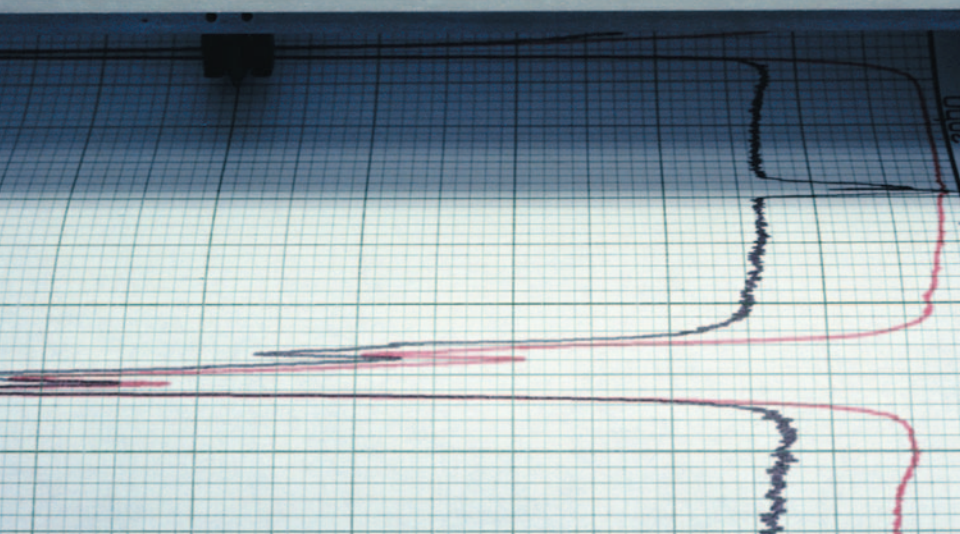
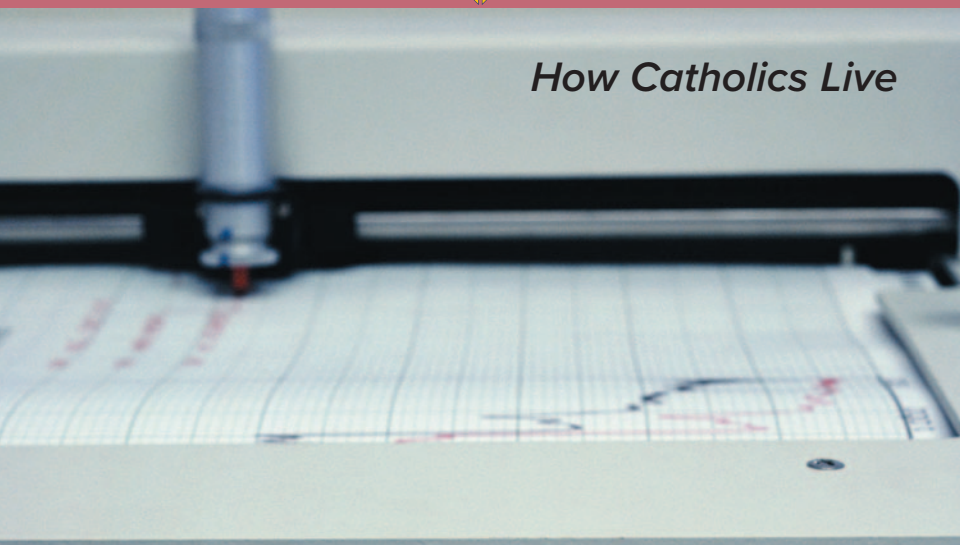




How Catholics Live



Section 7:

*The Fifth Commandment:
Moral Issues of Life and Death*



To Luke E. Hart, exemplary evangelizer and Supreme Knight from 1953-64, the Knights of Columbus dedicates this Series with affection and gratitude.

*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT: MORAL ISSUES OF LIFE AND DEATH

PART THREE • SECTION SEVEN OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

by
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A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith.

The Catholic Information Service recommends reading at least one Hart series booklet each month to gain a deeper, more mature understanding of the Faith.

PART III: HOW CATHOLICS LIVE
(MORALITY)

SECTION 7: MORAL ISSUES OF LIFE AND DEATH

1. *The “Quality of Life” ethic*

Throughout the twentieth century, Western civilization has witnessed a titanic struggle between two radically opposed philosophies of human life: the traditional “sanctity of life” ethic and the new “quality of life” ethic. The new morality judges human lives by the standard of “quality,” and by this standard it declares some lives not worth living and the deliberate “termination” of these lives morally legitimate. “Termination” is the usual euphemism for *killing*. *Life Unworthy of Life* was the way it was described in the title of the first book to win public acceptance for this new ethic by German doctors before World War II – the basis and beginning of the Nazi medical practices.

The criteria by which a human life is most often judged in this “quality of life” ethic today are:

- 1) Whether it is *wanted* by another. Today this is usually applied to unborn children, to justify abortion: if the baby is “unwanted” by the mother, or predicted to be “unwanted” by society, then it is thought morally right to take that life, i.e. to kill it. In other places and times,

other “unwanted” groups have been denied the right to life, such as Jews (the Holocaust), Blacks (lynching), and people with the wrong political or religious beliefs (in totalitarian states).

- 2) Whether it has “too much” *pain*. Today this is usually applied to justify killing the old. But there is increasing pressure to justify and legalize medically-assisted suicide at any age.
- 3) Whether it is “severely handicapped,” mentally or physically. Of course, there is no clear dividing line between more and less “severe” handicaps, or between “much” pain and “too much” pain, no objective criteria; so whether it is right to kill becomes a matter of subjective feeling and desire.

2. *The “Sanctity of Life” ethic*

The opposite philosophy of life is the traditional “sanctity of life” ethic, which is taught by all the great religions of the world, is the basis of Western civilization from its Judaeo-Christian roots, is presupposed in our laws, and is at the basis of all Catholic teaching about the fifth Commandment.

There are three reasons for the sanctity of human life: its origin, its nature, and its end.

“*Human life is sacred* because

- [1] from its beginning it involves the creative action of God,
- [2] and it remains for ever in a special relationship with the Creator,
- [3] who is its sole end” (CCC 2258).*

* CCC=*Catechism of the Catholic Church*

“God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being”⁵⁶ (CCC 2258).

If this is not true, then life is not sacred and God is not God. If it *is* true, then the “quality of life” ethic is as serious a form of idolatry as the worship of stone idols, false pagan gods, or evil spirits – which in ancient times also manifested itself in the practice of human sacrifice, especially of children.

3. *The sense of the sacred*

Not all men throughout history have known the true reason for the sacredness of human life: that one God created all men. But most men and most societies have instinctively intuited that moral conclusion, even without that theological premise, and felt a strong sense of the sacredness of human life. They have often violated it – history is full of murder and bloodshed – but a sense of shame and guilt remained attached to killing, especially killing the innocent. These instinctive feelings – the sense of the sacred and the sense of shame and guilt – seem to be in crisis today.

The loss of the sense of the *sacredness of human life* seems closely connected with loss of the sacredness of three other closely connected things: *motherhood, sex, and God*. Of motherhood, for a million and a half mothers a year in America alone abort their unborn daughters or sons. Of sex, for the “sexual revolution” was a radical change not only in *behavior* but also in vision, in philosophy. Of God, for “the fear of the Lord,” which Scripture calls “the beginning of wisdom,” is usually thought to be “primitive” and even harmful, even by many religious educators.

4. *The basic principle of Catholic ethics of human life*

Persons are not things, objects of manipulation and control and design, to be judged by some other, higher standard than persons. There is no higher standard – God himself is personal (“I AM”). Persons are subjects, *I*'s. They are subjects of rights. They are not to be judged as worth more or less on some abstract, impersonal scale of health, intelligence, physical power, or length of life. Each life, each individual, each human being is unique, and each is equally and infinitely precious. That is the root of Catholic morality on all issues of human life.

5. *Christ and the fifth Commandment*

Instead of *sbrinking* the fifth Commandment, as the modern “quality of life” ethic does, Christ *expanded* it. “In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord recalls the commandment ‘You shall not kill,’⁶² and adds to it the proscription against anger, hatred, and vengeance [Matthew 5:21-22]. Going further, Christ asks his disciples to turn the other cheek, to love their enemies.⁶³ He did not defend himself and told Peter to leave his sword in its sheath”⁶⁴ (Matthew 26:52; CCC 2262).

6. *Self-defense*

This does not mean that Christ commanded pacifism. “The legitimate [armed] defense of persons [including oneself] and societies is not an exception to the prohibition against the murder of the innocent that constitutes intentional killing. [For] [t]he act of self-defense can have a double effect: the preservation of one’s own life, and the killing of the aggressor.... The one is intended, the other is not”⁶⁵ (Saint Thomas Aquinas; CCC 2263).

Self-defense is legitimate for the same reason suicide is not: because one’s own life is a gift from God, a treasure we are

responsible for preserving and defending. In fact, it is natural and right to feel "...bound to take more care of one's own life than of another's"⁶⁶ (Saint Thomas Aquinas), just as one is bound to defend one's own family more than others.

Moreover, "[l]egitimate defense [by force] can be not only a right [morally *permissible*] but a grave duty [morally *obligatory*] for one who is responsible for the lives of others" (CCC 2265). I am invited (though not required) by Christ's "evangelical counsels" to "turn the other cheek" even to the point of martyrdom when my own life is threatened; such personal "pacifism" is honorable. But it is not honorable to fail to protect others for whom I am responsible, especially my family, from life-threatening aggressors; nor is it honorable for the state to so fail; and sometimes the only way to do this is by force, or at least the threat of it.

7. *Capital punishment*

"The defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm. For this reason, those who legitimately hold authority also have the right to use arms to repel aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their responsibility" (CCC 2265).

The morality of capital punishment follows the same principle as the morality of a just self-defense. If the execution of the murderer *after* he is apprehended is necessary to prevent more murders, then capital punishment is justified; for the same reason it is right to disarm a murderer by deadly force *before* he is apprehended, while he is in process of committing murder. The same principle for self-defense against aggression holds for a group (a society) threatened by an *individual* aggressor, or by an aggressive *nation*. For analogous reasons, those holding authority

have the right to repel by armed force aggressors against the community in their charge. The morality of capital punishment follows the same principles as the morality of a just self-defense.

But the important qualifier is “*if necessary*.” In most modern societies, defensive war is still necessary to repel foreign aggressors, but capital punishment is not; life imprisonment in secure prisons without parole is sufficient to protect society. “If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people’s safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person” (CCC 2267).

Thus the Church’s prudence judges that capital punishment, though it remains a public right if necessary, is not right under today’s conditions. These conditions also include unequal justice for rich and poor. It is obviously unjust to kill one man and not another because only one can afford a good lawyer, or because of any kind of racial prejudice.

8. *The morality of punishment*

The concept of justice is essential to morality. And the concept of rewards and punishments is essential to justice. Therefore punishment is essential to morality.

But what is the justification for it? What is the purpose of punishment?

The *Catechism* mentions four: order, expiation, deterrence, and rehabilitation.

- 1) “Punishment has the primary aim of redressing the disorder introduced by the offense” (CCC 2266). The primary purpose of punishment is justice, “just

desserts.” “The punishment must fit the crime.” Everyone senses instinctively that it is just to require “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

Charity does not contradict this justice; charity presupposes it in going beyond it. *Individuals* are required by Christ to go beyond justice to charity and forgiveness, but *society* must maintain a rule of law and justice to protect order. Christ did not advise public officials to forgive crimes and revoke punishments.

The *Catechism* mentions three other good reasons for punishment (CCC 2266).

- 2) “When it [the punishment] is willingly accepted by the guilty party, it assumes the value of expiation,” that is, atonement, penance, “making up for” the evil, paying his debt. Christ did this for our sins, on the Cross. We do it, in some small measure, in doing penance in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
- 3) Punishment also has the purpose of “defending public order and protecting people’s safety.” This is “deterrence.” Deterrence cannot be the only justification for punishment for that would justify also extreme and unjust punishments. The threat of capital punishment would surely deter drunk drivers more effectively than merely revoking their driver’s license. But it would not be just.
- 4) “Punishment then...has a medicinal purpose: as far as possible, it must contribute to the correction of the guilty party.” This is “rehabilitation” (CCC 2266).

9. *Sins against the fifth Commandment*

These include:

- 1) “Infanticide [killing an infant],⁷⁰ fratricide [killing one’s brother or sister], parricide [killing one’s father or mother], and the murder of a spouse are especially grave crimes by reason of the natural bonds which they break” (CCC 2268).
- 2) “The fifth commandment forbids doing anything with the intention of *indirectly* bringing about a person’s death” (CCC 2269).
- 3) “The moral law prohibits exposing someone to mortal danger without grave reason,
- 4) “as well as refusing assistance to a person in danger” (CCC 2269). Also,
- 5) abortion,
- 6) euthanasia, and
- 7) suicide all demand special treatment today, since the traditional consensus against them is rapidly breaking down in so-called “civilized” and “advanced” societies in the West.

10. *Abortion and the Right to Life*

The “bottom line” first: “[h]uman life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception [its beginning]. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person – among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life”⁷² (CCC 2270).

The American *Declaration of Independence* has the same philosophy: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men

are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

We cannot pursue our end of happiness without liberty. (Therefore slavery is a great evil.) But we cannot have liberty or pursue happiness without having life. (Therefore murder is a greater evil.)

The State did not create us, design us, or give us life. Nor did it give us the right to life. Therefore the State cannot take away that right.

All persons, not just *some*, have a “natural right” to life simply because of their nature, because of what they are: human persons. Only if someone gives up his right to life by threatening the life of another is it right to take his life, to protect the innocent other person. This is the morality of Western civilization, of Greek and Roman classicism at its best, of religious Judaism, of Islam, and of Christianity, of Biblical Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy as well as Roman Catholicism. It is the “sanctity of life” ethic.

The other philosophy, the “quality of life” ethic, holds that only some, not all, human beings have an inalienable right to life; and that some human beings may draw the line for others and exclude them from the community of persons, from those who have the right to life. This same principle is at work whether those excluded persons are unwanted, unborn babies, the old, the sick, the dying, those in pain, those of a certain “inferior” or unwanted race, those who have the wrong political opinions, or those who are declared “severely handicapped” because they fail to come up to a certain standard of intelligence or performance

such as “significant social interaction” – which standard is always determined by the killers.

Thus the “quality of life” ethic denies the most basic human equality and the most basic of all human rights. No two moral philosophies could be more radically at war with each other than the philosophy of the culture Pope John Paul II has called the “culture of death” and the philosophy of the Church of the God of life.

11. *The universal agreement in the Catholic tradition about abortion*

“Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion [as distinct from miscarriage or spontaneous abortion]. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable” (CCC 2271).

The earliest Christian document we have after the New Testament, the first-century “*Letter to Diognetus*,” mentions abortion as one of the things Christians never do, as a distinctive visible feature of their faith. The latest Ecumenical Council, Vatican II, reaffirmed this teaching in totally uncompromising terms: “...abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes”⁷⁶ (CCC 2271).

The presence of “dissenters” or of heretics who reject some certain, essential Catholic (“Catholic” means “universal”) teaching does not make that teaching uncertain, unessential, or non-universal. The Church’s teaching did not come from human opinion, so it cannot be changed by human opinion.

12. *The Church’s policy on abortion*

Catholic tradition distinguishes “formal” and “material” cooperation in any evil. “Formal cooperation” means direct, deliberate doing of the evil – for instance, a mother freely

choosing to pay a doctor to abort her baby, the doctor performing the abortion, or a nurse directly helping the doctor to perform it. “Material cooperation” means indirect or nondeliberate aid – for instance, contributing money to a hospital that performs abortions. Material cooperation is a “gray area.” Even paying taxes can be material cooperation in abortion when the government uses tax money to finance health insurance that covers abortions. It is not possible to avoid all material cooperation with evil. But it is possible, and necessary, to avoid all formal cooperation with evil, for any reason. No good reason can justify an intrinsically evil act.

“Formal cooperation in an abortion constitutes a grave offense. The Church attaches the canonical [official Church-law] penalty of excommunication to this crime against human life. ‘A person who procures a completed abortion incurs excommunication *latae sententiae*,’⁷⁷ ‘by the very commission of the offense’...”⁷⁸ (CCC 2272).

This does not mean that all who commit this sin are damned. Excommunication is not automatic damnation. But it does mean they have broken their communion with the Body of Christ. For Christ cannot commit such a crime, and to be a Catholic is to be a member of his very Body, to be his hands and fingers. It is not Christ’s hands that abort Christ’s children.

“The Church does not thereby intend to restrict the scope of mercy” (CCC 2272). Forgiveness is always available for any sin, if sincerely repented, and ministries of reconciliation like “Project Rachel” deal compassionately with women who have had abortions.

Mother Teresa says: “Every abortion has two victims: the body of the baby and the soul of the mother.” The first is beyond

repair, but the second is not; and the Church does everything possible to repair and restore souls and lives torn by sin – which in one way or another is true of all of us. The Church does not judge the individual soul, nor should any of us. She says, as her Master did, “Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone.” She is not in the business of stone-casting. But she is in the business of the accurate labeling of human acts, just like her Master, who said not only “neither do I condemn you,” but also “go and sin no more” (John 8:11).

13. *The basic arguments for and against abortion*

There are three steps, or premises, to the argument for outlawing abortion.

The first is that one of the most fundamental purposes of law is to protect human rights, especially the first and foundational right, the right to life.

The second is that all human beings have the right to life.

The third is that the already-conceived but not-yet-born children of human beings are human beings.

From these three premises it necessarily follows that the law must protect the right to life of unborn children.

There are only three possible reasons for disagreeing with this conclusion and being “pro-choice” instead of “pro-life.” One may deny the first, second, or third premises. For if all three are admitted, the “pro-life” conclusion follows.

Thus there are three different kinds of “pro-choicers”:

First, there are those who admit that all persons have a right to life and that unborn children are persons, but deny that this right should be protected by law (the first premise). This is a serious *legal* error.

“The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is a *constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation*. “The inalienable rights of the person must be recognized and respected by civil society and the political authority. These human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor do they represent a concession made by society and the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin....”⁸⁰ “The moment a positive [human] law deprives a category of human beings of the protection which civil legislation ought to accord them, the state is denying the equality of all before the law. When the state does not place its power at the service of the rights of each citizen, and in particular of the more vulnerable, the very foundations of a state based on law are undermined...”⁸¹ (CCC 2273).

Second, there are those who admit that the law should protect the right to life and that unborn children are human beings, but deny that all human beings have the right to life (the second premise). This is a very serious *moral* error.

It is essentially the philosophy of power, of “might makes right.” Those in power – doctors, mothers, legislators, adults – decree the right to kill those who lack the power to defend themselves: the smallest, most vulnerable, and most innocent of all human beings. No good reason can justify this decree; a good end does not justify an intrinsically evil means. If the babies shared the powers of the abortionists and could fight back with scalpels, there would be few abortions.

Third, there are those who admit that the law should protect the right to life and that all humans have that right, but

deny that unborn children are humans (the third premise). This is a serious factual and scientific error.

Before *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion, all science texts taught the biological understanding that the life of any individual of any species begins at conception, when sperm and ovum unite to create a new being with its own complete and unique genetic code, distinct from both father and mother. All growth and development from then on is a matter of degree, a gradual unfolding of what is already there. There is no specific or distinct point in our development when we become human. (What were we before that – birds?) Only when abortion became legal did the science textbooks change their language and cease teaching this understanding – not because of any new science but because of a new politics.

Abortion is not “a complex issue.” Few moral issues could be clearer. As Mother Teresa has said, “if abortion is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”

14. *Other sins against human life*

- 1) “It is immoral to produce human embryos intended for exploitation as disposable biological material”⁸⁴ (CCC 2275). This amounts to farming, killing, and selling tiny humans for their body parts!
- 2) “Test tube babies,” conceived without sexual union, are unnatural for the same reason artificial contraception is: both deliberately divorce what God and nature have joined: sexual union and reproduction. Test tube babies divorce babies from sex; contraception divorces sex from babies.

- 3) “Surrogate mothers” can result in a child having three, four, or five parents. It is unnatural in itself and deeply confusing to the child.
- 4) “Certain attempts to *influence chromosomal or genetic inheritance* are not therapeutic [to cure genetic diseases and restore natural health] but are aimed at producing human beings selected according to sex or other predetermined qualities. Such manipulations are contrary to the personal dignity of the human being and his integrity and identity”⁸⁵ which are unique and unrepeatable” (CCC 2275). “Designer genes,” the demand for pre-designed genetically perfect babies, is a case of “playing God” and an insult and injustice against the human babies rejected for having the “wrong” sex, color, IQ, etc. Every loving parent of a “handicapped” child knows that there are no “wrong” children, only wrong attitudes toward them. No children are “mistakes;” the mistakes are in those who reject them and the challenges and opportunities to love them as God does.

15. *Euthanasia*

“Whatever its motives [whether selfish convenience or unselfish mercy] and means [whether harsh or gentle], direct euthanasia...is morally unacceptable” (CCC 2277). For “mercy killing” is *killing*, and God’s commandment says “You shall not kill.” “The end does not justify the means;” a good motive (mercy) does not justify an intrinsically evil act (killing).

“Thus an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person...” (CCC

2277). This is how we treat a horse: we “put it out of its misery” by putting a bullet through its head, because we judge its life merely by physical, biological standards. It is only an animal. Man is not only an animal.

“Even if death is thought imminent, the ordinary care owed to a sick person cannot be legitimately interrupted” (CCC 2279). “Ordinary care” or “ordinary means” include such things as food and water and pain relief, as distinct from intrusive and aggressive medical interventions such as respirators or feeding tubes, which are “extraordinary means” and are discretionary, or optional.

The basic principle is simple: “You shall not kill.” Not anyone. Even capital punishment, defensive war, or armed self-defense is justified only when it is an act of protection of innocent human life when threatened. Protecting innocent life, by force if necessary, is right for the same reason murder is wrong: because human life is sacred.

However, “letting die” is not the same as killing. It can be morally right under some circumstances. If death is inevitable and imminent, there is no moral necessity to do anything that makes dying more long and painful. This is sometimes misleadingly called “passive euthanasia,” as distinct from “active euthanasia.” “Discontinuing medical procedures [such as chemotherapy or radiation] that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of ‘over-zealous’ treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one’s inability to impede it is merely accepted” (CCC 2278).

Also, “[t]he use of painkillers [such as morphine] to alleviate the sufferings of the dying, even at the risk of shortening their days, can be morally in conformity with human dignity if

death is not willed...but only foreseen and tolerated as inevitable. Palliative care...should be encouraged” (CCC 2279). In nearly all cases, dying today can be free from intolerable pain, though doctors are often not adequately trained in palliative care. However, there are excellent care organizations like Hospice which are.

16. *Suicide*

“Physician assisted suicide” is one of the primary “causes” defended by those who hold the “quality of life” ethic. Though they are usually secularists, what they are really committed to is a very definite religious philosophy, an answer to a religious question which is clearly expressed in the title of the movie defending suicide, “Whose Life Is It, Anyway?” That is indeed the question. If I am the author, owner, and lord of my life – if I am my own God, my own creator – then I have the right and the authority (the “author’s rights”) to do what I please with it. And if I am the creator rather than the procreator of my children, I may claim such authority over their lives too to justify abortion. The question comes down to this: am I under God, or may I play God?

Thus the fundamental question about the *morality* of human life is a question about *fact*, about truth. What *ought* to be depends on what *is*. If I am in fact God’s creature, then the answer to the question “Whose life is it, anyway?” is that it is God’s. My life is his gift.

Suicide is a sin not only against God but also against self. “It is gravely contrary to the just love of self” (CCC 2281). We are commanded to “love your neighbor *as yourself*” – and therefore also to love yourself as your neighbor. Killing yourself is murder, just as killing another is.

“It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family...and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations” (CCC 2281). Suicide is not a “victimless crime.” It horribly scars the souls of all who love the one who does it.

However, “[w]e should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance” (CCC 2283) – perhaps at the very moment of death.

17. *Scandal*

“Scandal” is a technical moral term; it means “an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil” (CCC 2284). It does not mean some tabloid newspaper reporting a famous person’s sins. It certainly does not mean “being unpopular or controversial” or “being offensive to some people” – if it did, Christ would have been guilty of it!

“Scandal takes on a particular gravity by reason of the authority of those who cause it [e.g., parents, teachers, or priests] or the weakness of those who are scandalized [e.g. children]. “It prompted our Lord to utter this curse: ‘Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea’”⁸⁶ (Matthew 18:6; CCC 2285).

To weaken the faith or hope or charity of another is a very serious evil. Teachers therefore have a very serious responsibility, especially teachers of religion to young people (see James 3:1).

18. *Health*

“Life and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God. We must take reasonable care of them...” (CCC 2288).

“The virtue of temperance [see Part III, Section 4, paragraph 8] disposes us to *avoid every kind of excess*: the abuse of food, alcohol, tobacco, or medicine” (CCC 2290). Especially “*the use of {illegal} drugs* inflicts very grave damage on human health and life” (CCC 2291).

“*Concern for the health* of its citizens requires that society help in the attainment of living-conditions that allow them to grow and reach maturity: food and clothing, housing, health care, basic education, employment, and social assistance” (CCC 2288).

19. *Respect for the dead*

- 1) “The dying should be given attention and care to help them live their last moments in dignity and peace.
- 2) “They will be helped by the prayer of their relatives,
- 3) “who must see to it that the sick receive at the proper time the sacraments that prepare them to meet the living God” (CCC 2299).
- 4) “The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect... ” (CCC 2300).
- 5) “The burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy”⁹² (CCC 2300).

20. *War and peace*

The Church is both idealistic and realistic about war.

On the one hand, “the Church insistently urges everyone to prayer and to action...[to] free us from the ancient bondage of war”¹⁰⁵ (CCC 2307).

On the other hand, “[i]nsofar as men are sinners, the threat of war hangs over them and will so continue until Christ comes again...”¹¹² (CCC 2317; see Matthew 24:3-8). Therefore “as

long as the danger of war persists and there is no international authority with the necessary competence and power, governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defense, once all peace efforts have failed”¹⁰⁶ (CCC 2308).

The same moral standards apply to collective self-defense by nations as to self-defense by individuals (see paragraph 6 above).

21. *The “just war” doctrine*

No war is just in itself. War is a sinful and barbaric invention. It is murder on a mass scale. But *going to war* can be just, if it is necessary self-defense.

The aim of a just war (i.e., a just “going to war”) is peace. It is not *taking* lives but *saving* lives, the lives of the innocent victims of aggression.

The traditional elements enumerated in what is called the “just war” doctrine are the following “strict conditions for *legitimate defense by military force*” (CCC 2309):

- 1) *Defense*. As implied above, a just war cannot be aggressive, but only defensive, a response to aggression. The Qur’an teaches the same doctrine to Muslims: Allah hates the aggressor.
- 2) *Grave damage*. “[T]he damage inflicted by the aggressor...must be lasting, grave, and certain.”
- 3) *Last resort*. “[A]ll other means of putting an end to it [this grave damage] must have been shown to be... ineffective.”
- 4) *End is peace*. The aim and intention must be not war but peace.
- 5) *Realistic hope for peace*. “[T]here must be serious prospects of success.”

- 6) *No graver evils.* “[T]he use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition” (CCC 2309). “Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man...”¹¹⁰ A danger of modern warfare is that it provides the opportunity to those who possess modern scientific weapons – especially atomic, biological, or chemical weapons – to commit such crimes” (CCC 2314).
- 7) *Rules of war.* It is not true that “all’s fair in love and war.” “The Church and human reason both assert the permanent validity of the *moral law during armed conflict.* “The mere fact that war has regrettably broken out does not mean that everything becomes licit between the warring parties”¹⁰⁹ (CCC 2312). For instance, “[n]on-combatants, wounded soldiers, and prisoners must be respected and treated humanely” (CCC 2313). “Actions deliberately contrary to...universal principles are crimes, as are the orders that command such actions. Blind obedience does not suffice to excuse those who carry them out.... One is morally bound to resist orders that command genocide” (CCC 2313).

22. *Pacifism*

There has been a tradition in the Church of principled Christian pacifism, as well as a tradition of “just war.” Church doctrine does not pronounce in a final and authoritative way on all moral questions, leaving many up to prudential human judgment. Pacifism – the refusal to bear arms – is not a

requirement for Christians, nor is it forbidden. It is an honorable option. Therefore “[p]ublic authorities should make equitable provision for those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms; these are nonetheless obliged to serve the human community in some other way”¹⁰⁸ (CCC 2311).

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

- ⁵⁶ CDE, instruction, *Donum vitae*, intro. 5.
⁶² *Mt* 5:21.
⁶³ Cf. *Mt* 5:22-39; 5:44.
⁶⁴ Cf. *Mt* 26:52.
⁶⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *STb* II-II, 64, 7, *corp. art.*
⁶⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *STb* II-II, 64, 7, *corp. art.*
⁷⁰ Cf. *GS* 51 § 3.
⁷² Cf. CDE, *Donum vitae* I, 1.
⁷⁶ *GS* 51 § 3.
⁷⁷ CIC, can. 1398.
⁷⁸ CIC, can. 1314.
⁸⁰ CDE, *Donum vitae* III.
⁸¹ CDE, *Donum vitae* III.
⁸⁴ CDE, *Donum vitae* I, 5.
⁸⁵ CDE, *Donum vitae* I, 6.
⁸⁶ *Mt* 18:6; cf. *1 Cor* 8:10-13.
⁹² Cf. *Tob* 1:16-18.
¹⁰⁵ Cf. *GS* 81 § 4.
¹¹² *GS* 78 § 6; cf. *Isa* 2:4.
¹⁰⁶ *GS* 79 § 4.
¹¹⁰ *GS* 80 § 3.
¹⁰⁹ *GS* 79 § 4.
¹⁰⁸ Cf. *GS* 79 § 3.

“Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response.”

– United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

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