

A Pastoral Letter on Life Issues from Bishop Brennan

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

Why have we been wearing face masks for many months and staying six feet apart? Why have we followed intensely the development and distribution of effective vaccines? Why do we abhor the violence and bloodshed in our homes, on our city streets and in the US Capitol? Have not the Coronavirus pandemic and recent violent events given our generation an opportunity to reflect seriously on the value we place on human life?

We instinctively realize that our lives and those of others matter, but it is useful to consider why. First of all, our life is pure gift. We did nothing to deserve it; we did not earn it; we could not demand it. It was simply given to us. For us who are religious, we believe this gift comes from God, who directly infuses an immortal soul in us and indirectly creates our body by means of our parents.

Secondly, as followers of Christ, we, along with Jews and many others, believe that each human being is made in the image and likeness of God. Human beings reflect God's wisdom, power and beauty not only through our ability to reason, our free will and our spiritual faculties but also by how we employ our bodies to create everything from buildings and roads to satellites and works of art. All of creation reflects the attributes of God but we human beings are the crown of God's creative work in the visible universe. The lives of such marvelous beings should be protected and given the opportunity to flourish. So, because all lives matter, we wear masks, wash our hands, wait for our turn to be vaccinated and deplore violence.

Apart from the threats posed by the Coronavirus and social violence, there are other serious threats to the lives of human beings. January each year brings the anniversary of one such threat. On January 22, 1973, I was at dinner with an American couple in Rome when we received word of the US Supreme Court's decision legalizing abortion. At that dinner was a priest, Fr. Bernard Haring, a well-known moral theologian who had served as a medic in the German army in the Second World War. All of us were appalled at the Court's decision. Fr. Haring said, "How could this happen in America? It was your country that freed the world from the barbarity of Hitler. How could America allow abortion on demand?"

Almost fifty years after that decision, our country is still deeply divided over abortion. A Pew Research Center survey, released August 29, 2019, showed that, while a majority of Americans did not want *Roe vs. Wade* overturned, only 27% thought abortion should be legal in all cases – precisely the regime now in place.

There is a social consensus that *Roe vs. Wade* went too far. There is considerable room for modifying current abortion practice. Don't expect this issue to go away.

Abortion is a direct assault on the life of the unborn child, whose Author ultimately is God. Even in very difficult circumstances (I have dealt with some of them), it is always objectively a grave evil. Without judging the subjective culpability of the mother and any man or woman involved in the abortion – for many circumstances may lessen or increase their responsibility – the abortion always results in a dead baby. It is so unjust to the child. Even in the rare case of a pregnancy resulting from rape – as hard as it is for the woman to have to bear a child conceived in a violent act – one must ask: why should the child be given the death penalty for what the father did?

Abortion is not the only life issue, however; there are many others. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago used the image of a "seamless garment" to speak of the interconnectedness of the many life issues.

I have always liked that image, taken from the tunic Jesus wore for which the soldiers cast lots, because they did not want to tear it. Issues such as poverty, racism, nativism, unequal access to good education and decent jobs, the physical environment as well as the treatment of elderly, handicapped and terminally ill persons, are all included in the fabric of the seamless garment. We should not rip out some issues from the pro-life garment and ignore or even oppose others. Rather, we should give moral support to those working on issues that surpass our own time and inclinations.

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I would argue that the seamless garment has a hem. The hem keeps the garment from fraying at the edges; it keeps it together. That hem is respect for the physical life of every person. Other issues, as important as they are, are irrelevant if the person is dead. That is preeminently true for the unborn child, who has not yet had a chance to break into the world and who lacks a voice to protest attacks on his or her life. If we oppose the death penalty for those convicted of heinous crimes, so that they may have time to repent and be saved, all the more should we oppose the taking of a tiny child's life, who has committed no crime and is defenseless. A person who is mentally or physically handicapped or terminally ill also deserves our protection. Euthanasia and its cousin, assisted suicide, are not respectful of the person as such, even if that person wants to exit life now. Respect for the inherent value of the person and loving care are what each vulnerable person needs, as I have witnessed in hospices.

Before ending, I must mention two other issues that directly affect how we view other people: racism and nativism. I heard Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speak when I was in college. He advocated for justice not just for African Americans but for all people being oppressed by powerful forces of hatred and self-interest. His doctrine of non-violence as the morally right method for promoting social and political change was thoroughly Christian and led me to take part in civil rights sit-ins and educational efforts to overcome racism. Sadly, racism still exists in our society. Change that lasts will come from people who let their minds and hearts be converted to God's way of looking at us: a beautiful mosaic in which the content of our character is far more important than the color of our skin. In society generally and in our Church, we have to recognize where racism still hurts people and take appropriate actions to eliminate it.

With respect to nativism – the social heresy that immigrants do not deserve the respect and rights that the native-born do – I have spent many years working with immigrants from around the world, especially Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, the Philippines, Korea and Vietnam. They are every bit as good as native-born Americans and, with their youth, their customs, their skills and their willingness to do the work many native-born do not want to do, they contribute considerably to our national life. It is as wrong to despise other people because of where they come from as it is to look down on persons because of their race.

Reasonable people can differ on how our country should handle immigration, but it is appalling how long it takes to come to the United States legally: according to a Cato Institute study (Policy Analysis # 873, June 18, 2019), it took a Mexican-born sibling of a US citizen twenty years from 1998 to apply for a permanent resident visa, while persons from some other countries waited even longer. Such long delays in immigrating legally increase the pressure on some persons to come illegally when facing starvation, rampant violence or religious or political harassment at home. We need immigration reform. Meanwhile, our faith teaches us to respect and treat the stranger fairly, regardless of his or her origin.

The seamless garment of life issues was sewn by our Creator, who has given us a beautiful, bountiful world in which to live together – “our common home,” as Pope Francis reminds us, where we should live in peace.

God wants us to cherish one another, as He cherishes us. That is why we must engage in the struggle to preserve or restore the fundamental rights that allow human beings to live and flourish: the born and the unborn, the fully functioning and the handicapped, persons of different races and those from different countries.

The Blessed Virgin Mary, a Jewish woman, appeared as Our Lady of Guadalupe to a Mexican peasant, Juan Diego, in 1531 to show compassion to the people of our hemisphere, whom her Son had saved but who did not yet know it. Her prayers brought healing to Juan Diego's uncle, who was gravely ill, and gave hope to millions of Mexicans who put their faith in Christ. Her example of reaching out to others is a model for us as we work together on the great life issues of our day. Let us call on her often to intercede before her Son, the Lord of Life, that our efforts to respect, protect and enhance the lives of all people may bear fruit in peace and justice.

Faithfully in Christ,

+Mark E. Brennan

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