of Christ and see our brother and our sister. The call to discipleship is a call to translate this commitment of faith into commitment of service to the Church and to the civil community.

³ From a homily on Matthew by Saint John Chrysostom (Hom. 50, 3-4: p. 58, 508-509), as found in the *Liturgy of the Hours*, Second Reading, Twenty-first Week in Ordinary Time, Saturday, pages 182-183, *passim*.

You have taken on a formidable task. Please accept our gratitude and appreciation for what you are about to do. By endorsing the work of this Convocation, we extend our support, trust and confidence that you will succeed in this educational and conscience-raising venture. We look to you as leaders in unifying the Body of Christ and in proclaiming that the body, through many, is one. Let your efforts never stray from the mandate that motivates our mission as a Church – to see in the face of Christ all those who hunger for justice and peace.

Finally, we leave with you, the Catholic faithful, who enjoy special competence in the many facets of the Consistent Ethic of Life, the inspiring words of Pope John XXIII:

The prayer of all ought to rise with fervor to the Almighty..., matched by the resolute commitment of each individual..., to join hands in brotherly fashion. A creator of peace, he will follow his path, lighting the lamps of joy and playing their brilliance and loveliness on the hearts of men across the surface of the globe, leading them to recognize, across all frontiers, the faces of their brothers, the faces of their friends.⁴

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⁴ Address of Pope John XXIII upon reception of the Balzan Prize for Peace, May 10, 1963, ASS 55 (1963), p. 455.

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