



Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem ©
* Knights of Malta *

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Chancellor's Update

Concluding Observations on the Fifth Commandment

In the previous two issues we studied the pastoral advice of the Council Fathers at Trent regarding the Fifth Commandment. We looked at the prohibitions, the exceptions to the prohibitions, and the positive admonitions to God's command: *Thou shalt not kill*.

Abortion

However, their presentation does not cover an abomination, which due to science and technology has grown in intensity during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We refer, of course, to the sin of abortion.

In a booklet entitled "The Commandments of God", published in 1940, Redemptorist Father Thomas Roche wrote, "Abortion is the premature delivery of the immature foetus, always accompanied by the death of the child. Abortion is a polite term for child murder. Either the child is brought forth at a time before the seventh month, or the living foetus is directly and intentionally destroyed by various methods and the dead infant is removed from the mother. In either case the life of the child is certainly and purposely destroyed. This is criminal abortion.

"Direct abortion is never lawful. Direct abortion means the destruction of the unborn child...From the first moment of its existence the unborn child is endowed with a human soul, and is therefore a human being with as much right to life as any other human creature. Since the child has been guilty of no personal crime, no one has the right to deprive it of life...Abortion, therefore, the direct killing of a human being, is essentially wrong; it is willful, deliberate murder...

"All persons who willfully cooperate in such an abortion are guilty of mortal sin and are excommunicated."

Politics, Abortion and Politicians

After abortion became legal in many countries, it became the crown jewel of the women's rights movement. Discussion of the topic gradually softened, so that the horror and avoidance of abortion lessened and people, especially young people, grew to accept it or lost sight of the previous prohibition. The actions of supposedly Christian politicians caused confusion in the minds of the voting public.

Recently some lay Catholics and a few Bishops, frustrated by the situation, demanded to know if the Church actually applauded pro-abortion politicians or, if not, would decree that such politicians should refrain from receiving Holy Communion.

In a letter written earlier this year to the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that received little attention from the press Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger addressed the issue. Excerpts follow as they appeared in the August 2004 issue of "Inside the Vatican".

"The Church teaches that abortion or euthanasia is a grave sin...Christians have a 'grave obligation of conscience not to cooperate formally in practices which, even if permitted by civil legislation, are contrary to God's law. Indeed, from the moral standpoint, it is never licit to cooperate formally in evil...This cooperation can never be justified either by invoking respect for the freedom of others or by appealing to the fact that civil law permits it or requires it'.

"Not all moral issues have the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia. For example, if a Catholic were to be at odds with the Holy Father on the application of capital punishment or on the decision to wage war, he would not for that reason be considered unworthy to present himself to receive Holy Communion. While the Church exhorts civil authorities to seek peace, not war, and to exercise discretion and mercy in imposing punishment on criminals, it may still be permissible to take up arms to repel an aggressor or to have recourse to capital punishment. There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion and euthanasia...

"Regarding the grave sin of abortion or euthanasia, when a person's formal cooperation becomes manifest (understood, in the case of a Catholic politician, as his consistently campaigning and voting for permissive abortion and euthanasia laws), his Pastor should meet with him, instructing him about the Church's teaching, informing him that he is not to present himself for Holy Communion until he brings to an end the objective situation of sin, and warning him that he will otherwise be denied the Eucharist."

The Cardinal continued that when the instructions and conversations have not had the desired effect and the person obstinately persists in presenting himself to receive Holy Communion, "the minister must refuse to distribute it...not as a sanction or penalty...not as passing judgment, but rather reacting to the person's public unworthiness to receive Holy Communion due to an objective situation of sin."

The Cardinal also noted that a Catholic voter who votes for a pro-abortion candidate solely because he or she agrees with the pro-abortion position would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil and should not present himself for Holy Communion. On the other hand when a Catholic voter does not promote abortion, but supports a pro-abortion candidate for other reasons, this remote material cooperation would allow him or her to receive Holy Communion.

Hopefully, all these observations will help to clear up some of the confusion over this most important Commandment of God that has arisen in recent years.

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Jerusalem 1048-1291, Cyprus 1291-1310, Rhodes 1311-1523, Malta 1530-1798, Russia 1798-1907, U.S.A. 1908-