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CATHOLIC ORTHODOXY; ANTIDOTE AGAINST THE CULTURE OF DEATH

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Introduction

It is clear that we are presently experiencing a period of intense and critical struggle in the advancement of the culture of life in the world. Many governments and international organizations openly and aggressively follow a secularist, anti-life and anti-family agenda. Even though religious language may be used and the name of God invoked, programs and policies are proposed for the people without respect for God and His Law, in the words of the Venerable Pope John Paul II, "as if God did not exist" (Pope John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic *Exhortation Christifideles laici*, "On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World," 30 December 1988, no. 34).

Now more than ever, the world needs the consistent witness to the truth, expressed in the Sacred Scriptures and in Tradition, which is the condition of the possibility of a culture which respects fully the gift of human life and its origin in procreation, that is, in the cooperation of man and woman with God through the conjugal union and through education in the home which they have formed by marriage.

In his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate*, "On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth," given on June 29th of 2009, Pope Benedict XVI teaches us that the development for which God has created man is achieved through the establishment of the culture of life:

"Hence charity and truth confront us with an altogether new and creative challenge, one that is certainly vast and complex. It is about broadening the scope of reason and making it capable of knowing and directing these powerful new forces [in the development of peoples], animating them within the perspective of that "civilization of love" whose seed God has planted in every people, in every culture (Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate*, "On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth," 29 June 2009, no. 33).

Our tireless promotion of the culture of life, in accord with the truth announced in the Magisterium of the Church, in fact, responds to the deepest longing in every man, and in every society. It anticipates and prepares "a new heaven and a new earth," which Our Lord Jesus Christ will inaugurate at His Final Coming (Rv 21:1).

Fundamental Presuppositions

A first fundamental presupposition of my presentation is the truth that the struggle against total secularization, which is, by definition, opposed to human life and to the family, is full of hope. It is, by no means, futile, that is, ultimately destined to failure. The fundamental presupposition is the victory of life, which Our Lord Jesus Christ, has already won.

Christ animates the Church in time with the grace of His victory over sin and death, until the victory reaches its consummation, at His Final Coming, in the Heavenly Jerusalem. Notwithstanding the grave situation, in our world, of the attack on innocent and defenseless human life and on the integrity of marriage as the union of man and woman in a bond of lifelong, faithful and procreative

love, there remains a strong voice in defense of our littlest and most vulnerable brothers and sisters, without boundary or exception, and of the truth about the marital union as it was constituted by God at the Creation. The Christian voice, the voice of Christ, transmitted by the Apostles, remains strong in our world. The voice of men and women of good will, who recognize and obey the law of God written upon their hearts, remains strong in our world.

Living in a totally secularized culture, we must open our eyes to see that many recognize the human bankruptcy of our culture and are looking with hope to the Church for the inspiration and strength to claim anew the God-fearing and Christian foundations of every human society. God has created us to choose life; God the Son Incarnate has won the victory of life for us, the victory over sin and everlasting death (cf. Dt 30:19; Jn 10:10).

We, therefore, must never give up in the struggle to advance a culture founded on the choice of life, which God has written upon our hearts, and the victory of life, which Christ has won in our human nature. In fact, we witness every day the commitment of God-fearing brothers and sisters who advance the cause of life and the family in their homes, in their local communities, in their homelands, and in the world.

A second fundamental presupposition of my presentation is the essential relationship of the respect for human life and the respect for the integrity of marriage and the family. The attack on the innocent and defenseless life of the unborn has its origin in an erroneous view of human sexuality, which attempts to eliminate, by mechanical or chemical means, the essentially procreative nature of the conjugal act. The error maintains that the artificially altered conjugal act retains its integrity. The claim is that the act remains unitive or loving, even though the procreative nature of the act has been radically violated. In fact, it is not unitive, for one or both of the partners withholds an essential part of the gift of self, which is the essence of the conjugal union.

The so-called "contraceptive mentality" is essentially anti-life. Many forms of so-called contraception are, in fact, abortifacient, that is, they destroy, at its beginning, a life which has already been conceived.

The manipulation of the conjugal act, as the Servant of God Pope Paul VI prophetically observed, has led to many forms of violence to marriage and family life (cf. Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae vitae*, "On the Proper Regulation of the Propagation of Offspring," 25 July 1968, no. 17). Through the spread of the contraceptive mentality, especially among the young, human sexuality is no longer seen as the gift of God, which draws a man and a woman together, in a bond of lifelong and faithful love, crowned by the gift of new human life, but, rather, as a tool for personal gratification. Once sexual union is no longer seen to be, by its very nature, procreative, human sexuality is abused in ways that are profoundly harmful and indeed destructive of individuals and of society itself. One has only to think of the devastation which is daily wrought in our world by the multi-million dollar industry of pornography. Essential to the advancement of the culture of life is the proclamation of the truth about the conjugal union, in its fullness, and the correction of the contraceptive thinking which fears life, which fears procreation.

It is instructive to note that Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical Letter on the Church's social doctrine, makes special reference to Pope Paul VI's Encyclical Letter *Humanae vitae*, underscoring its importance "for delineating the fully human meaning of the development that the Church proposes" (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 15). Pope Benedict XVI makes clear that the teaching in *Humanae vitae* was not simply a matter of "individual morality," declaring: "*Humanae vitae* indicates the strong links between life ethics and social ethics, ushering in a new area of magisterial teaching that has gradually been articulated in a series of documents, most recently John Paul II's Encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 15)."

His Holiness reminds us of the essential part which a right understanding of our sexuality has in true human development.

In treating the whole question of procreation, he underscores the critical nature of the right understanding of human sexuality, marriage and the family. He declares: "The Church, in her concern for man's authentic development, urges him to have full respect for human values in the exercise of his sexuality. It cannot be reduced merely to pleasure or entertainment, nor can sex education be reduced to technical instruction aimed solely at protecting the interested parties from possible disease or the 'risk' of procreation. This would be to impoverish and disregard the deeper meaning of sexuality, a meaning which needs to be acknowledged and responsibly appropriated not only by individuals but also by the community (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 44).

The respect for the integrity of the conjugal act is essential to the advancement of the culture of life. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, it is necessary "once more to hold up to future generations the beauty of marriage and the family, and the fact that these institutions correspond to the deepest needs and dignity of the person" (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 44).

Correspondingly, he notes that "States are called to enact policies promoting the centrality and integrity of the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society, and to assume responsibility for its economic and fiscal needs, while respecting its essentially relational character" (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 44).

The Magisterium and the Promotion of the Culture of Life

The relationship of the Magisterium to our eternal salvation lies at the very foundation of our life in Christ. In a world which prizes, above all else, individualism and self-determination, the Christian is easily tempted to view the Magisterium in relationship to his individualism and self-pursuit. In other words, he is tempted to relativize the authority of the Magisterium. The phenomenon today is popularly known as "cafeteria Catholicism."

The service of the Bishop, as true shepherd of the flock, is essential, indeed irreplaceable. The Venerable Pope John Paul II, in his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores gregis*, "On the Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World," promulgated on October 16, 2003, the 25th anniversary of his election to the See of Saint Peter, recalled the Rite of Ordination of a Bishop and, specifically, the imposition of the Book of the Gospels "on the head of the Bishop-elect," during the Prayer of Consecration, which contains the form of the Sacrament, observing:

"This gesture indicates, on the one hand, that the Word embraces and watches over the Bishop's ministry and, on the other, that the Bishop's life is to be completely submitted to the Word of God in his daily commitment of preaching the Gospel in all patience and sound doctrine (cf. 2 Tim. 4) (Pope John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores gregis*, "On the Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World," 16 October 2003, n. 28).

A bit earlier in the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, he stressed that "the proclamation of Christ always takes first place and that the Bishop is the first preacher of the Gospel by his words and by the witness of his life." He then reminded Bishops to "be aware of the challenges of the present hour and have the courage to face them" (n. 26).

The entire content of our faith, what Saint Paul in his First and Second Letters to Timothy calls the deposit of faith, is found in Sacred Scripture and Tradition (1 Tm 6:20; and 2 Tm 1:12-14). The faith, in its integrity, has been entrusted to the Church by Christ through the ministry of the Apostles. The deposit of faith is the teaching of the Apostles and the living of that teaching in the life of prayer and the sacramental life, and the witness of the teaching in the moral life. The foundation is the sound

doctrine which finds its highest expression in the Sacraments, above all the Holy Eucharist, and which is witnessed in the holiness of life of the believer (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 84).

The responsibility for the deposit of the faith and its transmission in every age belongs “to the living teaching office of the Church alone” (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, “On Divine Revelation,” 18 November 1965, n. 10). The “living teaching office” or Magisterium of the Church, exercised by the Roman Pontiff and the Bishops in communion with him, has its authority from our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ has conferred upon the Apostles, with Peter as their Head, and their successors, the Bishops, with the Successor of Peter, as their head, the authority to teach authentically (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 85).

The Roman Pontiff and the Bishops are servants of Christ and of His holy Word. The Magisterium “teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication, and expounds it faithfully” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 10). The Roman Pontiff and the Bishops in communion with him teach only what is contained in the deposit of faith as divinely revealed truth (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 86).

The Magisterium, in obedience to Christ and by the power of the particular grace of the Holy Spirit, interprets the Word of God, contained in the Sacred Scriptures and Tradition, in matters of both faith and morals.

The Roman Pontiff and the Bishops in communion with him define the dogmas of the faith, that is, the truths contained in the deposit of faith and “truths having a necessary connection with these” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 88).

With regard to morals, the Magisterium presents faithfully the Decalogue and the requirements of the life of the virtues. The teaching office would fail in its God-given mission, if it did not apply the living Tradition to the circumstances of daily life in Christ.

The Venerable Pope John Paul II exhorted Bishops to exercise the Magisterium regarding the moral life with these words: “The rules that the Church sets forth reflect the divine Commandments, which find their crown and synthesis in the Gospel command of love. The end to which every divine rule tends is the greater good of human beings. ... Nor must we forget that the Ten Commandments have a firm foundation in human nature itself, and thus the goods which they defend have universal validity. This is particularly true of goods such as human life, which must be defended from conception until its end in natural death; the freedom of individuals and of nations, social justice and the structures needed to achieve it. (*Pastores gregis*, n. 29).

In a culture beset by what our Holy Father, in his homily on the morning of the beginning of the conclave in which he was elected Successor of Saint Peter, called the “dictatorship of relativism,” the Bishop, as Chief Teacher of the faith and morals in the Diocese, carries an especially heavy and constant burden in providing the sound teaching which safeguards and promotes the good of all the faithful, especially those who cannot take care of or defend themselves (“*dittatura del relativismo*”: “*Initium Conclavis*,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 97 [2005], p. 687).

Catechesis is a most fundamental responsibility which the Bishop exercises on behalf of the good of the faithful entrusted to his care, ultimately, of their eternal salvation. Pope John Paul II reminded Bishops that they fulfill their responsibility by the first proclamation of the faith, or kerygma, “which is always needed for bringing about the obedience of faith, but is all the more urgent today, in times marked by indifference and by religious ignorance on the part of many Christians” (*Pastores gregis*, n. 29). United to the kerygma is the catechesis of those who have embraced the faith and strive to be obedient to the faith. Pope John Paul II declared: “It is therefore the duty of every Bishop to give real priority in his particular Church to active and effective catechesis.

He must demonstrate his personal concern through direct interventions aimed at promoting and preserving an authentic passion for catechesis” (*Pastores gregis*, n. 29).

As Pope John Paul II reminded the Bishops, in the just-quoted exhortation, the Magisterium includes also the precepts of the natural law written by God upon the human heart, the requirements of conduct inherent in man’s very nature and in the order of the world, God’s creation. Obedience to the demands of the natural law is necessary for salvation, and, therefore, the teaching of the natural law is within the authority of the Magisterium and part of its solemn responsibility. “In recalling the prescriptions of the natural law, the Magisterium of the Church exercises an essential part of its prophetic office of proclaiming to men who they truly are and reminding them of what they should be before God” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2036). When Bishops and faithful obediently submit themselves in mind and heart to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the perennial truth of the faith shines forth in the whole Church for the building up of the Body of Christ and the transformation of the world.

The response of both Bishop and the faithful to the exercise of the teaching authority of Christ is obedience, for they recognize in the truths proclaimed, regarding faith and morals, the infallible guide to their salvation in Christ Who said to His Apostles: “He who hears you, hears Me” (Lk 10:16). The words of our Lord are unmistakable in their meaning for us.

Obedience to the Magisterium is a virtue and is attained through the practice of such obedience. When the shepherds of the flock are obedient to the Magisterium, entrusted to their exercise, then the members of the flock grow in obedience and proceed, with Christ, along the way of salvation. If the shepherd is not obedient, the flock easily gives way to confusion and error. The shepherd must be especially attentive to the assaults of Satan who knows that, if he can strike the shepherd, the work of scattering the flock will be made easy (cf. Zec 13:7).

In his Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, “On the Relationship between Faith and Reason,” the Venerable Pope John Paul II reminded us that the Magisterium is bound strictly to Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, while, at the same time, Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are handed on from one generation to the next through the obedience to the Magisterium. Pope John Paul II declared: “The 'supreme rule of her faith' derives from the unity which the Spirit has created between Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church in a reciprocity which means that none of the three can survive without the others (*Fides et ratio*, n. 55).”

The faith is living. The faith is received through the action of the Holy Spirit dwelling within the soul, and it is expressed by the purifying and strengthening action of the Holy Spirit Who inspires man to put the faith into practice.

The disposition of mind and heart to believe all that God has revealed to us and to do all that He asks of us is the obedience of faith. The obedience of faith is the fitting response to the revelation of God, which has its fullness in Our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 11:8). Obedience to the Magisterium, the guardian and teacher of the faith, is the fundamental disposition of the baptized and confirmed Catholic (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 142-143).

The Blessed Virgin Mary lived perfectly the obedience of faith. At the Visitation, Elizabeth, her cousin, described Mary’s identity as Mother of the Redeemer with the words: “Blessed is she who believed that the Lord’s words to her would be fulfilled” (Lk 1:45). Mary’s response to the announcement of the Archangel Gabriel expressed perfectly the disposition of total obedience, which marked her soul: “I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:37-38). Mary’s response is the model of our daily response to God’s will in our lives, which the Church’s Magisterium teaches to us. The last words of our Blessed Mother, recorded in the Gospel, are the summary of her maternal instruction to us. When the wine stewards at the Wedding Feast of Cana approached her, seeking her help, she directed them to the Son of God, her Son, with the

counsel: “Do whatever He tells you” (Jn 2:5). Obeying her maternal counsel, the wine stewards witnessed the first miracle during the public ministry of Jesus.

Faith is, first of all, “personal adherence of man to God” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 150). When we believe all that God has revealed to us, we place all our trust in Him, in His Providence. Such trust can be placed in God alone. Faith in God the Father and total trust in His promises is clearly faith in Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son, and in the Holy Spirit Who dwells with us always in the Church (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 151-152). Our Lord Jesus Christ makes us one with Him in doing all that the Father asks of us by pouring forth into our souls the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit: the grace of the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to know God’s will and to do it with courage. The sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit produces in our souls a sevenfold disposition which may be described as the obedience of faith.

The moral life flows from our faith in God. It is the “obedience of faith” in action. The first tablet of the Ten Commandments governs our right relationship with God, which makes possible our right relationship with others and the world, governed by the second tablet. When we fail morally, we also fail in faith (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 2087-2088). I often recall the words of a sage professor of Canon Law, who taught me the Church’s discipline regarding clerics. More than once, he told the class: “Where there are problems of chastity, there are problems of obedience.” Our rebellion against the moral truth is a rebellion against God and all that He teaches us.

Challenges to the Obedience to the Magisterium

Obedience to the Magisterium is difficult for man in every age. The practice of the “obedience of faith” is difficult to master. The difficulty comes both from within us and from outside of us. We suffer the effects of the sin of our First Parents, which fundamentally was a sin of prideful disobedience, of rebellion against God’s will.

The grace of the Holy Spirit, poured forth into our soul through Baptism, strengthened and increased in our soul through Confirmation, and nourished within our soul through the Holy Eucharist, alone helps us to overcome our inherited tendency to rebellion and disobedience.

From outside of us, Satan never rests in proposing to us the same temptation which he proposed to our First Parents, the temptation to act as if God did not exist, to act as if we are gods. The world around us, the culture in which we live, to the degree that it is has succumbed to Satan’s deceptions, is a source of strong temptation for us. Our culture, in fact, has been described as “godless” both by the Venerable Pope John Paul II and by Pope Benedict XVI. Our culture teaches us to act as if God did not exist. At the same time, it teaches a radical individualism and self-interest which lead us away from the love of God and from the love of one another.

Often the lack of obedience to the Magisterium is not total but selective. Our culture teaches us to believe what is convenient and to reject what is difficult for us or challenges us. Thus, we can easily fall into “cafeteria Catholicism,” a practice of the faith, which picks and chooses what part of the deposit of faith to believe and practice. A most tragic example of the lack of obedience of faith, also on the part of certain Bishops, was the response of many to the Encyclical Letter *Humanae vitae* of Pope Paul VI, published on July 25, 1968. The confusion which resulted has led many Catholics into habits of sin in what pertains to the procreation and education of human life.

The lack of integrity in obeying the Magisterium is also seen in the hypocrisy of Catholics who claim to be practicing their faith but who refuse to apply the truth of the faith in their exercise of politics, medicine, business and the other human endeavors. These Catholics claim to hold “personally” to the truth of the faith, for example, regarding the inviolability of innocent and defenseless human life, while, in the political arena or in the practice of medicine, they cooperate in

the attack on our unborn brothers and sisters, or on our brothers and sisters who have grown weak under the burden of years, of illness, or of special needs. Their disobedience pertains not to some truth particular to the life of the Church, that is, not to some confessional matter, but to the truth of the divine natural law written on every human heart and, therefore, to be obeyed by all men.

The obedience of faith obliges us in all situations of life, also in situations in which it is most difficult to do what God asks of us. Ultimately, the obedience of faith could require martyrdom. In his Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor*, “Regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church’s Moral Teaching” of August 6, 1993, the Venerable Pope John Paul II taught us that there can be no compromise in the obedience to the moral teaching of the Magisterium: “Even in the most difficult situations man must respect the norm of morality so that he can be obedient to God’s holy commandments and consistent with his own dignity as a person. Certainly, maintaining a harmony between freedom and truth occasionally demands uncommon sacrifices, and must be won at a high price: it can even involve martyrdom” (n. 102a).

The Magisterium and Public Life

Regarding the Magisterium and public life, there has developed in many places the false notion that the Christian or any person of faith, in order to be a true citizen of his nation, must bracket his faith life from his public life. According to such a notion, one ends up with Christians, for example, who claim personally to be faithful members of the Church and, therefore, to hold to the demands of the natural moral law, while they sustain and support the right to violate the moral law in its most fundamental tenets.

We find self-professed Catholics, for example, who sustain and support the right of a woman to procure the death of the infant in her womb, or the right of two persons of the same sex to the recognition which the State gives to a man and a woman who have entered into marriage. It is not possible to be a practicing Catholic and to conduct oneself publicly in this manner.

While the Church does not propose the imposition of purely confessional practices on the general population, it must foster the teaching and upholding of the moral law, common to all men, which is at the heart of every true religion. What kind of government would require that its citizens and political leaders act without reference to the fundamental requirements of the moral law?

While true religion teaches the natural moral law, the observance of the moral law is not a confessional practice. It is rather a response to what is inscribed in the depths of every human heart. Religious faith plainly articulates the natural moral law, enabling men of faith to recognize more readily what their own human nature and the nature of things demand of them, and to conform their lives to the truth which they recognize. For that reason, governments, in the past, have acknowledged the importance of religious faith for the life of the nation.

The laws of many nations, in fact, aimed to protect the teaching and practice of religious faith for the sake of the common good.

In his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us: “The Christian religion and other religions can offer their contribution to development only if God has a place in the public realm, specifically in regard to its cultural, social, economic, and particularly its political dimensions. The Church’s social doctrine came into being in order to claim a citizenship status” for the Christian religion. Denying the right to profess one’s religion in public and the right to bring the truths of faith to bear upon public life has negative consequences for true development.... Reason always stands in need of being purified by faith: this also holds true for political reason, which must not consider itself omnipotent. For its part, religion always needs to be purified by reason in order to

show its authentically human face. Any breach in this dialogue comes only at an enormous price to human development (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 56).

In the present situation of our world, the Christian faith has a critical responsibility to articulate clearly the natural moral law and its demands.

Under the constant influence of a rationalist and secularist philosophy which makes man, instead of God, the ultimate measure of what is right and good, many have become confused about the most basic truths, for example, the inviolable dignity of innocent human life, from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death, and the integrity of marriage between one man and one woman as the first and irreplaceable cell of the life of society. If Christians fail to articulate and uphold the natural moral law, then they fail in the fundamental duty of patriotism, of loving their country by serving the common good.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that the universal natural moral law provides a sound basis for all cultural, religious and political dialogue, and it ensures that the multi-faceted pluralism of cultural diversity does not detach itself from the common quest for truth, goodness and God" (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 59). Referring to the fundamental moral defect of our culture, that is, "a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human," Pope Benedict XVI declares: "God reveals man to himself; reason and faith work hand in hand to demonstrate to us what is good, provided we want to see it; the natural law, in which creative Reason shines forth, reveals our greatness, but also our wretchedness insofar as we fail to recognize the call to moral truth" (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 75).

The Scandal of Disobedience to the Magisterium

Recognizing the responsibility of Christians and of all men of good will to enunciate and uphold the natural moral law, we also recognize the scandal which is given when Christians fail to uphold the moral law in public life. When those who profess to be Christian, at the same time, favor and promote policies and laws which permit the destruction of innocent and defenseless human life, and which violate the integrity of marriage and the family, then citizens, in general, are confused and led into error about the basic tenets of the moral law. In our time, there is a great hesitation to speak about scandal, as if, in some way, it is only a phenomenon among persons of small or unenlightened mind, and, therefore, a tool of such persons to condemn others rashly and wrongly.

Certainly, there is such a thing as pharisaical scandal, that is, a malicious interpretation of the morally good or, at least, morally indifferent actions of another. The term comes from the supposed scandal which Our Lord Jesus caused to the Pharisees by, for instance, healing the man born blind on the Sabbath (cf. Jn 9:13-34).

But there is also true scandal, that is, the leading of others, by our words, actions and failures to act, into confusion and error, and, therefore, into sin. Our Lord was unequivocal in his condemnation of those who would confuse or lead others into sin by their actions and their failures to act. In teaching His disciples about temptations, He declared: "Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin (Lk 17:1-2).

It is clear that Our Lord taught as a primary responsibility, with the gravest of consequences, the avoidance of scandal, namely, of any act or failure to act which could lead another into sin. Our Lord's words are nothing less than vehement.

To ignore the fact that Catholics in public life, for example, who persistently violate the moral law regarding the inviolability of innocent human life or the integrity of the marital union, lead many into confusion or even error regarding the most fundamental teachings of the moral law, in fact, contributes to the confusion and error, redounding to the gravest harm to our brothers and sisters, and, therefore,

to the whole nation. The perennial discipline of the Church, for that reason among other reasons, has prohibited the giving of Holy Communion and the granting of a Church funeral to those who persist, after admonition, in the grave violation of the moral law (*Code of Canon Law*, cann. 915; and 1184, § 1, 31).

It is said that these disciplines which the Church has consistently observed down the centuries presume to pass a judgment on the eternal salvation of a soul, which judgment belongs to God alone, and, therefore, they should be abandoned. On the contrary, these disciplines are not a judgment on the eternal salvation of the soul in question. They are simply the acknowledgment of an objective truth, namely, that the public actions of the soul are in grave violation of the moral law, to his own grave harm and to the grave harm of all who are confused or led into error by his actions. The Church confides every soul to the mercy of God, which is great beyond all our imagining, but that does not excuse her from proclaiming the truth of the moral law, also by applying her age-old disciplines, for the sake of the salvation of all.

When a person has publicly espoused and cooperated in gravely sinful acts, leading many into confusion and error about fundamental questions of respect for human life and the integrity of marriage and the family, his repentance of such actions must also be public. The person in question bears a heavy responsibility for the grave scandal which he has caused. The responsibility is especially heavy for political leaders. The repair of such scandal begins with the public acknowledgment of his own error and the public declaration of his adherence to the moral law. The soul which recognizes the gravity of what he has done will, in fact, understand immediately the need to make public reparation.

If there has always been the danger of giving scandal to others by public and seriously sinful actions or failures to act, that danger is heightened in our own time. Because of the confusion about the moral law, which is found in public discourse, in general, and is even embodied in laws and judicial pronouncements, the Christian is held to an even higher standard of clarity in enunciating and upholding the moral law.

It is particularly insidious that our society which is so profoundly confused about the most basic goods also believes that scandal is a thing of the past. One sees the hand of the Father of Lies at work in the disregard for the situation of scandal or in the ridicule and even censure of those who experience scandal. Teaching about the relationship of human ecology to environmental ecology, Pope Benedict XVI underscores a contradiction in "the overall moral tenor of society," which leads us and especially our youth into serious confusion and error: "If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 51).

One of the ironies of the present situation is that the person who experiences scandal at the gravely sinful public actions of a fellow Catholic is accused of a lack of charity and of causing division within the unity of the Church. In a society whose thinking is governed by the "dictatorship of relativism" and in which political correctness and human respect are the ultimate criteria of what is to be done and what is to be avoided, the notion of leading someone into moral error makes little sense. What causes wonderment in such a society is the fact that someone fails to observe political correctness and, thereby, seems to be disruptive of the so-called peace of society.

Lying or failing to tell the truth, however, is never a sign of charity. A unity which is not founded on the truth of the moral law is not the unity of the Church. The Church's unity is founded on speaking the truth with love. The person who experiences scandal at public actions of Catholics, which are gravely contrary to the moral law, not only does not destroy unity but invites the Church to repair what is clearly a serious breach in Her life.

Were he not to experience scandal at the public support of attacks on human life and the family, his conscience would be uninformed or dulled about the most sacred realities.

The Common Good and the Promotion of the Culture of Life

Finally, in advancing the culture of life, we must be clear about the objective meaning of the common good. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council described the common good as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, "On the Church in the Modern World," 7 December 1965, no. 26).

The fulfillment of individuals and societies is not some subjective determination by those, for example, who are in power. It is the fulfillment which is written in the very nature of man, in nature itself. It is the fulfillment for which God has created us and our world, not the fulfillment which, at any given time, we may find attractive or useful. It is interesting to note that the English word, fulfillment, translates the Latin word, *perfectio*, that is, the perfection of the individual or group, according to man's proper nature and end.

In advancing the culture of life, we must be clear about the objective nature of the common good and of the perfection which it makes possible. Not everyone who uses the term, common good, understands its true meaning. A well-known European Catholic theologian, commenting on the Commencement Address of United States President Barack Obama at Notre Dame University on May 17th of 2009, declared: "In fact, the speech to the University of Notre Dame seems strewn with references taken from the Christian tradition. There is, for example, an expression which frequently returns, 'common ground,' which corresponds to a fundamental concept of the social teaching of the Church, that of the common good" (Georges Cottier, O.P., "La politica, la morale e il peccato originale," *30Giorni*, 2009, no. 5, p. 33).

The common good refers to an objective perfection which is not defined by common agreement among some of us. The common good is defined by creation itself as it has come from the hand of the Creator. Not only does the notion of common ground not correspond to the reality of the common good, it can well be antithetical to it, for instance, should there be common agreement in society to accept as good for society what is, in reality, always and everywhere evil.

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, the common good "is the good of 'all of us', made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society" (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 7). The common good corresponds "to the real needs of our neighbors"; it is an act of charity which each Christian is to exercise "in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*" (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 7). Pope Benedict XVI consoles and urges us onward in seeking the common good: God's love calls us to move beyond the limited and the ephemeral, it gives us the courage to continue seeking and working for the benefit of all, even if this cannot be achieved immediately and if what we are able to achieve, alongside political authorities and those working in the field of economics, is always less than we might wish. God gives us the strength to fight and to suffer for love of the common good, because he is our All, our greatest hope (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 78).

Conclusion

Let us, obedient to the Magisterium, engage with new enthusiasm and new energy in the struggle to advance the culture of life in our world. The struggle is fierce, and the contrary forces are many and clever. But the victory has already been won, and the Victor never fails to accompany us in the struggle, for he is faithful to His promise to us: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:20).

The obedience to the Magisterium is alone the way to participate in the victory of eternal life, and the service of the Bishops is irreplaceable in leading us all to an ever purer and stronger obedience. There is no other way to salvation than hearing God's Word and putting it into practice with all our being. We know that, if we speak the truth and live the truth, Who is Christ the Lord of heaven and earth, we will foster a culture of life in our world, a culture in which the common good is safeguarded and fostered for all, without boundary or exception.

The Letter to the Hebrews which teaches us, in a particular way, the "obedience of faith" reminds us that our Lord Himself "learned obedience from what He suffered" and thus became the source of eternal life, of eternal salvation, for us all. We ask for the obedience of Christ each time we pray to God the Father in the words which our Savior Himself taught to us: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, commenting on these words of the Lord's Prayer, assures us that we, inspired by prayer, Christ's prayer in us, can do what is impossible for us, on our own, but becomes possible for us in Christ, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit from His glorious pierced Heart: How much more reason have we sinful creatures to learn obedience – we who in Him have become children of adoption. We ask our Father to unite our will to His Son's, in order to fulfill His will, His plan of salvation for the life of the world. We are radically incapable of this, but united with Jesus and with the power of His Holy Spirit, we can surrender our will to Him and decide to choose what His Son has always chosen: to do what is pleasing to the Father (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2825).

Let us confide ourselves and our world to the prayers of the Mother of God. Through her ceaseless maternal care, she will not fail to bring us and our world to the truth, to her Divine Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. I conclude by making my own the prayer with which Pope Benedict XVI concluded his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate*:

"May the Virgin Mary proclaimed Mother of the Church by Paul VI and honored by Christians as the Mirror of Justice and the Queen of Peace protect us and obtain for us, through her heavenly intercession, the strength, hope and joy necessary to continue to dedicate ourselves with generosity to the task of bringing about the development of the whole man and of all men" (*Caritas in veritate*, no. 79)."

+ Raymond Leo Burke
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Prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura