

You shall not kill

In our survey of unchangeable Catholic teachings, drawing on the Holy See's 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary*, so far we've especially focused on teachings of the highest level, taught infallibly by the Church as having been divinely revealed, and so to be believed by divine and catholic faith. Today we look at the last example of such teaching listed by the *Commentary*. The Church's infallibility extends to teachings of both faith and morals, and this final example of first-level teachings is in the moral area.

The CDF *Commentary* names as infallibly taught as divinely revealed, 'the doctrine on the grave immorality of direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being'. Killing the innocent is always gravely wrong. This is very obvious to us, even if no longer, sadly, to many in the wider world. When it comes to an innocent human being, the fifth commandment, 'You shall not kill', has no possible qualifications or exceptions.

As we've recalled several times, a doctrine can be taught infallibly by being solemnly defined (by a Pope, or by an Ecumenical Council in union with the Pope); or by being taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium – all the Bishops, albeit scattered around the world but in communion with the Pope, agreeing in their teaching that some doctrine is to be believed as divinely revealed or is to be held definitively. There does not appear to have been a solemn definition on the absolute wrongfulness of killing the innocent, but the *Commentary* is indicating that it has been taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. The great consensus of Bishops, both past and present, has been in no doubt on this question. The *Commentary* refers specifically to the teaching of St John Paul II in his landmark encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, 'The Gospel of Life' (1995). That encyclical focused particularly on abortion and euthanasia, but presented these in context of the whole great Gospel teaching of the preciousness and inviolability of human life.

Pope John Paul did not give new solemn definitions in *Evangelium Vitae* but appealed to the ordinary and universal Magisterium, adding his own voice to reaffirm the unanimous chorus, already infallible, of the whole Church around the world and down the centuries.

He declared, 'The absolute inviolability of innocent human life is a moral truth clearly taught by Sacred Scripture, constantly upheld in the Church's Tradition and consistently proposed by her Magisterium... Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral. This doctrine, based upon that unwritten law which man, in the light of reason, finds in his own heart, is reaffirmed by Sacred Scripture, transmitted by the Tradition of the Church and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.' (57) Here he referenced the passage of Vatican II that explains the ordinary and universal Magisterium and its infallibility. (*Lumen Gentium* (25))

(The Pope specified 'direct and voluntary' killing to distinguish this from actions that might cause death as an unintended side effect, foreseen but not intended directly – for example, in legitimate self-defence or legitimate withdrawal of disproportionate or burdensome medical treatment. Also, his teaching in this passage concerns 'innocent' human beings, setting aside questions of war or capital punishment. (Cf. *Catechism*, 2263-65; 2277-79; 2308-09; 2266-67))

Later in the encyclical, he gave similar declarations on abortion and euthanasia. After reviewing the Church's whole tradition regarding abortion, he went on to proclaim: 'Given such unanimity in the doctrinal and disciplinary tradition of the Church, Paul VI was able to declare that this tradition is unchanged and unchangeable...'

'Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops – who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine – I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church.' (62)

On euthanasia, he declared (65): 'In harmony with the Magisterium of my Predecessors and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. Depending on the circumstances, this practice involves the malice proper to suicide or murder.'

The Pope also reaffirmed the authoritative teaching that abortion and euthanasia must furthermore always be prohibited by civil law. He proclaimed: 'Disregard for the right to life, precisely because it leads to the killing of the person whom society exists to serve, is what most directly conflicts with the possibility of achieving the common good. Consequently, a civil law authorising abortion or euthanasia ceases by that very fact to be a true, morally binding civil law. Abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimise. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection... In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is therefore never licit to obey it, or to take part in a propaganda campaign in favour of such a law, or vote for it.' (72-73)

Beyond powerfully reaffirming these teachings, St John Paul set forth in *Evangelium Vitae* a great charter for the establishment of a 'culture of life' to overthrow the widespread 'culture of death'. The Legion especially hears his call that 'a great prayer for life is urgently needed, a prayer which will rise up throughout the world. Through special initiatives and in daily prayer, may an impassioned plea rise to God, the Creator and lover of life, from every Christian community, from every group and association, from every family and from the heart of every believer. Jesus himself has shown us by his own example that prayer and fasting are the first and most effective weapons against the forces of evil. As he taught his disciples, some demons cannot be driven out except in this way.' (100)

The Pope concluded (104-105) by entrusting everything to Mary, who 'helps the Church to realise that life is always at the centre of a great struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness... Mary is a living word of comfort for the Church in her struggle against death... And as we, the pilgrim people, the people of life and for life, make our way in confidence towards a new heaven and a new earth, we look to her who is for us a sign of sure hope and solace.'