



The Sanctity of Human Life

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Focus on the Family

Focus on the Family's Fourth Guiding Principle

We believe that human life is of inestimable worth and significance in all its dimensions, including the unborn, the aged, the widowed, the mentally handicapped, the unattractive, the physically challenged and every other condition in which humanness is expressed from conception to the grave.

Human life is sacred. You've probably spoken these words in one form or another in an attempt to explain your pro-life view on issues like abortion and euthanasia. While respect for the sanctity of human life is the foundation of the pro-life movement and a founding principle of Focus on the Family, what does this respect look like in the real world? How can we as Christians incorporate this reverence for human life into our daily lives?

What is the Sanctity of Human Life ethic?



Recognition of the sanctity (or sacredness) of human life is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The sanctity of human life is first described in the Holy Bible in Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Scholars note that being created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) means more than having certain abilities and attributes. It means that humans *are* the images of God, regardless of what they can or cannot do.¹ To bear the image of the Creator is a privilege extended uniquely to humans. No other

"creation" of God can make this claim.

In God's eyes, we are each endowed with a touch of Himself. Each human carries within his or her being the likeness of the Creator. Therefore, each human life exists as an expression of God and His character. We are not merely flesh and blood. We are all image-bearers of the Living God. Since we embody God's image, the sacredness of our lives, and the dignity it demands, is based on something beyond our characteristics or abilities — it is rooted in the essence of God Himself. This image or likeness of God that is present in each human life is not tangible: you cannot see, touch or smell it. It's part of the mystery of life.

The image of God in humankind provides direction and guidance regarding how we treat one another. Men, women and children created in God's image should be respected, regardless of their mental capacity, physical ability, faith (or absence of faith) or social position. Characteristics we attribute to God (benevolence, love and creativity) may or may not be evident in each of His created human beings. The recognizable presence or absence of such desired characteristics does not determine the worth of the individual. The value of each person is firmly established on the basis of the nature of God, who is the quintessence of dignity and holiness.



Unlike the Christian experience of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, the sacredness of human life is not based on accepting Jesus Christ as Savior. *Every human life*, Christian or not, is sacred and of inestimable value because each life is created in the image of God. The likeness of Yahweh is impressed upon each human spirit. This status is not reserved for Christians but extends to every member of the human family.

What does it mean to be human?

This is a core question as we examine how to embrace the Sanctity of Human Life ethic. To be human means to be part of the human family. To be human is identifiable by species (*Homo sapien*) and genetic code. Life, biologically speaking, begins at fertilization. We all began with the same raw materials: an egg and a sperm. We are fully human when these gametes unite at fertilization, as nothing else is added to us — only nourishment and time to grow.



This biological definition of human life is critical as society attempts to redefine what it means to be human based on more subjective criteria. Arbitrary standards for determining who is human, such as physical ability, intelligence or age, can shift with the tide of public opinion or cultural trends. Such measures are not reliable for this critical definition. The presence or absence of characteristics and capacities cannot determine humanness.

The biological component of our humanness is as sacred as our souls, as God created and sanctified both. Perhaps the most poignant example of the sacredness of the human body is seen in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, who became human taking on Himself the frail likeness of humanity. By coming to earth as a human embryo and dying a painful death on the cross, Jesus Christ sanctified the entire life process from fertilization to natural death.

What is human dignity?

Human dignity is innate, bestowed upon us by God. It is not based on the ability to care for our selves or competence to complete a task. Being dependent upon others does not

cause us to lose our dignity. Dignity is not a characteristic we can forfeit — it is an inseparable attribute woven into the fiber of our being.

However, we live in a culture that does not recognize the intrinsic distinction of individual worth. Therefore, we must reinforce the immutable existence of human dignity through the affirmation of those who are dependent and weak. In this context, dignity takes on a second form, becoming a recognized quality in all members of a society. Your dignity is affirmed and strengthened when members of your family and community care for you in a weakened state. Those who love and care for you during times of reduced ability (e.g., senility, incontinence) declare your dignity and value apart from the tasks you can no longer accomplish independently. Our willingness to serve and *be served* in this time of physical weakness demonstrates our recognition of human dignity.



Our society's failure to honor human dignity is evidenced in the sentiments of our age. We live in a time in which people would rather die than continue living with less than a perfect "quality of life." This attitude is reflected in comments such as, "I would rather die than live in a wheelchair," or, "If I had cancer, what would be the point of living?" Such proclamations are the byproduct of a society that reserves dignity for those who exhibit physical ability and control. Therefore, it should be no surprise that dependency is looked upon as the ultimate weakness. Disability or end-of-life circumstances potentially situates each of us where we would rather not be: in need of the care and comfort of others. Demanding independence as a criterion for human dignity promulgates a cultural acceptance of solutions such as euthanasia, rather than compassionate care for those who cannot care for themselves.

A common fear among the disabled or terminally ill is that of becoming a burden. In reality, few of us are immune to this fear. We fear losing our independence (e.g., incontinence or using a wheelchair) because dependence is viewed as a weakness. These fears are based on an unspoken, yet dangerous, understanding in our culture that independence is required for an acceptable quality of life. Human dignity is restored as we counter this view through our witness of caring for each other in our times of dependence and need.

Who are You?

Any attempt to reestablish a cultural ethic recognizing the Sanctity of Human Life is incomplete without challenging individual image-bearers to assess their own personal value: Do you know who you are? Do you see yourself as a striking reflection of God's glory, beauty and majesty on the earth? Do you value your own life as sacred, even in light of the limitations of your humanity?

Our society teaches that our "self-worth" comes from a variety of sources: productivity, attractiveness, social status and even from within ourselves. Human beings who base their personal value on such transient measures will be disappointed, at best. Self-destructive behaviors, ranging from alcohol and drug abuse to non-Biblical sexual

relationships, often find fertile soil in the lives of people searching for a God-centered identity. Comprehending who we are as image-bearers of God is the first step in sharing the Sanctity of Human Life ethic in our world.

Why has the Sanctity of Life ethic eroded in our culture?

First, we need to recognize the spiritual source of this disrespect for human life. In John 10:10, Jesus exposes satan's *modus operandi*: to steal, kill and destroy those made in the image of God. He is motivated by hatred for those who reflect the image of the Holy God — the same God who threw him out of heaven because he wanted to be like God (Isaiah 14:14, "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High"). The enemy of our souls will always attack and seek to destroy human beings created in God's image. Thankfully, the second part of this verse reveals the good news that Jesus Christ came to give all human beings abundant life.

It is within this spiritual context that we can more clearly see the examples in our society where satan temporarily succeeds in destroying God's creation: legalized abortion, destructive research on human embryos, increased violence and a move toward legalizing physician-assisted suicide, among others. Satan is a ruthless adversary yet not a particularly creative one. His mission — to "seek, kill and destroy" those created in the image of God — will be with us until the end of the age. Our challenge is to reestablish the Sanctity of Human Life ethic in our generation, restoring the value and worth of all human life from fertilization to natural death.



What can you do?

There is mounting evidence that our secular society's disregard for the value of human life has wrought unspeakable tragedy. One only needs to mention the cities of Jonesboro, Paducah and Littleton, the sites of recent fatal school shootings, to be vividly reminded that the *absence* of a sanctity ethic results in the destruction of human life.



Restoration of this life ethic must begin with the church. Even as Christians, we fail to comprehend the value of every human life because we cease to look at each other in awe. We fail to recognize that each person with whom we have contact bears the image of God. We no longer view one another as breathtaking creatures, embodying a touch of the Creator Himself.

Since respect for human life is based on recognizing God as the Creator and humankind as created in His likeness, any nation that abandons God will abandon respect for His Creation. A culture without God cannot recognize the innate value of each human being created in His image. The sacredness of human life becomes virtually impossible to grasp and irrelevant without God in the equation. Unfortunately, confusion regarding the origin of humanity is not confined to the secular culture. Churches must teach the truth about the value of life from a biblical worldview.

So, what can you do to help restore the Sanctity of Human Life ethic? First, restoration can begin with your own heart. It is safe to say that most Christians are not murdering their neighbors with handguns. However, we should examine our hearts for attitudes toward our fellow humans that violate the *spirit* of the Sanctity of Human Life ethic. We must struggle against the subtle ways we dishonor or fail to acknowledge the intrinsic worth of each individual.

This disrespect may erupt through disdain for someone we do not know based on his or her appearance, a negative comment made under our breath or impatience with a slow driver in the automobile ahead of us on the highway. The spiritual sins of superiority, contempt and slander are more frequent and easier to hide than the physical crimes of assault, rape or murder. These seemingly minor and unimportant sins of our hearts are, in fact, expressions of disrespect for God's human image in our world. These heart sins represent the core of our fallen nature — the very nature that motivates man to violate man, thereby violating God.



Second, we need to teach the next generation a respect for all human life: parents teaching children through word and deed, and churches instructing children through explicitly pro-life curriculum and Bible study. Children who are respected and cherished will better comprehend the concept of sacred human life. Spiritual leaders should make the subject of life a prominent part of church activities and teaching. The affirmation of life can also be modeled through church support of pro-life pregnancy resource centers and hospices.

Finally, we must continue to support public policy that protects human life and oppose legislation that threatens it. Examples include supporting legislation ensuring that mothers receive factual information about their preborn child before an abortion and opposing efforts to legalize physician-assisted suicide. Active efforts to defend life must continue while the church works to reiterate the value of each life through its teachings. The law is a teacher, and Christians must remain active to advocate for the passage of life-affirming laws that restore the Sanctity of Human Life ethic in our society.

¹ Nigel M. de S. Cameron, *Is life really sacred?* (Eastbourne, Great Britain: Kingsway Publications, 1990), p. 21-22; Donal P. O'Mathúna, "The Bible and Abortion: What of the 'image of God?'," in John Kilner, editor, *Bioethics and the Future of Medicine: A Christian Appraisal*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 199-211.