

**Do We Work in Vain  
for Human Life?**

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**D**O WE work in vain for human life? All of us who are troubled by this question are working together in what often seems a hopeless struggle to protect innocent human life. Most members of the movement for life engage directly in the work: staffing Birthright centers, struggling to amend the Constitution to protect human life, teaching natural family planning, and so on. But some of us participate only indirectly, by trying to help those who are really doing the work.

For fifteen years I have been devoting much of my effort as a philosopher to this work. Now I am about to withdraw from the work I have been doing in ethics and philosophy of law, and to take up a new project in the field of Catholic moral theology. My initial efforts in this new field have borne fruit in a clearer understanding of the rich meaning of the work for human life in which I have been privileged to share. So I offer this paper as my last effort, intended especially to help those who work for human life and who wonder—as I have often wondered—whether this work is vain.

In recent years I have been studying the question of euthanasia and many issues related to it, trying especially to see what the laws should be on these matters in a society which promises liberty and justice for all. This study has been completed with the help of Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., and it will be published as a book entitled *Life, Death, Liberty, and Justice: A Contribution to the Euthanasia Debate*. For many reasons, labor on this book has been especially burdensome and discouraging.

The issues and solutions in the euthanasia debate are far more numerous

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and complex than in the abortion debate. For this reason, it seems to me, those who would work in the matter of euthanasia in defense of human life are very confused—and even more divided than in the matter of abortion against one another—so that friends of life are working at crossed purposes. As I worked on euthanasia, the conviction grew in my mind that within only a few years many who cannot live without public help are going to die with public help. Our society, which is too stingy to help the poor and dependent to live with dignity, is going to impose upon them the indignity of dying by unjust acts. I still hope my conviction is mistaken, but I do not believe it is. More than ever, then, I have been forced to ask myself: Do we work in vain for human life?

Even without bringing to bear on this question the special light of Christian faith, I think we can say with assurance that we do not work in vain. I believe the discouraged feeling that the work is fruitless arises from concentration of attention on the legal domain and from horror at the extent to which the enemies of life are achieving their purposes. If we turn attention to the moral domain, we can see that those who work for human life nevertheless are accomplishing a great deal.

From a moral point of view, what is most important about human actions is not their success or failure in bringing about desired results. More important than results is that an individual who acts establishes and develops his own identity, and that a group of people who act together establish and develop the nobility or corruptness of their own society.

In a nation such as ours, where there are many enemies of life, it is all the more important that those who are not its enemies be its dedicated friends, so that they can preserve the society from greater and more rapid corruption. Although the law permits and in many ways even encourages abortion, for example, still the society is not merely its law. Those who defend innocent life prevent the society as a whole from becoming as corrupt as its law and thereby maintain for everyone an option to be considered: personal respect for life and refusal to take part in its destruction. Surely, many people in our society have chosen life by their own private decisions who would have chosen death had the friends of life not kept the doors of the antilife mentality of this society sufficiently ajar to allow a sliver of the light of moral truth to shine upon the consciences of those not wholly closed to this light.

As to individuals, those who have made themselves dedicated friends of life have served themselves well; for this commitment usually is taxing and unselfish, and so it truly humanizes those who make it. This fact is especially obvious in the young people who have worked in defense of innocent human life. In the process they have made themselves firmer in character and more sensitive to what is good and right not only in respect to acts directly bearing upon life but also in respect to the whole sphere of sexual behavior. A young

man or woman who works hard to protect the lives of unborn babies is hardly likely to take part in conceiving one irresponsibly or killing one brutally.

The moral accomplishment of the work of the friends of life is one reason why the enemies of life still hate, mock, lie about, pretend to ignore, and otherwise unfairly treat the movement for life. The mere existence of this movement is a threat to the enemies of life. Its moral accomplishment by itself blocks the movement against life from dominating completely the climate of opinion of the society and the hearts of all its members. Thus the enemies of life cannot fully achieve their goal. They still fear that they may never be able to kill everyone who they have decided would be better off dead.

Still, friends of life can hardly help feeling disheartened, since the horror of the slaughter of the innocents continues and increases, and since nothing can make their deaths anything else but an unmitigated evil opposite to the good of life we love. Moreover, while not all who work for life consider themselves Christians, most friends of life are Christians. The enemies have pointed this out repeatedly and even have claimed that opposition to the killing of the innocent arises from specifically Christian interests—for example, that the opposition to abortion depends upon the horror of killing the unbaptized, who thereby are excluded from the Kingdom. Of course, it is not true that this interest is the primary conscious motive of Christians who have worked in defense of life. I suspect that most Christians today believe that although baptism is necessary for salvation and should be administered to aborted babies who are not surely dead, nevertheless, somehow babies who die without the rite of baptism are admitted to the Kingdom. Still, some who are both Christians and friends of life do wonder how aborted infants and others who die without personal sin, but also without the baptismal ceremony, are saved.

I myself have wondered about this for a long time. Now, I think, I have a satisfying answer to it, one that will encourage and console Christians who work for life. Moreover, the answer will cast light from a fresh perspective on the general question of the relationship between the Gospel of Christ and basic human goods, such as life.

The friends of life indeed are mainly persons who recognize themselves as Christians. The enemies have made as much of this fact as possible, by claiming that opposition to legalized abortion is religious and especially Roman Catholic in inspiration. Besides appealing to anti-Catholic and other religious prejudice, the enemies of life have formulated the issue in this way in order to balance the thesis that legally permitting abortion is unjust to the unborn with the counterthesis that legally prohibiting abortion infringes upon the liberty of those who wish to have or to do abortions by imposing Catholic and other religious morality upon persons who do not believe it.

The old morality of sanctity of life is in truth rooted in religion, although it is not specifically Catholic. It is held by all Christians and Jews who are faithful to their traditions and also by many whose traditions are rooted in the Vedic and other sacred books of the East.

Again, as a matter of historical fact, while people of all beliefs have sought and done abortions for the sake of expediency, the new morality of quality of life, by which the enemies of life attempt to justify abortion, is rooted in modern, anti-religious humanism, which uniformly regards human life as a mere instrument and biological substructure for the good life. This is as true of Marx as it was of Spinoza, as true of Dewey as it was of Hume. All of these and many others who shaped the worldviews of the competing versions of contemporary secular humanism pronounced themselves enemies of all religion based upon divine revelation and its tradition through a family of faith. Secular humanists do not merely ignore the God of Abraham whom Christians believe is the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ: they consider the claims of this God and reject them as invalid. Enemies of life act as they do by applying a moral atheology which is nothing else than the practical implications of one or another atheistic worldview.

When the day of judgment comes, the Lord will confront the friends of life who tried but failed to save the lives of the unborn. To them he will say: When I was about to be aborted, you defended me. He also will confront the enemies of life who helped to kill these innocents. To them he will say: When I was unwanted, you slaughtered me. Finally, he will confront the unborn themselves, having identified himself with these innocents who were unsuccessfully defended by his friends and slaughtered by his enemies. And these enemies acted in the rejection of his name, while these friends acted as best they could for his name's sake.

What about the innocent victims of abortion? The passion and defeat of the movement for life seems to be intimately bound up with the passion and death of Jesus himself, not only because of the opposing principles of the actions of the participants but also by the very structure of brutal injustices conducted with color of law against innocent victims the sanctity of whose lives is ignored by those who kill them and impotently defended by those who grasp this sanctity. Thus, it seems to me that it would be most unfitting if he—who died to save humankind and died in accord with the will of God who desires that all should be saved—did not welcome the victims of abortion along with those of his friends who accepted the burden of the defense of life as part of their calling to follow Christ.

If this conclusion about the destiny of the aborted babies is correct, then it is possible to develop traditional doctrine concerning the necessity of baptism for salvation by saying that aborted babies do not die unbaptized even if they do not receive the usual baptismal rite. In one way, like the Holy Inno-

cents slaughtered by Herod's order in a desperate effort to prevent the founding of a rival Kingdom, the innocents slaughtered by abortion suffer at least partially because the enemies of Christ are determined to prevent the growth of his Kingdom. In another way, just as the younger children of a family preparing for baptism, killed by accident before the rite is received, are embraced within the baptismal desire of their parents, so the children whose lives are not saved by the well-intended efforts of the friends of life are embraced within the faith of those whose failure to save them was accidental in relation to their effort to do so. If this reasoning is correct, those who work for human life do not work in vain. The unsuccessful attempt to save the mortal lives of the unborn contributes to their sure salvation for everlasting life.

Someone might object that even friends of life who are Christians have not been working with this intention. They have been striving only to protect the mortal lives of the unborn. The objection would be correct as to the explicit intentions of most if not all who have worked in the movement for life. But implicitly, one who lives in the light of faith and who attempts to follow Christ does not do good to another without loving that other in Christ, and to love another in Christ is to seek for the person one loves not only a particular good, some necessity of life, but life itself, and more abundant life. One who loves a whole good never loves any lesser good consistently with it except by implicitly loving the lesser good both for itself and for the contribution it makes to the whole. Thus friends of life in defending the mortal lives of the unborn implicitly intend not only that these lives should be preserved but also that they should flourish into everlasting life.

Someone also might object that the mortal life of an unborn baby is not part of his or her everlasting life but is merely a biological substratum for human existence in this present world. This objection is not well taken. Life is the very existence of a living person. Although Christians believe that a spiritual fragment of the self somehow survives bodily death, the person does not survive and no bodily person enjoys everlasting life except by bodily resurrection from the death which mortals suffer.

The human existence by which human persons will enjoy everlasting life after their resurrection will be the same human existence by which they now enjoy bodily life, and it is this life which the friends of life seek to protect. Everlasting life and mortal life are not two existences but are two ways of enjoying one life. In heaven the blessed will share fully in the divine nature and so will be not only children of God but also his partners in a relationship so intimate that they will know God as he knows them. Yet the blessed will remain human persons and the same existing individuals whose existence in this world is a mortal life. Any attack upon this life is an attack upon the whole reality of the person who exists by it, and so the effort to protect this life is, implicitly at least, an effort to protect what contributes intrinsically—not as

mere means or extrinsic condition—to everlasting life.

It might seem that this way of looking at the matter renders vain in a very different way the work we do for human life. For if life is existence and existence does not end, then human life in reality needs no defense, for it cannot be successfully attacked.

But this objection also fails. For the earthly way of enjoying human life can be attacked, and such an attack is an attack upon life itself, which pervades the various modes in which it is enjoyed. Furthermore, the significance of an attack upon life is not what it does in reality so much as what it is meant to do. Enemies of life do not consider the life of a human person indestructible, for they do not believe that the created universe was called out of nothingness by God with the intention that it will last. Hence, in intending the earthly destruction of a human bodily life, an enemy of life means to destroy it utterly. In one way this intention is far worse than what is truly possible, for although killing a person attacks the sanctity of life in him or her, the person is not destroyed utterly.

But in another way the enemies of life do not realize what they are doing. For although they are willing to destroy a human life utterly, they usually imagine that the new life they are willing to destroy is only potentially the life of a person. That is so because they consider the true person to be a system of desires and satisfactions, for whom everything material is only a tool for getting what one wants. Those who have projects calculate what means are required to achieve what they project. Chosen objectives alone thus are considered the goods of persons and societies, and the fulfillment of such objectives alone is regarded as personal flourishing. The material world out there, which includes the human body and its organic functions, thus is thought to be outside and below the person, a mere vegetative and bestial foundation for the desires and satisfactions in which alone the person emerges.

This strange view is a kind of dualism, which separates and opposes the selfhood and the bodiliness of human persons. It is related to the belief that human persons are not creatures of God but only emergents from natural processes which owe nothing to a creator. In this view, personal meaning and value cannot depend upon the material substratum from which persons emerge, for this they have in common with brute nature, but must rather arise from human minds and wills alone.

Anyone who thinks in this way also denies that anything can be truly called good or evil until someone's thinking and deciding make it so. If the world does not come to be through a wise plan, then there is in it no providential design which must be studiously unfolded. Human decisions create the good and the evil. What is wanted is good; what is unwanted is bad. This situation has three further consequences.

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First, right and wrong are said by the enemies of life to arise from the efficiency of acts in bringing about desired results. Once arbitrary decisions of principle are made by individuals or groups, the possible ways of acting are evaluated by the extent to which they will bring about what is wanted. Friends of life, by contrast, think that an act is right only if it is consistent with all of the truths about what contributes to human flourishing. Thus friends of life are certain that one must always be faithful to human goods and may never attack them, and no one who is a friend of human life will approve the killing of some because they or society would be, by someone's decision, better off dead.

Second, because wanting and not wanting are equally real states of mind, and because wanting and not wanting settle for the enemies of life what is good and bad, they regard the good and the bad as equally real but incompatible states of affairs. It follows that the conflict between good and bad can be settled, as enemies of life see matters, only by the driving out and destruction of one of the two by the other. Naturally, they want what they want, and so they seek to destroy what they consider bad. It follows that for them human life sometimes will be an evil which must be destroyed. Friends of life, by contrast, believe that everything which comes forth from God is good. Evil is nothing more than a defect or wound in the wholeness of things God intended when he made them. And so friends of life believe that even the worst evils must be overcome by healing and restoration, by fostering the wounded good and helping it to flourish until what is defective is made whole and holy. This is the Christian belief that salvation overcomes sin by healing love.

And so, third, enemies of life can make no sense of the belief that evil can be overcome by a patient acceptance of suffering and death. While they are ready to kill for what they believe to be good, the willing acceptance of suffering and death seems to them utter folly, because such acceptance accomplishes nothing since it destroys nothing. Friends of life can make sense of the voluntary acceptance of suffering and death, because although these remain utterly evil, the undergoing of evil can be a means of establishing community with others who suffer and thus can provide a channel for the restoration of health and wholeness. In this way evil can be overcome without destruction, for a defect can be mended and a wound healed by the work of love.

The redemption brought about in Jesus perfectly illustrates the manner in which evil can be overcome without destruction and in accord with the understanding held by friends of life of bodiliness, of good and evil, of right and wrong, and of the overcoming of evil.

The Word of God wished to make himself a bridge of reconciliation for humankind, which had withdrawn from friendship with God and become

isolated in its own misery. To do this the Word became flesh in Jesus, gradually accepting in the course of his life the misery of the human condition until this man was like other men and women in all but their alienation from God. The suffering and death of Jesus provide on his part a substantial basis for community between him and us insofar as we are sinners. For even as sinners we are not wholly evil. Our sinful wills still love what remains of goodness in us and hate at least the very evil which we suffer because of our sins.

Jesus in suffering evil also hates it and loves the good of life which he relinquishes. Sinners who notice how much they have in common with him can choose to become more like him and can be drawn from sin to restored fullness of life. Of course, we also notice our difference from him and choose to resist the appeal his willing undergoing of evil makes to us.

The situation is exemplified by the account of the two thieves crucified with Jesus. Both are sinners. Both suffer as Jesus does, and both love their lives and hate their misery as he does. Both are like him and yet, as thieves, different from him. The one observes the difference, is drawn by the goodness of Jesus, chooses to identify with him, and in so doing admits and escapes his own sin: he suffers unjustly, but we justly. The other thief also observes the difference, is drawn by the goodness of Jesus, but refuses to identify with him, and in doing so remains in and sinks more deeply into alienation from God, for he identifies with those who mock Jesus.

The suffering and death of Jesus effect reconciliation between God and humankind by effecting community through the Word in the form of the suffering servant, who makes himself as much as he can like us so that we can make common cause with him against evil, identify with the goodness of his loving heart, and so be healed and made whole.

The community with Jesus of the good thief and of repentant Peter must be extended by the followers of Jesus to the whole of mankind. To extend this community, the apostles and other followers of Jesus must go to all nations, tell of Jesus and imitate him, and initiate those who are willing by the rite of baptism. For those who imitate Jesus, expending themselves and their resources in the service of others both promotes human goods and makes a contribution to the whole good of their flourishing in the more abundant life everlasting. By accepting suffering and frustration, a follower of Jesus enlarges the possibility within himself for community with others on a basis which poses no threats, for even sinners who seem to flourish and enjoy life are poor and wretched, tormented by the consequences of evil they have done themselves.

The extension of the community of salvation is a material process. The followers of Jesus are servants of the material communication of the Word, of the baptizing water, of the eucharistic bread, of the fleshly bond of marriage, of innocent and defenseless human life. Yet from the beginning, those

who wish to extend the community of Jesus have much in common with those to whom they intend to reach out.

The first step of the first apostle is a real embodiment of the mission to all nations and all times; the ultimate community not only is intended but already is incipient in this step. Those who know themselves to be in misery, who long for redemption, who are ready to listen to the Gospel also attempt what they can, with the help of God's grace, to prepare for the arrival of the apostle. In this way, both the apostle and every morally upright person are from the beginning of the apostolic mission in a condition of incipient communication and community. The apostle desires to baptize; those who await the apostle desire to be baptized. And what each does in fact is for him the remote beginning, the first movements, of the act toward which both move.

Considering matters in this way, we can see how those who do not seem to be baptized really are so. Their baptism is not complete, but it truly has begun. If it is never completed, nevertheless hearts which are stimulated by God's grace to be open to his mercy will not long for it in vain. At the same time, the apostolic work of bringing about explicit and conscious conversion and building up a self-conscious and apostolically active community must go forward, for several reasons.

First, an intention and a first step toward carrying out any purpose only make a true act of fulfilling the purpose if the first step is followed by the second, and this by all the subsequent steps as soon as the way is clear for them. Second, the explicit preaching and example of the apostle make a new and personal appeal to every sinner to accept the option which Jesus holds out to humankind. Third, only when those who are open to God become part of a self-conscious and apostolically active community can they effectively undertake their own part in the work of spreading the community of Jesus by purposeful sharing in apostolic work. Baptism can be by desire, but confirmation cannot.

For these reasons, it seems to me that those who are willing to hear the Gospel and to respond to it already begin to be baptized when the first apostle sets out to teach all nations. But through the ages the apostolic work must continue. It is the work of every self-conscious member of the community of Jesus. It is carried out not only by preaching the word but also by imitation of the work of Christ; and so by every service to every human good; by every act directed to the promotion of good, to defense against what threatens it, to removing the obstacles to the redemptive community's coming and its perfection. And the proper way of carrying out Christian apostleship is made clear in the model of Jesus, who did not destroy but rather accepted and suffered evil.

The baptism of unborn babies, killed by abortion, through the seemingly useless work of those who strive to protect their lives is but one example of

the way in which the redemptive community is extended to all who are willing—or even merely innocent and not unwilling—to receive baptism. The best that Christians are able to do in their struggle against evil surely is sufficient to accomplish the redemptive mission in their time. No one is lost by unavoidable failures. Yet less than the best Christians can do is not sufficient, and nothing they can do short of the end of time ever will be all that they ought to strive to complete. Hence, work for human life has not been in vain, and it must be carried on with redoubled energy the less successful it seems to be.

This is not to say that every undertaking that seems to fail must be pursued in the same way. Near the beginning of this paper, I pointed out ways in which the movement for life has accomplished much. If we look at these accomplishments from the perspective of faith, it is clear that what has been done in this cause by Christians has been redemptive and will continue to be so.

Another example of the manner in which, it seems to me, the apostolic mission to baptize reaches some babies who die without the rite of baptism is the case of the babies of believing couples who die before birth by natural accident. Here the beginning of baptism is in the marriage in Christ and the upright marital act of a Christian couple who are open to a new life and who predestine each of their children to new life by baptism in Christ. A couple who seek to block conception prevent themselves from sharing in the beginning of the redemption of any child they happen to conceive.

But this interference does not prevent the mercy of God from reaching the child. If he is aborted, he is saved by the efforts of those who seek to defend him. If he is born unwanted, his baptism is begun by the work of all who seek to reach him with the Gospel. Among these are those who are working to turn his parents from the use of methods of regulating birth which would block or destroy human life toward methods which are compatible with maintaining openness to life.

Very often enemies of life ridicule those who work for it by urging that the struggle against abortion be abandoned and that those who have carried on this work devote themselves instead to alleviating poverty and other conditions which sometimes create difficult situations. The taunt is not to be heeded to the extent of accepting abortion as legitimate and unquestionable policy in our society. Those who ridicule the friends of life in this way are saying that if one is somewhat at fault, through failure to fulfill all that love requires, one must acquiesce in the destruction of the person one has not yet loved enough.

Nevertheless, my recent studies of euthanasia and questions related to it have convinced me that to a very large extent the systematic killing of dependent persons in our society probably is going to occur because they are dependent upon public support. The flawed sense of justice of the wealthy

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and powerful is balking at this burden. It is ironic that the burden of dependency became a public one only during modern times and that it has tended to be borne by progressively larger governmental units directed by administrators more and more distant from those who are in need. I do not see how private efforts to relieve the needs of the poor and miserable can change all at once the situation which has developed over many years. Nevertheless, unless the public burden of dependent persons is lessened in some other way, it is going to be lessened by killing.

Christians who are friends of life have no special legal obligation to impoverish themselves in an effort to save the poor. Nor can anyone have an ethical duty to do that in the way that one can have strict obligations not to kill and to fulfill the duties of one's state of life. Yet Christians are committed to extending the redemptive community in the best way they can. And the redemptive community is proposed to others, as it was by Jesus, only when one suffers injustice patiently, surrenders what is one's own for the good of others, and seeks to overcome evil by love.

No one can deduce and demonstrate what Jesus would do today if he were confronted with the challenge which now confronts the friends of life. But some sort of creative effort in accord with his style of confronting evil seems called for on the part of his followers. Anyone who responds in faith to this call will contribute to the beginning or perfecting of baptism in those whose lives are at risk. And no one who tries to confront the movement for death with a generous willingness to become poor—and to suffer like Jesus for those who are poor and wretched—will work in vain for human life.

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