

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE ARCHBISHOP AND AUXILIARY BISHOP OF BAMENDA ON THE SACREDNESS AND DIGNITY OF HUMAN LIFE

TO ALL THE FAITHFUL AND PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL

“God created man in the image of himself,
in the image of God he created him,
male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27)

Dear brothers and sisters,

1. “I thank my God whenever I think of you; and every time I pray for all of you, I pray with joy” (Phil. 1:3). This is particularly true now because of the difficult socio-political situation in which we have been living during the last few years. We thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has called all of us to be saints (cf. Rom. 1:7), for your faith and endurance. You are all present in our thoughts and prayers in a special way as we begin once more the holy Season of Lent. Lent is a time when we contemplate the Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the unique Saviour of the world. By his Passion, Death, and Resurrection, Jesus conquered sin and death, reconciled us with God and restored us to the dignity of the children of God. Lent is a time when we endeavour to open up to God and to our neighbour through prayer, fasting and almsgiving. That is why we invite you to meditate on the sacredness and dignity of human life during this Season of Lent.

The Biblical Foundation of the Sacredness and Dignity of Human Life

2. Human life is the most sacred gift with which God, the author of life, has endowed the human being. Right from creation humanity has been called to share in the divine life because “God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). This is the basis of the sacredness and the dignity of human life. Without this divine dimension the human person will be nothing but dust as the Ash Wednesday liturgy reminds us: “For dust you are and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). Aware of this the Psalmist exclaims: “what is man that you should spare a thought for him, the son of man that you should care for him?” (Ps. 8:4).

3. This sacredness and dignity of the human person has been made even more wonderful by Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, who became flesh and dwelt among us (cf. John 1:14). By the Incarnation, the Son of God “was for a short while made lower than the angels” (Hebrews 2:7) and “emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; ... and humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8). By his Resurrection he was raised high by God “so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11). By his Incarnation, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, identified himself with every human being and raised human dignity even to a higher level. He tells us that whatever we do to any human person is done to him (Mt. 25:40). Our human dignity is a gift of God’s tremendous love for which we should continuously thank him and of which we should jealously take care.

4. The first incidence of the profanation of human life recorded in the Bible is the brutal and senseless murder of Abel by his brother Cain (Gen. 4:1-16). This is because he cannot control his emotions of anger against God and envy of his brother (vv. 5-7). The blood of his innocent brother that he sheds will continue to cry out to God from the ground that had opened its mouth to receive it (v.10). Nevertheless God continues to protect the life of Cain, who is afraid that he might be killed in revenge, by putting a mark on him. He tells him that anyone who kills him will pay for it sevenfold: “if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be taken for him” (Gen. 4:15). Later on the Decalogue formally forbids the shedding of human blood: “You shall not kill” (Ex. 20:13).

destroy an innocent human being” (C.C.C. n. 2258). Its value is intrinsic, for it derives from God. “Of all visible creatures only man is ‘able to know and love his creator. He is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake’ and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity” (C.C.C. n. 356). The Catechism of the Catholic Church goes on to state that: “being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone” (C.C.C., n. 357).

9. Human life is sacred from conception until natural death. This teaching of the Church is based on the belief that our lives have their origin in God and return to God when we die. We believe that we live our lives under God’s providential love and care. At times this is difficult to understand, especially when tragedy and sorrow enter our lives. However, as Christians, we believe that our lives come from, and are cared for by someone greater than us - a loving God and Father, who has given us the dignity of his adopted children and wants all of us to discover him, live in the security of his love and return to Him. Every human life, regardless of his or her stage of development is sacred. As Pope Francis emphasizes, “equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable, infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery and every form of rejection” (G.E. n. 101).

10. The divine injunction “Thou shall not kill” equally prohibits all acts of the abuse and disrespect of human life and human dignity. Such acts include torture “which uses physical or moral violence to extract confessions, punish the guilty, frighten opponents, or satisfy hatred” (C.C.C., n. 2297). The abuse of human dignity sometimes leads to the loss of life. Taking delight in torturing the dying person, removing the wounded from hospital or abandoning the wounded to die unattended to are all sins against the Fifth Commandment. It is sad, shameful and totally unacceptable that even ambulances and private cars carrying patients, wounded persons and pregnant women have not enjoyed the freedom they need to bring such people speedily to hospital for treatment, as should be the case. This is to the disgrace of all those who apply rules disproportionately, or to those who, acting arbitrarily, have ignored international conventions regarding behaviour during war.

The Necessity and Urgency to Safeguard the Sacredness and Dignity of Human Life

11. The situation we are living now cannot leave us indifferent. All acts that rub human beings of their life and dignity should be vehemently condemned no matter who their perpetrators are. Human life and its God-given dignity should always be respected and protected, even during war and in situations such as the one in which we find ourselves. It is therefore urgent and imperative that we do something and immediately to prevent the situation from getting worse as it has happened in other countries. In order to achieve this, all are invited: individuals, families, groups, Christian communities, the civil society, the government and the International Community to work towards finding a lasting solution to stem the abuse of human life and dignity that is going on now in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. We want to reiterate that violence and the approach of “neutralising” the secessionists is not the right solution because violence only begets violence.

12. We, therefore once more earnestly appeal to the competent authorities that the military should desist from the wanton killing of innocent civilians and the burning down of houses which is the basic cause of the displacement of the populations. We plead that there may be no more delay in addressing effectively the real causes of the present crises. “No matter what difficulties we face in our country, a solution will never be found in violence, but rather in a dialogue between opposing groups”. This message that was sent to the Heads of State of all African countries 26 years ago by the Standing Committee of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) is still relevant to us today. We call on all the protagonists to put down their arms, stop this senseless fratricidal and suicidal war and have the courage to enter into dialogue with one another. There is no other way outside frank and meaningful dialogue. Might is not always right. True dialogue calls for humility. The process is not just about sitting around a table, but changing the way of

way that, in the words of our venerable predecessor, the late Archbishop Paul Verdzekov, of blessed memory, who was a real apostle of the fight against torture, “the consciences of Christians and of Christian Communities need to be awakened and sensitized so that we may all face the reality of torture and join in the struggle for its total elimination. Victims and torturers alike need liberation. For this struggle, one of the principal and efficacious arms which Christians must use is prayer, followed by acts of solidarity with the victims of torture and their families, legal action, denunciation, and pressure on the State Institution”.

18. Lent is the favourable time for conversion and reconciliation with God and our neighbour. This is the message which St. Paul addresses to us on Ash Wednesday to be ambassadors of reconciliation for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20-21; 6:2). It is a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Prayer opens us up to God; fasting liberates and strengthens us in the fight against sin and evil; and almsgiving opens us out to our neighbour. This Lent we must intensify our prayers, especially the Eucharistic celebration and Adoration. Let us pray more than ever before for the Lord’s intervention in this crisis. Christ alone is the one liberator who can free men and women from all forms of servitude that dishonour humanity. It is Christ who “brings good news to the poor, freedom to captives, opens the eyes of the blind, and liberates the oppressed...” (Lk. 4:18). Let us pray for the repose of the souls of those who have lost their lives in this crisis. Let us fast and make penance and reparation for the sins of the profanation and disrespect of human life and dignity. Through fasting and penance we are in solidarity with all those who are suffering, especially the innocent ones, who share in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Let us show compassion, generosity and love to all those who are suffering: the poor, the sick, the internally displaced and all those who are in need. Let us pray for forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.

19. All of us must work for peace. This is the first step towards avoiding war. If war has unfortunately broken out, all parties must avoid arrogance and empty pride and be ready to acknowledge their failures and readiness to engage in meaningful dialogue as a way towards finding a lasting solution. Anger, vengeance, resentment are clearly immediate steps towards killings (Mt. 6:21-26). St. Francis’ peace prayer is a tool that can touch our hearts and move us to seek ways of regaining peace, beginning with ourselves. Lord, Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace.

Gratitude to all who are promoting the Sacredness and Dignity of Human Life

20. We wish to render immense gratitude to each and every one in the Archdiocese of Bamenda and beyond who has been working hard since the beginning of this crisis to help the displaced person through their generous contributions and in various other ways. We acknowledge the heroic courage of our health institutions: doctors and nurses who continue to risk their lives to save human life. May the Lord, the chief physician, be their reward. We congratulate those members of the military, the forces of law and order, the separatists and all who have had the courage to acknowledge the fact that killing and torture are abominable crimes and have consequently refused to participate in carrying out such crimes. We remain grateful to all the people who have risked their lives and gone out of their way to save lives, help the injured and bury the dead, including strangers. By doing this they are living Jesus’ invitation that “whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers that you did for me” (Mt. 25:40). Pope Paul VI emphasized this role when he said “May people look to us not just for charitable handouts but for support in their legitimate struggle against all forms of injustice and oppression (The Development of Peoples). We remain grateful to those who have been praying night and day for God’s intervention, and those who have acted as instruments of peace and reconciliation. Christ said: “Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called sons of God!” (Mt. 5:9).

21. We call upon all the faithful and people of good will to pray together, reason together, decide together, and act together, so that the truth may prevail and the sacredness and the dignity of human life be respected. May each and every one of us become what Saint Pope John Paul II referred to as “promoters of a new way of looking at life” (E. V., n. 99). In the face of the present crisis let each and everyone repeat the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. “I have decided to stick to love; hate is too great a burden to bear.”