

The Culture of Life

In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II identified the need to strive for a culture of life. For us as member of the Order of Malta, the culture of life has a particular significance for living according to our motto "tuitio fidei et obsequium pauperum".

The culture of death threatens the most vulnerable in our society: the frail elderly, the chronically ill, those with diminished cognitive function, asylum seekers, the unborn and women who are exposed to the violence of abortion as a solution to what is usually a social problem, the threat of rejection if she accepts her motherhood. In many ways these people are the poorest in our community.

We can respond to those threats practically, as we do, by our involvement in hospitality, in hospices and palliative care, in assisting asylum seekers, in caring for the sick and the elderly, and by seeking to provide support for women distressed by unexpected pregnancy.

However there is a need not only to give witness by what we offer, there is also a need to influence the development of a culture of life. The SMOM International Association of Catholic Bioethicists and the various national initiatives of the Order in Bioethics have been established so as to link our service to the poor, who are the likely victims of the culture of death, with the witness that the Church gives to the dignity of the human person made in the image and likeness of God, a witness that seeks to protect the sacredness of every person but especially the most vulnerable.

Unless we succeed with that witness to the faith, then much of our service to the poor will be undermined by our government, overwhelmed by aggressive secularism, taking away the dignity of those who are most vulnerable. If we do not win the battle for hearts and minds about the sacredness of every human life, then our efforts to serve the poor will become more and more marginalised as the most vulnerable become excluded from membership of the human family.

The continued development of the Order's role in Bioethics is therefore at the forefront of the contribution that the Order can make. Our motto represents a partnership between service and witness. The one needs the other.

In seeking to serve the poor, the very basis of that friendship is our acceptance of the fundamental equality of every person. We speak of "our lord's the sick". By that we mean to express our role of service to those who are in need of assistance. True service to the poor does not treat the poor as mere recipients of our beneficence, but fellow travellers along the journey of life. One of the most significant things about volunteering for care of the dying is how often it is that those caring eventually become those cared for.

At heart of the activities of the Order is love for our fellow human beings, and the basis of love is equality. The man who receives my assistance dignifies me by receiving it and I dignify him by recognising my dependence upon him. The mystery of love is its relationship to suffering. Suffering provides the basis for the expression

of love. Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* links divine love to human love by showing us that the desire to love someone else is equally a part of the complete love as the desire to be loved. *Eros* and *agape* are parts of the same divine love. This is the equality of our love for the poor.

For every woman who is in difficulty with pregnancy there is a man who shares responsibility for the child that is the result of their love. When I stand before an audience of Australian adults, I know that it is likely that one in three persons in the audience has had a direct involvement in abortion. The victims of abortion are all around us. By their lack of love women and men have harmed themselves through their rejection of the child who is the fruit of their love, rendered barren by abortion.

The victims of abortion are part of our spiritual poverty. They are to be numbered amongst our poor to whom the Order of Malta owes service.

Pope John Paul II called for a radical solidarity with women, a solidarity requires that the underlying causes which make a child unwanted be addressed. There will never be justice, including equality, development and peace, for women or for men, unless there is an unfailing determination to *respect, protect, love and serve life* – every human life, at every stage and in every situation (*Evangelium Vitae*, 8).

Service to this poor is a call to recognise the frailty of human nature and the need for forgiveness. We must ask for forgiveness for ourselves in the choices that we made not to give love where love was needed.

The two sides of our motto call on us to love practically in service but also in witness to the need of every human being to be loved and respected. The poor who need what we can give, need also our respect for them as persons, equally called to communion with God our creator.

The attack on that respect for all persons is central to the culture of death, the culture that values human beings only instrumentally for their functions, rather than loving them for who they are. The culture of death is represented by use and not by love. The emphasis on autonomy excludes all those whose human capacities are diminished.

If we are to provide true service to our Lord's the sick, the frail; the elderly the cognitively impaired and the other victims of the culture of death, including the victims of abortion, then we must give witness in solidarity with them, calling for recognition of their sacredness and the important role of law in protecting the worth and value of every member of the human family, no matter their disabilities or their loss of dignity through sin.

In the West we face a most difficult battle, one in which as religious persons we are becoming the marginalised. After the second world war, there was a realisation that there was a law above civil law, a set of reasons for human beings to act based upon the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of every human being. For a time there was agreement between the international human rights movement and the great religions.

Since then however we have seen the development of secularism a very aggressive exclusionist form of secularism which views religious belief and practice with arrogant intolerance and dismissiveness. This kind of secularist belief is characterised by attempts to exclude contributions to public discussion on the basis of a kind of bigotry that classifies the contributions of persons who are religious in a nominalist way.

The battle has shifted from being a battle about particular issues to a battle in the west for the right of religious persons to exist and to contribute to society and its public policy as religious persons.

When Christians, either as individuals or in company with others of similar mind, take part in public discussion, they do so simply as citizens expressing a view about the common good and the principles that are needed to protect the common good. They are behaving responsibly by taking their civic role seriously, provided of course that they conduct themselves properly within the norms of democracy. This caveat also applies to those who replace intelligent argument and debate with *ad hominem* attacks which invite people to disregard fellow citizens on the basis of their religion.

The view that human life is to be protected is implied by the simple idea of equal respect for persons. It is legitimate to argue about who is a person, but that is not essentially a religious debate, even if religious people may be inclined to be more sensitive to the need to protect those who are most vulnerable on the fringes of life.

The right to be involved in public debate needs protection. It is manifestly unjust and extraordinarily bigoted to claim that religious people ought not to be permitted to contribute or that their contribution ought not to be considered.

At the same time, contribution to public debate needs to be aware of the sensitivities of others. Public policy advances through seeking points of agreement and being careful to respect areas of disagreement. There is a role for what the philosopher John Rawls calls “public reason”, this is a discussion that takes place on the basis of agreed fundamental principles.

However it is important that there is also continued discussion of those fundamental principles, as well as on the application of them, and it is appropriate in a pluralist society that all perspectives are brought to bear upon that discussion in a considered way.

There is a need to listen to, to search for, and to identify those core values that will make our communities great, whomever and how many espouse them, and from wherever those values might originate.

The great traditions in every age and culture have tended to identify the very same core values. Our human need for a transcendent reality that is beyond the merely human ultimately outlasts every other alternative belief form both intellectually and emotionally.

The Order of Malta has an important role to play in giving witness to those transcendent values. Our role in Bioethics has become a definitive role of leadership

in which we defend the poor and their right to be and to exist as fundamental to and in partnership with the practical service that we offer them.

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