Social Justice

Lesson 3: The Dignity of Life

Pray

1. Review (5-10 min)

-How would you describe Social Justice? What are some examples of social justice at work in the world today? What are the two great commandments that Jesus gives us? What are the 7 themes of Catholic Social Teaching? (Life and Dignity of the Human Person, Call to Family, Community, and Participation, Rights and Responsibilities, Option for the Poor and Vulnerable, The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers, Solidarity, & Care for God's Creation) What organization is the largest charity in the world? What are the 10 Commandments? What are the first three Commandments about? The last seven? Why are the first three the most important? What are the Beatitudes?

2. The Sanctity of the Human Person (10-15 min)

-We may have asked ourselves, “What is the meaning of life” or “why are we here” many times. Questions such as these do not have an answer unless we have faith. As Christians we believe that God created everything including us.

-We believe that God created us and created us for a purpose. The purpose of every humanlife is to **know, love and serve God in this world in order to be happy with Him in the next life. Our meaning, our purpose is drawn from our being brought into existence. We are loved into existence.**

**-Read Genesis 1:24-28: God creates animals this day and the crowning event of the creation of animals is us. Human beings are the culminating act of creation. Before our creation the world was meaningless. The world finds its meaning in the human person because God gives the earth to mankind to be its stewards. We are fashioned in the image and likeness of God. We are supposed to be mirrors then of the Divine presence. Each of us carries within us a glimmer of God and a spark of the Divine.**

**-Our divine patronage makes human life invaluable. Read Genesis 2:4*b*-8: God breathes the breath of life into the man. God gives mankind a soul which enables us to love, have free will and be self-aware. God is the giver of life.**

**-God alone is the Lord of life and death. We, as created beings, can share in the Divine plan by becoming fathers and mothers but only through the Almighty God.**

**-Because life is a gift solely through the love of God, only He has the authority to take life away. As created beings it is our duty to safeguard the lives of God’s most precious creature-us.**

**-To help us understand how important human life is God gives us the Commandments.**

**-Commandment 4 “Honor thy father and mother” is a way in which God is reminding us of our creation. We are brought into existence through an act of love between father, mother and Almighty God.**

**-By reminding us of our origins, both human (father and mother) and divine (created in God’s image), we can better understand our worth as beings loved into existence. In recognizing our origins we can also then see other human beings as created out of God’s love and also having inherent dignity.**

**-Commandment 5 “Thou shall not kill” reminds us that we are not to extinguish the gift of life given by God to another human being.**

**3. Threats to the Dignity of the Human Person (1 hour)**

**-As sinful human beings we have not always lived in accord with God’s will or the divinely inspired order of things. Throughout history we have murdered and fought wars which directly contradict the divine law to safeguard the human person. We cannot spend time on all the past issues that have violated God’s law so we will focus on the major topics in our day and society which go contrary to God’s law.**

**A. Abortion**

**-Abortion is the deliberate ending of a pregnancy by the mother. There are two kinds of abortion. One is the cutting up of the baby in his/her mother’s womb and being removed afterward. The other kind is a chemical abortion which many contraceptive pills and the “morning after pill” effect.**

-The question at hand here is when does life begin? When is a person truly a person?

-The Church believes that life begins at conception-that is when an egg is fertilized. In short, when sperm hits egg life has begun.

-Once fertilization occurs there is no additional DNA that is added. In a real sense all the material necessary for a human being is contained within that egg. Thus, the egg is truly a person.

-Some claim that in the early stages of pregnancy that the baby is just “cells” or simply “tissue” and not a human being.

-Are you just a bunch of cells? Are you just tissue? Every human being is made of cells and tissues, does that mean we can put you to death?

-Maybe the question should be put like this, when does God give you a soul? Does a soul come at conception when a new life is first begun or does it come when we’re born?

-God’s Word gives us a pretty good answer to this: “You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb. I praise you, because I am wonderfully made; wonderful are your works! My very self you know.”

-Here we come to the conclusion that God has indeed created us and given us a soul from the very moment of our conception within the wombs of our mothers.

-If we examine all of the evidence, it seems pretty clear that a human being, body and soul, is present from the very moment of conception onward.

**-For Discussion**

-How different would the conversation sound if every time we used the “abortion” we instead used “aborting a child(ren)”?

**-Example:**

#1 So you say you are pro-life. You don't agree with abortion?

#2 No, I think that **aborting children** is always wrong. [notice the change in terminology]

#1 What about the case of rape and incest - are you saying you are against abortion even in those cases?

#2 I'm against **aborting children** in every case, even if the child was conceived through rape or incest.

#1 Well, I think it's the woman's right to choose.   
#2 So you think that a woman should be allowed to choose to **abort a child**? What gives her a special right to decide to end a child's life?

-Are there any situations in which you think an abortion is ok? *(Pause for answers or discussion-the most likely answers are rebutted below use if necessary).*

-Rape-this is obviously a great evil done to a woman. Does that mean we should compound the problem by committing another evil? The man who does the evil deed of rape should be punished for his crime but does that mean the baby deserves a death sentence? Has the baby committed any evil, done anything to merit the taking of his/her life?

-Unready mother-some argue that a woman should be allowed to have an abortion if her life will be freed and she will be able to live the life that she intended. For instance, a 15 year old girl may not be ready to have a child and this would throw her life off track. What cost is there to helping this young girl stay on track? Is it worth it to kill a human being so that another can live as they wish? Can I kill the guy in front of me for a promotion because that will help me live the life I want?

-Birth defects-birth defects such as Down Syndrome can be diagnosed before birth. Some argue that those with birth defects should be aborted because they would make the life of the parents harder or it would be better for the child to not be born. Should we be able to kill those that make our life more difficult? Have you ever seen a child with special needs? Do you think that his/her life and the people around him/her would be better if we had simply not allowed him/her to be born?

-Should abortion be legal in the United States? *(Guide this discussion carefully)*

-If life begins at conception, each baby in the womb is a person and should be granted protection by the law.

B. Euthanasia

-Euthanasia is sometimes referred to as “mercy killing.” It can also be called “assisted suicide.” It involves the deliberate ending of one’s own life through unnatural means.

-As we discussed earlier, God is the giver and taker of life. We as human beings are not to interfere with God’s dominion over life.

-We also run into very practical considerations when dealing with a nuanced issue like euthanasia.

-What happens in the case of misdiagnosis?

-There are “miracles” that doctors cannot explain almost every day, euthanasia eliminates any opportunity for recovery

-There is no clear cut definition of “terminally ill.” This phrase may refer to someone who is gravely ill but is not in immediate danger of death and is in no pain.

-Legislation that opens up the “mercy killing” as a treatment will be used by the government to trim health care costs. In fact, “mercy killing” is paid for under “comfort care” in the state of Oregon.

-At the crux of the argument is the dignity of life. Our lives mean something. They have value and worth even amid suffering. In fact, it was through the suffering of one man that we all have had our sins forgiven and have an opportunity to enter heaven.

-When we suffer with faith and unite that suffering to Jesus’ sufferings on the cross we can help bring about our own salvation as well as the salvation of others.

-Think about how many people have come back to Christ while on their deathbed. Now think of all of those deathbed conversions lost to a needle in someone’s arm.

-Euthanasia allows us to have our last act in this life be an act of violence, the taking of a life. Even if that violence is against ourselves and that life is our own it remains a sinful act. We cannot end God’s gift of life here and hope to get eternal life if we reject the life He has given us here.

C. The Death Penalty

-The death penalty is another aspect of our society that we need to examine. The current model says that for acts of grave violence we should kill that person so that they pay for their crimes and cannot hurt anyone ever again.

-Let’s examine this issue from the point of view of God. We all have turned our backs on God through sin. Each one of us has rejected Him time and again. Yet, we ask God to spare us, grant us mercy and allow us to enter heaven.

-in the “Our Father” we ask God to forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us. How can we ask for so much forgiveness and not be able to forgive ourselves? If God forgives us in the same measure we forgive others, shouldn’t that be incentive for us to have mercy on those who wrong us?

-The death penalty is state approved murder. It is the taking of a life. Again, we are not the arbiters of life and death.

-Even the most hardened criminal whose crimes are unspeakable cannot be executed by the state. This creates another act of violence in addition to the crimes committed by the individual. Is this justice? This isn’t justice, it is vengeance. We cannot be a people who seek to avenge the wrongs committed against us.

-There is sometimes the argument used that a criminal can escape and cause more destruction. This is relatively untrue. People don’t escape from maximum or “super max” prisons. It simply doesn’t happen. Prison escapes occur at a rate of about .2% or roughly 2 out of 1000 prisoners. This takes into consideration all prisoners in the United States including those who are in minimum security prisons.

-There is also the claim that the death penalty saves the tax payers money by eliminating people to feed and clothe each year. This is untrue as well because the court and appeals process necessary to put someone to death make it much more expensive to put someone to death rather than incarcerate them for life.

-Lastly is this thought, what if we get the wrong guy. Is it better to allow one guilty man to live than to execute one innocent man. In the United States we have executed innocent people who were later exonerated by definitive evidence. In the last 40 years we have had around 200 cases where a person was sent to death row but later exonerated. For some of these men and women it was too late and we had already had them put to death.

D. War

-War is another violation of human rights and undermines the dignity of the human person.

-War is an extreme measure that should only be used as a last resort.

-Throughout the course of war many innocent lives are lost as casualities and people’s lives are ruined. In addition to the casualties of soldiers there are also men, women and children who die even though they may not be the intended target. Furthermore, communities are damaged through loss of life and through other means while a war is on.

-The Catholic Church does not condemn war in all cases; however, it is a last resort and must meet some criteria for being considered justified. We call this the “just war theory.” This is not an official teaching of the Church, it is not doctrine, but rather a guideline for determining whether or not violence can even be considered.

1. The war must be defensive-this is pretty self-explanatory but the war must be a response to evils committed. For example, we can consider World War II as a response to the aggressive attacks throughout Europe by Germany or the attack on Pearl Harbor.

2. There must be a continued and long list of grievances that are sure to continue-war is not to be a snap decision based upon one act. The actions against a people must be accumulating and the prospect of ending them through any other means must be impossible. For example, during World War II the list of grievances of the French or British can be seen as reasons for going to war.

3. The defender must not cause more damage than would have been inflicted by the aggressor. In defending themselves a people cannot inflict more damage than would have been caused by the attacker. In war there are always other casualties. If a nation seeks to defend its non-combatants (non-soldiers) and ends up killing more non-combatants on either side this is not just and cannot be sanctioned. For example, during World War II the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. It can be argued that this was brought about more destruction and death than an attack on mainland Japan. The morality of this action can be debated.

4. There must be a chance for success. There must be a chance to end the aggressor’s evils. This means that we cannot engage in a war if there is no or little prospect of success. To do this would be to send people to die with no hope of victory. This is tantamount to sending them to die for nothing. It would be better to surrender than to fight without hope of success. For example, during the Persian Gulf War in the 1990’s Saddam Hussein fought a war with the United Nations. This army was comprised of many nations and there was no prospect of Iraq winning this war. Yet, Saddam sent his troops against the UN and many lives were lost with no hope of victory.

4. Summary

-The dignity of the human person is crucial for understanding and living the Catholic faith.

-We are not to seize the power of death from God but rather to face death with faith, hope and love.

-We are to be a people that exercise mercy and forgive those who harm us.

-Violence brings about more violence. The circle of violence is interrupted through forgiveness.

-When we are living as citizens and deciding who to vote for we should first find out whether or not a candidate understands what it means to be human by being against abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty. This is part of our duty as American Catholics: to elect candidates who bring about the common good by fully embracing the dignity of the human person.

Prayer

Give us, O Lord, we pray, hearts that are filled with love and concern for our brothers and sisters. Let us not be quick to judge, easy to anger and slow to forgive but rather allow the love of Christ to form within us hearts of true charity. Grant us your mercy so that we may share the abundance of that mercy with others. May those who do not yet know You experience Your mercy through the mercy we grant to others. We especially pray for the victims of violence: for aborted babies, those in war torn areas, and those who are victims of state operated murder; may they experience the joy of your kingdom where you live forever and ever. Amen.