



# The Christian conscience in support of the right to life

**Tot de 13e Algemene Vergadering Pauselijke Academie voor het Leven: "The Christian conscience in support of the right to life"**



24 februari 2007  
Paus Benedictus XVI

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is a true joy for me to receive the Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life in this Audience, held on the occasion of the 13th General Assembly, and those who are participating at this Congress on the theme: "The Christian conscience in support of the right to life".

I greet Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, the Archbishops and Bishops present, brother priests, the Congress speakers and all of you, gathered from various countries. I greet in particular, Archbishop Elio Sgreccia, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, whom I thank for the kind words addressed to me and for the work he does together with the Vice-President, the Chancellor and the Board of Directors who carry out the delicate and vast tasks of the Pontifical Academy.

The theme to which you have called the participants' attention, and therefore also that of the Ecclesial Community and of public opinion, is very significant: the Christian conscience, in fact, has an internal need to nourish and strengthen itself with the multiple and profound motivations that work in favour of the right to life.

It is a right that must be sustained by all, because it is the first fundamental right of all human rights. The Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* strongly affirms this: "Even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize in the natural law written in the heart (cf. Rom 2: 14-15) the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and can affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree. Upon the recognition of this right, every human community and the political community itself are founded" (n. 2).

The same Encyclical recalls that "believers in Christ must defend and promote this right, aware as they are of the wonderful truth recalled by the Second Vatican Council: 'By his Incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human being' (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22). This saving event reveals to humanity not only the boundless love of God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3: 16), but also the incomparable value of every human person" (ibid.).

Therefore, the Christian is continually called to be ever alert in order to face the multiple attacks to which the right to life is exposed. In this he knows that he can count on motives that are deeply rooted in the natural law and that can therefore be shared by every person of upright conscience.

In this perspective, above all after the publication of the Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, much has been done to make the subject matter of these motivations better known in the Christian community and in civil society, but it must be admitted that the attacks on the right to life throughout the world have broadened and multiplied, also assuming new forms.



The pressures to legalize abortion are increasing in Latin American countries and in developing countries, also with recourse to the liberalization of new forms of chemical abortion under the pretext of safeguarding reproductive health: policies for demographic control are on the rise, notwithstanding that they are already recognized as dangerous also on the economic and social plane.

At the same time, the interest in more refined biotechnological research is growing in the more developed countries in order to establish subtle and extensive eugenic methods, even to obsessive research for the “perfect child”, with the spread of artificial procreation and various forms of diagnosis tending to ensure good selection.

A new wave of discriminatory eugenics finds consensus in the name of the presumed well-being of the individual, and laws are promoted especially in the economically progressive world for the legalization of euthanasia.

All of this comes about while, on another front, efforts are multiplying to legalize cohabitation as an alternative to matrimony and closed to natural procreation.

In these situations the conscience, sometimes overwhelmed by the powerful collective media, is insufficiently vigilant concerning the gravity of the problems at play, and the power of the strongest weakens and seems to paralyze even people of good will.

For this reason it is necessary to appeal to the conscience, and in particular, to the Christian conscience. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us, “Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right” (n. 1778).

From this definition it emerges that the moral conscience, to be able to judge human conduct rightly, above all must be based on the solid foundation of truth, that is, it must be enlightened to know the true value of actions and the solid criteria for evaluation. Therefore, it must be able to distinguish good from evil, even where the social environment, pluralistic culture and superimposed interests do not help it do so.

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.

Unfortunately, many factors hinder this undertaking. In the first place, in the current phase of secularization, called post-modern and marked by disputable forms of tolerance, not only is the rejection of Christian tradition growing, but distrust for the capacity of reason to perceive the truth also distances us from the taste for reflection.

According to some, for individual conscience to be unbiased it must free itself both from references to tradition and those based on human reason.

Hence, the conscience, which as an act of reason aims at the truth of things, ceases to be light and becomes a simple screen upon which the society of the media projects the most contradictory images and impulses.

One must be re-educated to the desire to know authentic truth, to defend one’s own freedom of choice in regard to mass behaviour and the lures of propaganda, to nourish passion for moral beauty and a clear conscience. This is the delicate duty of parents and educators who assist them; and it is the duty of the Christian community with regard to its faithful.



Concerning the Christian conscience, its growth and nourishment, one cannot be content with fleeting contact with the principal truths of faith in infancy, but a programme of accompaniment is necessary along the various stages of life, opening the mind and the heart to welcome the fundamental duties upon which the existence of the individual and the community rest.

Only in this way will it be possible to prepare youth to comprehend the values of life, love, marriage and the family. Only in this way can they be brought to appreciate the beauty and the sanctity of the love, joy and responsibility of being parents and collaborators of God in giving life.

In the absence of a continuous and qualified formation, the capacity for judgment of the problems posed by biomedicine in the areas of sexuality, new-born life, procreation, and also in the way to treat and care for patients and the weaker sectors of society, becomes even more problematic.

It is certainly necessary to speak about the moral criteria that regard these themes with professionals, doctors and lawyers, to engage them to elaborate a competent judgment of conscience, and if need be, also a courageous objection of conscience, but an equal need rises from the basic level for families and parish communities in the process of the formation of youth and adults.

Under this aspect, next to Christian formation, whose aim is the knowledge of the Person of Christ, of his Word and Sacraments in the itinerary of faith of children and adolescents, one must consistently fuse the discourse on moral values that regard the body, sexuality, human love, procreation, respect for life at every moment, at the same time with valid and precise motives, reporting behaviour contrary to these primary values.

In this specific field the work of priests must be opportunely flanked by the commitment of lay educators, also specialists, dedicated to the duty to guide the ecclesial reality with their knowledge enlightened by faith.

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.

The Second Vatican Council teaches us that “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). The Council has offered wise directives so that “the faithful should learn to distinguish carefully between the rights and the duties which they have as belonging to the Church and those which fall to them as members of the human society”, and “they will strive to unite the two harmoniously, remembering that in every temporal affair they are to be guided by a Christian conscience, since not even in temporal business may any human activity be withdrawn from God’s dominion” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 36).

For this very reason the Council exhorts lay believers to welcome “what is decided by the Pastors as teachers and rulers of the Church”, and then recommends that “Pastors... should recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the Church. They should willingly use their prudent advice” and concludes that “[m]any benefits for the Church are to be expected from this familiar relationship between the laity and the Pastors” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 37).

When the value of human life is at stake, this harmony between the magisterial function and the committed laity becomes singularly important: life is the first good received from God and is fundamental to all others; to guarantee the right to life for all and in an equal manner for all is the duty upon which the future of humanity



depends. The importance of your study meeting emerges also from this perspective.

I entrust the work and the results to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, whom the Christian tradition hails as the true “Mother of all the living”. May she assist and guide you! To seal this wish I willingly impart to all of you, to your families and collaborators, the Apostolic Blessing.