



Statement on the Sacredness of Human Life and its Untimely Termination

Passed by the full membership on June 19, 2022

Preamble

We, the members of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America, promote and uphold the sacred and inviolable essence of human life. The continued challenges of our time prompt us to publish a more comprehensive statement of the Orthodox Church's regard for human life and, in particular, the termination of human life. Prepared by our Committee for Church and Society, and affirmed by the Assembly as a whole, this statement seeks to succinctly articulate Orthodox Christian teaching for the faithful and to continue the Church's tradition as a beacon and witness to life as freely given by our good and loving Creator.

Sacredness of Life

The sacredness of life is shared with all creatures and creation fashioned and brought into existence by our mutual Creator. From single-celled organisms to plants, reptiles to birds, or mice to elephants, all are created and thus sacred. "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). As such, it is our responsibility as human beings to treat all life accordingly: with care, reverence, humility, and love.

Human Life is Sacred and Inviolable

The recognition of each human person as created in the image and likeness of God, destined for eternal life and therefore, sacred and inviolable, is a cornerstone of Christianity. Through the Church's canons, dogma, and moral code across the centuries, we have affirmed this understanding of human life from the womb to the tomb. These convictions are taught and witnessed by the Orthodox Church in all its manifestations around the world today. All human life is both sacred and inviolable, regardless of age, health, or any other status. Human life, including free will, is rightly understood as a gift from God, meant to be cherished and respected. We are all meant to "have life, and have it abundantly," as we know from our Good Shepherd (John 10:10-11). When human life is understood in this way, we are inclined to care deeply for one another and to cherish and protect each and every person.

Taking of Human Life

Any deliberate ending of human life is a rejection of its sacredness and inviolability and is unacceptable. This includes the death of the unborn by abortion, murder in peacetime or in war, suicide, and euthanasia. The Church mourns the premature end of a human life, and we seek to minister with compassion and mercy in these situations.

Murder

Murder is clearly condemned in scripture and the practice of the Church, as heard in the Old Testament: “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17), and Ezekiel 18:32 proclaims, “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.” The terrible misuse of our God-given free will to end the life of another is a rejection of the understanding of life as a gift.

Murder is never condoned by the Church, yet, in this broken world, violence, including killing, is unfortunately a daily reality. We regularly witness the tragedies of individual killing, mass killing, as well as war in our own contemporary society. Such killing contradicts the understanding of human life as sacred and inviolable, instead treating human life – or certain human lives – as meaningless, dispensable, and unworthy of care and respect. These actions spawn further disregard for human life through wounds and trauma – physical, spiritual, and mental.

In the case of war, further destruction is sown through the displacement of people. The lives of military personnel and civilians on all sides of armed conflict are shattered through their experience of this denigration of life. The Church’s role in war is to steadfastly witness its understanding of human life by encouraging peace, just as the priest prays in the anaphora “for civil authorities and our armed forces, grant that they may govern in peace, Lord, so that in their tranquility we, too, may live calm and serene lives, in all piety and virtue.”

There are times when a person kills in self-defense or in defense of others. Officers of the law as well as soldiers may be put into a position wherein they must choose to kill to defend the innocent. This killing is also a tragedy, even when motivated without malice or spite but by necessity.

The Church laments the loss of life from killing of any kind, for any reason. It mourns this loss alongside the bereaved and provides them with succor and hope. The Church also provides a path for spiritual healing and repentance for those who have taken life, believing that the grave damage done to a soul through killing can be healed by the Great Physician.

Suicide

The taking of one’s own life is a rejection of God’s gift of life. Suicide is an act of self-murder and is a tragic violation of human life. The Church can never condone suicide, but it does have compassion on those whose own struggles or illnesses are so extreme that they turn to suicide. Previously our Assembly (then SCOBA) wrote, “While human freedom was not annihilated in the fall, both spiritual factors, like acedia (spiritual torpor), and physical factors, like depression, can severely compromise a person’s ability to reason clearly and act freely” (Pastoral Letter on Suicide, 2007). We often offer, with prayerful discernment and at the case-by-case discretion of the bishop, a church burial and memorial services in cases of suicide, and we mourn with and minister to the bereaved when a loved one commits suicide.

Euthanasia

In recent years, the possibilities for ill persons to choose to end their own lives have increased with access to medications that hasten death and legislation that allows for physicians to assist in the death of their patients. The Church grieves the pain and suffering many people experience in this life, but it cannot and does not condone any form of euthanasia. As with other forms of suicide, the Church, out of its compassion for both the dead and the bereaved, may, with prayerful discernment and at the case-by-case discretion of the bishop, offer funeral and burial services in certain of these situations. Most importantly, we advocate for compassionate palliative care and continue to pray for a “good Christian ending to our lives” and a death that is “peaceful, without shame or pain,” as we pray in our services.

Capital Punishment

The laws of many places around the world allow for death as punishment for horrific crimes. In these cases, the Orthodox Church’s understanding of human life as sacred and inviolable diverges from the understanding of human life held by many nations or states.

When a mob looked to Jesus to justify capital punishment for an adulterous woman, He replied, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” then compassionately said to her, “From now on do not sin again” (John 8:2-11). Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans expounds on our Lord’s teachings: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all ... beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written [in Deuteronomy 32:35], ‘vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Romans 12:17-19). The Church, from the teachings of Jesus Christ and the early Church, knows that it is not the place of people, nations, or states to prematurely end a life for any reason.

Certain passages from the Old Testament are sometimes employed as justification for the death penalty – such as “whoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death” (Exodus 21:12) – but Christ Himself, who is the only Judge of the world (John 5:22), reorients humanity’s understanding of the Old Testament law. He forgives rather than condemns and loves rather than hates.

Abortion

Our salvation begins with a conception. The Mother of God’s miraculous conception of her son and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ marks the beginning of new life and hope in the world. As we sing in the Troparion that celebrates the Annunciation, “Today is the beginning of our salvation, the revelation of the eternal mystery!”

Our liturgical calendar includes other feasts of conception, including the Righteous Anna’s Conception of the Mother of God and the Conception of John the Baptist by his parents Elizabeth and Zachariah. The Church has integrated these celebrations into its life not only as an affirmation of these figures who played such important roles in salvation history, but also because these feasts teach us that human life is bestowed by God and that the origins of every

new human being are clearly inseparable from conception. Therefore, human life in its earliest manifestations in the womb is sacred and inviolable. Any act to terminate life in the womb – whether by abortive medications, medical procedures, or destructive behavior – denies this truth, is considered murder, and risks terrible spiritual consequences for those involved.

As with any instance of sin, mercy and healing – not retribution and punishment – are the way of the Lord. The Church is called to minister to those seeking abortions, those who have had or those who have been forced to have abortions, and those who have performed abortions, knowing that abortions are often sought because of poverty, abuse, coercion, neglect, despair, or the influence of a life-denying ethos that has become a societal norm. Church-sponsored and other programs that provide spiritual, physical, psychological, and financial support to expectant single mothers and couples in situations in which abortion is being considered, and to young families in need of extra care, should be vigorously supported by the Church and the faithful.

Current societal trends condone abortions for what some perceive as non-desirable human qualities, including physical or chromosomal abnormalities, or a less desirable sex. The Church appreciates, respects, and cares for all manner of human life and, therefore, never condones abortion in these cases. Every human life is worthy of our prayer and protection.

The Assembly of Bishops has previously acknowledged that there are “rare but serious medical instances where mother and child may require extraordinary actions” (Statement on Sanctity of Life, 2019); see also Assembly of Bishops Endorses Alternatives to Women in Crisis Pregnancies, 2021). This refers to tragic situations in which an abortive measure will preserve life. For example, if both mother and unborn child will almost certainly perish should the pregnancy continue but the mother will likely live if an abortion is administered, the Church grieves the tragedy of the situation and offers space for the discernment of the mother, the father, and the pastor as to the most life-giving course of action. Yet, these situations are unique and unusual and do not condone abortion as a norm in any way. Furthermore, the Church does not accept contemporary thinking that links free will with the right to abortion.

We continue to uncompromisingly reject any acceptance of abortion, while creating a merciful and compassionate path for all of those who have experienced abortion to journey back to the Church and to re-commit to human life as sacred and inviolable.

Miscarriage

In the vast majority of instances, the non-intentional and very common loss of early human life through miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death is different from the willful ending of life; it does not involve an act of free will but is instead a result of our imperfect world. This loss of very young life is to be grieved, and the family compassionately ministered to, by the Church. To this end, we will continue to provide new rituals and ways to address these circumstances, which include prayers of mourning, compassion, and healing.

Conclusion

A consequence of our God-given free will is that humans are capable of either rejecting or communing with God. The Orthodox Church grieves the rejection of God in the deliberate taking of human life and celebrates the possibilities of drawing closer to God that come with the understanding of human life as sacred and inviolable. We are intended to experience abundant life through communion with our Creator. We, the Assembly of Bishops, hope that the understanding of human life as a good and true gift will radiate through the Church and the world, and continue to pray, alongside the faithful, “for the peace of the whole world, for the stability of the holy churches of God, and for the unity of all.”