

The Right to Life

There is little doubt about the Catholic Church's position on abortion—it is inherently evil. There is, however, some confusion about the full extent of the Church's pro-life stance.

The right to life is a fundamental precept of Catholicism. But the right does not end with birth. Catholic teaching requires not only that we protect the unborn, but also that we provide the resources necessary to ensure that child has all he or she needs to live a life of dignity; food, shelter, education, health care, work, to name a few.

Thus, in order to call ourselves pro-life, we must not only support the rights of the unborn, but also the rights of the born to have fundamental needs met. This means that we support programs which provide necessary resources to pregnant women, single mothers, working mothers, and families living in or on the cusp of poverty. The Catholic fight against abortion doesn't end at the clinic, it continues on to the federal and state budget processes, where social services programs (such as Head Start or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) seem to always be first on the chopping block, and to advocacy for environmental protection (access to potable water and safe food is undeniably fundamental to a life of dignity).

Nor does our advocacy for life end at our borders. As a universal church, we believe in the right to life for all, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, disability, geography, or gender. As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops stated in 1998:

The culture of death extends beyond our shores: famine and starvation, denial of health care and development around the world, the deadly violence of armed conflict and the scandalous arms trade that spawns such conflict. Our nation is witness to domestic violence, the spread of drugs, sexual activity which poses a threat to lives, and a reckless tampering with the world's ecological balance. Respect for human life calls us to defend life from these and other threats. It calls us as well to enhance the conditions for human living by helping to provide food, shelter and meaningful employment, beginning with those who are most in need. We live the Gospel of Life when we live in solidarity with the poor of the world, standing up for their lives and dignity.

More troubling for some, the right to life continues until natural death. Pope John Paul II was particularly forceful in his statements that our deep respect for life precludes use of the death penalty. "Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform." (Pope John Paul II, St. Louis, MO, January 1999). In a technologically advanced country such as ours, society can be protected from violent predators without resorting to execution.

Catholic social teaching about the right to life encompasses far more than just a pro-life stance on abortion. Catholics must advocate not only for an end to abortion, but also to end the injustices that lead women to seek abortion—lack of support or resources, violence against women, or workplace policies that punish pregnant women, among other things. If we are truly pro-life Catholics, we must also be advocates for the poor, disrespected, and disenfranchised around the world.