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*Fratelli Tutti*  
and a Consistent  
Ethic of Life

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# *Fratelli Tutti* and a Consistent Ethic of Life

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On December 11th the BBC reported that President Trump would rush through the federal execution of five inmates on death row.<sup>1</sup> These executions are due to take place during the final few weeks of his presidency and before President-elect Biden enters office. And so by the time this article is published all five people will have been put to death.

This move by Mr. Trump surprised some. He is the first outgoing president for 130 years not to pause executions during a time of presidential transition. And according to the BBC report, if all five executions are carried out, Mr. Trump will become “the most prolific execution president in over a century”,<sup>2</sup> approving the execution of 13 human beings on death row since July of this year alone. It is a macabre legacy.

Despite this, and in disregard of his vehemently anti-immigrant, xenophobic and racist views, Donald Trump was hailed by many in the run up to the recent US election as a “pro-life” president. And Joe Biden, who promised to abolish the death penalty if elected, had his commitment to Catholic/Christian values frequently questioned. The challenge for Catholics in the United States and elsewhere, it seems, is to avoid becoming single-issue voters, committing instead to what John Paul II termed “a culture of life” in all its totality.<sup>3</sup> For the principle of the sanctity of life is not a selective one; the sacredness of human life is not derived from, nor dependent upon, virtue or merit. It does not apply in a limited way only to the unborn or to those we like. It does not

1 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55236260> accessed on December 18th, 2020.

2 Ibid.

3 See USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, Part I, available at: <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-part-one>

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apply more robustly at certain stages of human life than at others. It is universal, applicable to all human beings in all circumstances and in all contexts.

And the ethical implications of that foundational Christian belief are far-reaching, extending well beyond the rights of the unborn. The sanctity of life demands, among other things, a commitment to ending child hunger and child marriages; working towards basic universal healthcare for all peoples; fighting for the abolition of harmful practices such as female genital mutilation; and committing to protect and preserve the natural world. It involves a rejection of all forms of violence in society, including gun violence, gender-based violence, and the death penalty. It requires condemnation of the proliferation of armaments and violent conflict around the world. And it implies that we welcome the stranger, especially those displaced because of war, violence or economic destitution. With the aid of *Fratelli tutti* let us reflect on some of these points more fully.

#### FRATELLI TUTTI ON WAR AND THE DEATH PENALTY

In his latest encyclical Pope Francis discusses a wide range of moral concerns, including war and the death penalty. Building on the teachings of his predecessors, the Holy Father raises serious objections to both, describing them as “false answers” to contemporary problems. For Francis, war and the death penalty “do no more than introduce new elements of destruction in the fabric of national and global society” (FT n.255).

#### *War*

Pope Francis is firm in his condemnation of war. “We can no longer think of war as a solution, because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits. In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a “just war”. *Never again war!* (FT n.258, emphasis added). Reasons for war can often be couched in humanitarian arguments, or justified through the manipulation of information, Francis warns. And given the highly globalized nature of our world, the broader impact of even localised conflicts is often all too evident.

It should be added that, with increased globalization, what might appear as an immediate or practical solution for one part of the world initiates a chain of violent and often latent effects that end up harming the entire planet and opening the way to new and worse wars in the future. In today’s world, there are no

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longer just isolated outbreaks of war in one country or another; instead, we are experiencing a “world war fought piecemeal”, since the destinies of countries are so closely interconnected on the global scene (FT n.259).

Cicero, regarded as a key architect of the doctrine of the Just War, claimed that the resort to violence represented a failure of our humanity. As rational creatures, he argued, we ought to be able to resolve our differences through peaceful, intelligent means rather than resorting to the sword. Francis echoes these sentiments: “War is a failure of politics and of humanity, a shameful capitulation, a stinging defeat before the forces of evil” (FT n.261). Both humanity and the environment bear the horrific cost of conflict, while the existence of nuclear, chemical and biological weaponry threatens human existence in previously unimaginable ways. And although the policy of deterrence is often used to justify the proliferation of nuclear arms, this tactic is a fragile and risky one. The Holy Father calls for the fostering of greater trust among nations, and a global politics built on mutual respect, dialogue and collaboration: “International peace and stability cannot be based on a false sense of security, on the threat of mutual destruction or total annihilation, or on simply maintaining a balance of power” (FT n.262).

Interestingly, Pope Francis also recommends the establishment of a global fund that could put an end to world hunger and progress development in poorer parts of the world. “With the money spent on weapons and other military expenditures, let us establish a global fund that can finally put an end to hunger and favour development in the most impoverished countries, so that their citizens will not resort to violent or illusory solutions, or have to leave their countries in order to seek a more dignified life” (FT n.262). Consider for a moment the sums involved.

According to the World Bank, the United States spent over 731 billion dollars in 2019 on its military.<sup>4</sup> This far exceeds the spending of its closest rivals. The UK, for example, spent just over 48 billion dollars in the same year, while Russia’s military expenditure came to 65 billion dollars. Germany and France each spent approximately 50 billion dollars on their military capabilities. To put this another way, in 2019 the Pentagon’s budget was almost three times bigger than China’s. In that year, the US military budget exceeded the next 10 countries’ defense budgets combined, equating to approximately 38 per cent of global military spending. And as Elliott Negin argues in *Scientific American*, “While the Pentagon budget routinely eats up more than half of annual U.S. discretionary spending, a host of other interrelated threats that undermine national security writ large

4 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=US>

go chronically underfunded, including the current public health, environmental and climate crises, all of which disproportionately harm low-income communities and communities of color”.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, global military spending is occurring at a time when extreme poverty is set to rise for the first time in over twenty years. Can Christians reasonably claim commitment to a culture of life while ignoring, or even benefiting from, such huge expenditure on armaments?

*The death penalty*

The death penalty has raised major ethical concerns for Church leaders for many decades. Like John Paul II and Benedict XVI before him, Francis rejects the argument that the death penalty is necessary to protect the common good, a point also found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.

Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that “the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person”, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide (CCC: 2267).

Pope Francis calls on Christians and all people of good will to work together to abolish the death penalty world-wide, as well as improve the conditions within prisons “out of respect for the human dignity of persons deprived of their freedom”. (FT 268). This plea is echoed by many within the Catholic Church. The US Bishops, for example, have for several years questioned the use of the death penalty in their country, and the recent federal executives have generated further condemnation from within the USCCB.<sup>6</sup> Others have gone further. In an article for *The National*

5 See: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/its-time-to-rein-in-inflated-military-budgets/>. The figures cited here are supported by data supplied by the World Bank in the link above.

6 See, for example, Archbishop Paul Coakley and Archbishop Joseph Naumann’s statement, available at: <https://www.usccb.org/news/2020/us-bishop-chairmen-lament-additional-federal-executions>, or USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, available at: <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-part-two>

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*Catholic Reporter* James Keenan SJ and William Montross SJ are critical of several high-ranking Catholics in the judiciary and politics who are facilitating these executions. “Still, Catholics are assiduously ignoring [Catholic] teachings. Barr launched the killing spree without hesitation, and when the Catholic justices intervened and vacated preemptively the stays of execution, they effected these killings. The active Catholic participation in this killing spree is remarkable, and of course, scandalous, especially in as much as they rush the nation to committing these actual executions ... [And] Catholics in high offices have shown by their own extraordinary actions that they are among the most active participants in executing tragically vulnerable people”.<sup>7</sup> Of course Barr and others will claim they are simply implementing the rule of law. But one is left wondering how such actions could possibly promote a culture of life or defend the principle of the sanctity of life. No doubt committing to a consistent ethic of life will place enormous economic, political, personal, and spiritual demands on us. But then, fidelity to the Gospel has never been easy or convenient.

## FACING UP TO GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The 2016 election of Donald Trump and the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the EU both highlight a worrying trend across many parts of the world. We have witnessed a rise in far-right political movements, identifiable by clear anti-immigrant, xenophobic rhetoric, and by a narrow nationalism that attempts to promote a limited sense of belonging. Control of borders is now a key political promise in many election campaigns.

A blatant hypocrisy underpins the anti-immigrant sentiment that is on the rise. Take for example the UK’s efforts to regain control of its borders by leaving the EU. Britain is second only to the United States in global rankings for military exports. UK military exports rose to approximately £14bn in 2018, falling to 11 billion in 2019. The Middle East is the primary destination for these sales, accounting for 60% of all arms exports in 2019 (down from 80% in 2018).<sup>8</sup> Alarmingly, UK arms sales to repressive regimes increased by £1bn in 2019 compared to 2018 figures. “In 2019 the UK sold £1.3bn worth of weapons to 26 of the 48 countries that are classed as ‘not free’ by Freedom House, the US government-funded pro-democracy institution. This was compared with just £310m in

7 <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/catholics-involvement-death-penalty-killing-spree-scandalous>

8 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/06/uk-remains-second-biggest-arms-exporter-with-11bn-of-orders>

2018 ... Business is brisk among those countries which the Foreign Office itself identifies as having poor human rights records”.<sup>9</sup>

Much of this weaponry, it is believed, is being used in conflicts in Yemen and Syria. And yet we find that most of the world’s leading armaments suppliers, including the UK, are refusing to accept responsibility for the millions of civilians fleeing these conflicts. Borders are being closed, the plight of migrants is being largely ignored, while enormous profits are made from the conflicts fought with Western armaments.

By the end of 2019 it was estimated that 79.5 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide, of which 26 million were refugees and 45.6 million were internally displaced persons.<sup>10</sup> As David Hollenbach SJ explains, “If solidarity extends only as far as national or cultural borders, refugees will not receive the support they need. On the other hand, if we fail to support ... citizens who are economically vulnerable, we should not be surprised when some of them take anti-immigrant and anti-refugee political stances. The challenge, then, is to find the appropriate relation among the solidarities that link us to communities of diverse scope”.<sup>11</sup>

*Responsibility* and *response* can be determined by examining several criteria. Primary responsibility, of course, rests with the nation/government of those displaced. But, as we know, many people are fleeing conflict, oppressive regimes, and religious and ethnic persecution. Thus, where countries will no longer protect the rights of their citizens the global community may be obliged to intervene. Proximity – be it geographical or cultural – is another factor that helps determine our response to refugees. Capability is a third. The duty of any nation towards refugees must be weighed against the needs of one’s own citizens. But as Hollenbach notes, “neither of these duties is absolute. Duties to fellow citizens do not always trump duties to refugees, nor do duties to refugees always override duties to co-citizens. This means we are challenged to strengthen solidarity on multiple levels”.<sup>12</sup> Finally, one must examine the degree to which one’s government and economy benefits from the sales of armaments to unstable, fragile nations around the world. Surely countries that profit financially from global arms sales bear some responsibility towards the civilians fleeing conflict?

9 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/uk-arms-trade-repressive-regimes>

10 <https://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/figures-at-a-glance.html>

11 <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2019/10/21/what-we-owe-refugees-fleeing-persecution-around-globe>

12 <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2019/10/21/what-we-owe-refugees-fleeing-persecution-around-globe>

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### A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE

As Pope Francis clearly states in *Fratelli tutti*, the Catholic Church now commits itself to the abolition of the death penalty worldwide. Like war, the use of capital punishment is a complex issue, requiring legal, political, socio-economic, and cultural reform. It raises uncomfortable questions about the levels of violence in society, as well as the myriad of injustices that create the conditions for violence to flourish. The US Bishops have called for the abolition of capital punishment, stating that, “our nation’s increasing reliance on the death penalty is extremely troubling. Respect for human life must even include respect for the lives of those who have taken the lives of others ... The antidote to violence is not more violence.”<sup>13</sup> As a part of any pro-life commitment, the US Bishops encourage the creation of solutions to violent crime that respect the dignity of the human person.<sup>14</sup>

A leading figure in the promotion of “a consistent ethic of life” was Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin. He recognised that some resisted this idea because of the desire to “push their narrower agendas”.<sup>15</sup> But he also acknowledged that the idea itself is a challenging one: “It requires us to broaden, substantively and creatively, our ways of thinking, our attitudes, our pastoral responses. Many are not accustomed to thinking about all the life-threatening and life-diminishing issues with such consistency. The result is that they remain somewhat selective in their response”.<sup>16</sup>

*Consistency* in our ethic of life may require a radical change in how we treat others, including immigrants, people of other faiths, members of the LGBTQ+, the poor, and prisoners. It may place greater burdens on us as a society, requiring increased taxation, for example, to more adequately assist vulnerable communities. It may challenge some of our religious assumptions. It may require reforming long-established structures and laws, rectifying religious, political and societal practices that exclude or marginalize. As John Paul II put it, “It leads us to promote life actively, and to *develop particular ways of thinking and acting which serve life*. In this way we exercise our responsibility towards the persons entrusted to us and we show, in deeds and in truth, our gratitude to

13 USCCB, “Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium”, in Charles E. Curran, Leslie Griffin (eds.), *Readings in Moral Theology* no.12: *The Catholic Church, Morality and Politics*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), p.151.

14 They include here the creation of adequately paid jobs, equal opportunities for women and minorities, a living wage, access to healthcare and child care, and safe, affordable housing. See p.154

15 Joseph L. Bernardin, “Consistent Ethic of Life”, in Curran and Griffin, *Readings in Moral Theology* no. 12, p.162.

16 *Ibid.*, p.162.



God for the great gift of life”.<sup>17</sup> The need for a consistent ethic of life is all the more urgent when one considers the range of threats to human dignity and human life. Bernardin argued that this ethic “cuts across such issues as genetics, abortion, capital punishment, modern warfare, and the care of the terminally ill”. One might also include here endemic racism, societal violence, lack of access to adequate healthcare, and environmental destruction. Bernardin understood that these are distinct problems, each complex in its own way, but argued there was a “common moral challenge” that binds them to a consistent ethic nonetheless.<sup>18</sup>

And as John Paul II argued in *Evangelium vitae*, to be pro-life is to actively work for the common good of society. “It is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop. A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized.” (EV, 101).

Thus, a consistent ethic of life requires a broad and inclusive framework. It includes commitment to the dignity of life at all stages, as well as the provision of conditions that enable human beings to flourish, and dedication to eradicating “the ancient scourges of poverty, hunger, endemic diseases, violence and war” (EV, n.3). Matters of war and capital punishment may initially seem like distant problems to many of us. But we must each ask how we can better promote a culture of life, either locally or globally. Do our pensions benefit from investment in armaments or fossil fuels? Can we do more as a society to help refugees or the homeless? Do we encourage attitudes and structures that are sinful to those around us? Do our workplaces allow misogynistic or homophobic practices to go unchecked?

Throughout all his social documents, Pope Francis asks us to examine our ways of living, our attitudes, our biases. He seeks more than merely reform of unjust structures; he understands that a new way of thinking, a new vision, is required also. As he puts it, “Certainly ... without an attempt to enter into that way of thinking, what I am saying here will sound wildly unrealistic. On the other hand, if we accept the great principle that there are rights born of our inalienable human dignity, we can rise to the challenge of envisaging a new humanity” (FT, 127).

17 John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, n.76.

18 Bernardin, “Consistent Ethic of Life”, p.163.