

A Consistent Ethic of Life - Te Kahu-O-Te-Ora

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Introduction

We live in a world of extraordinary beauty, blessed with wonderful gifts by our Creator, and containing life, love and diversity in abundance. We acknowledge that in every culture and community wonderfully mature and committed people serve the needs of their neighbour with selflessness and generosity, and we thank them for that. All these we celebrate for the great hope they offer. And yet we find that the world we live in is also a violent world. The modern consumer culture, itself imbued with an ethos of competition, can do violence to the weak, the vulnerable, the feeble, the poor, and the powerless, while rewarding the strong, the beautiful, the powerful and the rich.

The very life and ecology of the planet faces severe threats from pollution, exploitation and mismanagement of its resources. Too often the driving forces for social change are greed and the desire for power, rather than the common good and solidarity of humanity.

People continue to aspire to a life of respect for moral values. They yearn for what poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and has called "the freshness deep down things".[2] But successive generations have perceived that guiding principles have become less clear and the moral signposts of previous generations have become blurred.

Any form of injustice built into national and international structures does violence to fundamental human rights and dignity and is sinful.[3] Such sinfulness needs to be confronted. [4]

We need to recognise that through the legacy of the past, which includes colonisation, we are often caught up in institutions that are inherently unjust. But we must make choices, both personal and collective. Our choices require a shift in emphasis from violence to non-violence away from systems which stunt, shorten or endanger life, toward a life-giving commitment to community and the protection. of the common good.

Humankind faces new challenges and new possibilities with the advent of technologies of instant communication, the development of weapons of mass destruction, and the advances in genetic engineering and the practice of medicine which can prolong and shorten life at will. A new vision and new insights are needed to ensure the continuance and development of the human family.

Now even local actions can have a global significance. Indeed human activities are more and more assuming a global impact, affecting for good or ill the balance of nature and our planet.[5]

The continuing globalisation of the economy is resulting in the creation of a super-rich elite, while at the same time millions more are being disempowered and economically starved. Small and localised enterprises should be encouraged so that people can benefit from full participation. Nor should this globalisation lead to an increase in poverty in a context of greater affluence for privileged countries and individuals.

The future of humanity itself has become dependent on the wise choices made by the human family to ensure the flourishing in abundance of life, love and diversity. There must be continuing reflection on the value of life so that wise choices can be made.

Biblical Tradition

At the heart of the biblical tradition there lies the clear revelation of God: Choose life not death.[6] Through God all life was created and continues to be created. The Hebrew Scriptures give witness to God's abiding concern for the journey of His people to the new life of the promised land.

Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, and have it in abundance." [7] The primary purpose of the death and resurrection of Jesus was that sin and death might be overcome forever and a "new creation" begun. Jesus said, "The Reign of God is at hand."

The call to fullness of life, the sharing in the very life of God, endows every human life with an inestimable value and an innate and sacred dignity.[8]

Most, if not all, religious traditions in the world have respect and reverence for life.[9] To the Hindu and the Buddhist all forms of life are sacred and the killing of animals is normally forbidden. However in order to nurture and protect all life we need to widen our understanding of what it is we are protecting and how we are to go about it. We need to recognise the interconnectedness of all living things and the value of diversity.

We must seek justice so that all people might live in dignity. The urgent voice of the 1971 Synod of Bishops spells out our obligations clearly: "The practice of justice is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel." [10] If we are to protect and enhance life, we must work for justice.

Consistent Ethic of Life

Bearing all this in mind, we believe that a Consistent Ethic of Life must be promoted. This places the sacredness of creation and the need to protect and enhance all human life, and the life of our planet on which we depend, as a basic and central moral point of reference.

This can act as a counter to the culture of violence which surrounds us. Just as a kahu [1] embraces all that is good and wholesome, so the Consistent Ethic of Life forms a canopy of non-violent moral teachings embracing all dimensions of life.

The Consistent Ethic of Life draws on the traditional principles taught by the Church, bringing them together in a modern framework. These principles are essential components of the common good, related to one another, but constitutive elements of an overall pro-life morality. Together, like the kahu, they form a "seamless garment" [11] of ethics which if practised would ensure the safety and continued development of humanity and its environment.

There are eight inter-related components of the Consistent Ethic of Life.

Integrity of Creation

Respect for the integrity of creation is a central component of Church teaching. "Use of mineral, vegetable and animal resources cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives." [12] The integrity of the ecosystem within which human life exists is vital to our very survival, to the well-being of future generations, and to respect for the work of God.

Creation itself provides the primary source from which all life flows. Within creation all life forms are interconnected. Our actions, the things we use, the way we use them and the wastes we produce need to respect the integrity of this creation. The Bible tells us in its account of the creation of the world that "God saw that it was good." [13] It is also in keeping with the traditions of the Maori of Aotearoa that we need to respect the sacredness of creation, as partners in life with the earth, the oceans, the lakes, the animal world, the mountains, the fish of the sea and the birds in our forests and gardens. From such sources, balanced by the infinite hand of God, we draw all life and nourishment. Without them we face death.

Discrimination

Discrimination on any grounds is rejected by the Church which states that "no inequality arising because of race, nationality, social condition or sex" should exist. [14]

A Consistent Ethic of life proclaims the dignity of every person. We are united by our common humanity, created in the image of God, and called to live in active love and tolerance of all who are different from ourselves.

The evils of racism and sexism are an affront to the dignity of the human person. They are built on the premise that one person, sex, group, culture or race is inherently superior to another. Often they take the form of petty prejudice in a community. Too often they form the basis of social structures that preclude full participation and membership.

The founding covenant for our nation of Aotearoa-New Zealand is the Treaty of Waitangi which was intended to safeguard the rights and dignity of two different races. [15] The dignity and equality of all was won through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Racial equality will be achieved only when Christ's victory is reflected in our personal and structured relationships.

An economy based on principles of co-operation, just reward for labour and a recognition of the common good, form an essential element of the Consistent Ethic of Life. Why do we promote life's sanctity if we do not defend the right of all people to live in dignity? This has been a constant call of the Church's social teaching throughout this past century. It is a call we cannot afford to ignore.

Poverty

Poverty is and remains the number one killer in the world. Increasingly our world is typified by extremes of wealth and poverty. This is perpetuated wherever economic policies place free-trade and economic growth above the wellbeing of people. Debt and structural adjustment programmes are resulting in millions more starving and dying each year from a lack of basic necessities like adequate food, water, shelter, education and medical care.[16] Poverty is often the companion of hunger, disease, family stress, domestic violence alienation, drug addiction and hopelessness. Within New Zealand a growing number of disenfranchised families are emerging, shut out of the economic mainstream and deprived of its major benefits.

It is important that no-one be deprived through poverty of their human rights and meaningful participation in the development of society. The future is in our hands to walk towards life rather than death, to develop and enhance the fabric of life for all co-operatively rather than competitively.

The Arms Race

Early Church theologians taught that wealth, over and above what a person needed for the ordinary necessities of life, belonged not to the possessor but to the poor who had little.

"Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs."[17] The money spent on weapons of war, amounting to billions of dollars a year, should in justice be spent on the needs of the dispossessed and the poor. "We regard the arms race, which constitutes a significant proportion of the world's economy, as outright theft from the poor of our world who have to go without. "[18] A Consistent Ethic of Life demands the elimination of mass weapons of destruction, both nuclear and conventional, and the development of comprehensive peace accords based on mutual respect.

Peace

The promotion of peace built on justice was a major emphasis of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council,[19] and the rejection of war as a legitimate means of settling disputes is central to a Consistent Ethic of Life. Never in history has the human family slaughtered as they have done these past 100 years. The death toll from the wars of this century has reached hundreds of millions. And for what? Power, domination, control, enslavement?

Aside from the intolerable waste of the earth's resources on weapons of war, the fruits of war include the death and maiming of innocent civilians, the destruction of family life, crops and land, the contamination and poisoning of the environment, the curtailment of civil rights and the imprisonment of dissenters. All of these diminish the lives of those affected and run contrary to the Corporal Works of Mercy taught in the gospels.[20]

Abortion

The Church teaches that human life begins at conception and lasts until we draw our final breath. The death of the unborn child through procured abortion is condemned. The Church defines abortion as "the deliberate and direct killing by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth." [21]

The unborn child is the most vulnerable, most innocent and most defenceless of all beings. The protection of such a person is clearly a moral obligation no one can avoid. Our responsibility extends to creating an environment within families and society where pregnant mothers are supported, children are made welcome and abortion is not seen as the only possibility in cases of forced and problematic pregnancies.

Euthanasia

Recently a movement to legalise euthanasia became prominent in New Zealand. For the human family, death remains a mystery. The moment of death is in God's hands. Terminal illness and the suffering which usually accompanies it is the end cycle of the journey of life. For many it can seem an intolerable burden. Yet modern methods of palliative care make even the most difficult deaths more bearable.

When society decides that certain types of killing are moral the door is opened to many others. The mentally ill, the elderly, indeed anyone that society might consider to be obsolete, worthless, no longer productive or expensive to keep could be considered expendable in time. As Pope John Paul II remarks, euthanasia is yet another illustration of the culture of death.[22] To deliberately end a life "is direct and intentional killing. Its legislation would place a most dangerous and immoral power in the hands of human beings" [23]

The Consistent Ethic of Life recognises the sanctity of the lives of the terminally ill, the redemptive nature of inevitable suffering properly borne, and the contribution even the most helpless sick person has to offer by drawing on the compassion and love of those around.

Death Penalty

The death penalty is also incompatible with a Consistent Ethic of Life, in a society which is now more able to restrain criminals and more willing to work for their reform. [24] For these reasons the death penalty has itself become an unnecessary and unjust taking of human life. We repeat our call for the development of humane restorative judicial processes for all criminal offending that allow not just for sanction where appropriate but for apology, healing, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and wherever possible reconciliation. [25]

Conclusion

The Church calls on all people of good will to make moral choices to reject the climate of profound and growing disrespect for human life. The choice to protect the environment, to eliminate discrimination and poverty, and to oppose war, abortion, euthanasia, the arms race and the death penalty will be a choice to follow the biblical injunction to choose life not death.

The purpose in presenting a Consistent Ethic of Life is based on the belief that concern for any of the matters threatening life requires a concern for the broader issues in society of respect for all human life. One aspect of life affects another. All are important. Together they make a whole. This sacred cloak of integrity, of wholeness, Te Kahu-o-te-ora embraces them all.

Signed by the Bishops

+ P J Cullinane, Bishop of Palmerston North. President, NZ Catholic Bishops' Conference

+ L A Boyle, Bishop of Dunedin

+ D G Browne, Bishop of Hamilton

+ J J Cunneen, Bishop of Christchurch

+ J A Dew, Auxiliary Bishop of Wellington

+ O J Dolan, Coadjutor Bishop of Palmerston North

+ P J Dunn, Bishop of Auckland

+ M T Mariu SM, Auxiliary Bishop of Hamilton

+ Cardinal Thomas Williams, Archbishop of Wellington

References

[1] Kahu was to the Maori a cape or garment of various types. Kahu was also the membrane enveloping a foetus. It was the veil that at times covered the head of new-born babies. Maori tradition was that person would never drown. O-te-ora, of life. So Te Kahu-o-te-ora, "The Garment of Life".

[2] G.M.Hopkins God's Grandeur (1912).

[3] Gaudium et Spes 25.

[4] Reconciliation 16.

[5] Cf. D. Bohm Wholeness and the Implicate Order (Routledge & Keegan, London 1980), D. Zohar The Quantum Self (Harper-Collins 1994).

[6] Deuteronomy 30:19,20a. This is to be achieved by fidelity to God's will - a spiritual relationship undergirding life.

[7] John 10:10

[8] Evangelium Vitae 2.

[9] Nostra Aetate 2 (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Vatican II, 1965)

[10] Justice in the World, 1971

[11] John 19:23

[12] Evangelium Vitae 2

[13] Genesis 1:31.

[14] Lumen Gentium 32.

[15] A Commemoration Year for Aotearoa-New Zealand 1990 (New Zealand Catholic Bishops conference Statement, 1990).

[16] Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church 2449.

[17] St John Chrysostom, Hom. In Lazaro 2,5: PG 48,992

[18] Nuclear Testing in the Pacific (Federation of Catholic Bishops of Oceania, 15 August 1995).

[19] Gaudium et Spes 63

[20] Catechism of the Catholic Church 2447.

[21] Evangelium Vitae 8.

[22] Evangelium Vitae 12.

[23] Euthanasia (A Pastoral Letter of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference, 1995).

[24] Evangelium Vitae 27.

[25] Creating New Hearts: Moving from Retributive Justice to Restorative Justice (A Pastoral Letter of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference, 1995) (Return to text).

Dedication

A Consistent Ethic of Life Dedicated to the memory of: Cardinal Joseph Bernardin 1928 - 1996, Archbishop of Chicago 1982 - 1996, whose active promotion of the consistent ethic of life planted the seeds for this statement.

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04 496 1725

communications@nzcbc.org.nz

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