

The Christian conscience in support of the right to life

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1. On 23-24 February, the Pontifical Academy for Life organized an International Congress at the Vatican on the occasion of its 13th General Assembly. The topic of the Congress was: “Christian conscience in support of the right to life”. Present were the Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life and other well-known experts from various countries, in addition to approximately 420 persons from around the world.

At the end of the meeting, on the basis of what emerged from the reports presented and from the lively and constructive discussion, the Pontifical Academy for Life offers the following considerations to the ecclesial community, the civil community and every person of good will for reflection.

2. “Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged” (Gaudium et Spes, n. 16).

Thus, acting in faithful obedience to the judgments of his own moral conscience, which honestly seeks good and is constantly nourished by known truth, every person expresses and realizes his human dignity deep within himself, edifying himself and the whole community through his own conscious and free choices.

3. So that man may always be guided in his actions by the judgment of his moral conscience to do good in truth, he must take every possible care of his continuing formation, nourishing it with values consonant with the dignity of the human person, with justice and with the common good, as the Holy Father recalled in his Address to the Pontifical Academy for Life:

“The formation of a true conscience, because it is founded on the truth, and upright, because it is determined to follow its dictates without contradictions, without betrayal and without compromises, is a difficult and delicate undertaking today, but indispensable” (Address to Participants in the 13th General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy of Life, 24 February 2007; L’Osservatore Romano English edition [ORE], 7 March, p. 3).

The Christian’s conscience, in particular, is fully enlightened in his search for good by a constant encounter with the Word of God, understood and lived in the Christian community according to the teachings of the Magisterium.

4. This need for continuing formation and a deepening of the conscience is very obvious today in the face of the many cultural and social problems which are surfacing and affect the right to life in the context of the family, in the assumption of the duties proper to married couples and to parents, in the health-care profession and in political tasks.

It is the ever more necessary and pressing task of the Christian conscience, taking on authentic human values and starting with the fundamental value of respect for life in its physical existence and dignity, to view such problems in the light of reason illumined by faith in forming opinions on the moral value of one’s own acts.

5. Furthermore, we cannot overlook the many difficulties that the Christian conscience of believers meets today

in forming an opinion and in reasoning. These difficulties are due to the cultural context in which they live and in which they are experiencing the crisis of “authority”, loss of faith and all too often a tendency to seek refuge in forms of extreme rationalism.

In addition to the cultural context, another area that tests the Christian conscience is constituted by the juridical norms in force, both those that are codified and those defined by tribunals and the sentences passed by tribunals, which increasingly and under strong pressure from united and influential groups have opened and are opening the ruinous breach of decriminalization: exceptions to the individual’s right to life are foreseen, various attacks on human life are being every more widely legalized, and indeed end by denying that life is the basis of every other right of the individual and that the respect due to the dignity of every human being is the basis of freedom and responsibility.

In this regard, Benedict XVI has recalled that “the Christian is continually called to be ever alert in order to face the multiple attacks to which the right to life is exposed” (ibid. p. 3).

6. The specific requirements of the Christian conscience encounter their acid test in their application to the health-care professions; here, Christians face both their duty to protect human life and the risk of finding themselves in situations where in carrying out their professional duties they are cooperating with evil.

In such situations, the dutiful exercise of a “courageous conscientious objection” acquires importance on the part of doctors, nurses, pharmacists and administrative personnel, judges and parliamentarians, and other professional figures directly involved in the protection of individual human life, wherever the legislative norms provide for actions that threaten it.

However, at the same time it should also be stressed that recourse to conscientious objection occurs today in a cultural context of ideological tolerance, which paradoxically sometimes tends not to encourage the acceptance of the exercise of this right since it is a “destabilizing” element of the quietism of the conscience.

We wish to highlight that the exercise of the right to conscientious objection is particularly difficult for the health-care professions, since this right is normally recognized as the right of an individual and not of hospital structures or associations.

In the field of medical practice, the case of “emergency contraception” (generally using chemical expedients) may be mentioned. It is necessary first of all to recall the moral responsibility of those who make their use possible at various levels, and the need for recourse to conscientious objection since the effects of this form of contraception are abortive (preventing implantation or gestation). The moral duty to provide the public with complete information on the various mechanisms of action and the effects of these expedients should also be reasserted.

This of course goes hand in hand with the duty to oppose any medical intervention or research that is destined to destroy human life.

7. The mobilization of all who have at heart the protection of human life seems increasingly appropriate and must be extended to politics. Respect for the principle of equality that demands the rights of all to be honoured and protected, especially in the case of the frailest and most defenceless beings, is an indispensable requirement of justice.

We present anew and with conviction the specific teaching concerning conscientious objection that is presented in the Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (cf. nn. 72, 73, 74), particularly in the perspective of the adherence of Christians to programmes proposed by political parties.

We are also hoping for legislation that will complete Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed in 1948 by the United Nations to guarantee the right to conscientious objection and to defend this right against all forms of discrimination in the areas of work, education and the attribution of benefits by governments.

8. To conclude, we present anew the desire expressed by the Holy Father as a message of hope and of commitment in order to contribute to building a human society in proportion to man: “Therefore, I ask the Lord to send among you, dear brothers and sisters, and among those dedicated to science, medicine, law and politics, witnesses endowed with true and upright consciences in order to defend and promote the ‘splendour of the truth’ and to sustain the gift and mystery of life.

“I trust in your help, dearest professionals, philosophers, theologians, scientists and doctors. In a society at times chaotic and violent, with your cultural qualifications, by teaching and by example, you can contribute to awakening in many hearts the eloquent and clear voice of conscience” (Address, ORE, op. cit., p. 4).

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