

1. Life and dignity of the human person. Human dignity means that all persons have worth and value. Why? The Church believes that God's likeness bears on every dimension of the human being. Created in the image of God, the human person has characteristics of God and is therefore a being intimately and essentially related to God. The human person is at the center and the summit of the created order. The origin of social life is the human person, and every expression of the social order must be directed toward the dignity and the welfare of the human person. Humans ultimately share in God's freedom, a freedom that enables recognition of what is good and the will to choose it. Human dignity is not something that humans decide. Its origin is the wisdom of God, whose love created and continues to sustain every person. Disrespect of a fellow human being is blasphemy or an attack against God. As the bishops stated, "Every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family" (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*, 1998).

Furthermore, because the dignity of the human person is rooted in the actual creation of the human person, dignity applies to every moment of human life, from beginning to end. Thus the bishops are consistent when they point out that the human person enjoys an inherent dignity from the moment of conception to natural death. John Paul II, in his encyclical *On Human Life* (n. 101), likewise taught that "unconditional respect for the right to life of every innocent person . . . is one of the pillars on which every civil society stands." Any society or civil government that fails to do this thus fails in its duty. As a result, its decrees in this regard are wholly lacking in binding force. Human dignity comes before any social structure or political power. More and more, John Paul applied this principle to questions about the death penalty and about war. With regard to the death penalty, John Paul,

in his 1999 St. Louis visit, stated, "The dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil." According to John Paul II, capital punishment is no longer necessary to protect society, and thus, it should rarely, if ever, be used. Concerning war, saddened by the failure of his attempt to dissuade the United States from going to war against Iraq, he simply cried out, "War is always a failure for humanity" ("Address to the Diplomatic Corps," Vatican City, January 13, 2003).

2. Call to family, community, and participation. Children are conceived in a relationship and have a natural right to be nurtured in the enduring and loving relationship of their parents. This helps children become capable of loving relationships. The human person is not only a "being intimately and essentially related to God" but also a being ordered to relationships with fellow human beings that extend beyond the immediate family. From the sphere of the family, one moves into participation with the broader society of the human race. Thus the U.S. bishops teach that "the family is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. Furthermore, people have a right to and duty to participate in society, seeking the common good and well being of all" (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*, 1998).

3. Rights and responsibilities. The most fundamental rights are the right to life and the right to the means necessary and suitable for a full human life. This includes the right to a standard of living in keeping with human dignity. Everyone has a right to active participation in society, to share in the benefits of society, and to move between countries. The right to religious liberty and what flows from it (i.e., freedom of conscience, public exercise of faith, and the promotion of cultural tradition) is intimately connected to the right of a full human life. Religious freedom, according to John Paul II, is basic to understanding the dignity