

## **Statement on Human Dignity, Conscience, and Healthcare To the Catholics and People of East Texas**

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1. As we prepare for Christmas and await the second coming of Christ, let us joyfully exclaim with the Prophet Isaiah: “Would that you might meet us doing right” (Is 64:4).

2. The Church in East Texas proclaims and witnesses to the sacred dignity of each human person based on the person of Jesus Christ. The Son of God became a man, was crucified, and rose on the third day to manifest God’s love for us and to dwell with us. Jesus reveals to us the true dignity of every human person, body and soul, created in the image of God and called to share his life forever. The Gospel and the Christian life, therefore, are not based on theory or ideology, but on the truth about the human person revealed in Christ. To be a Christian is to live with Jesus in the joys and sufferings of this life and to allow him to enlighten the often difficult decisions we face. In this way Christians bear that witness to Christ and to the dignity of the human person that our world so urgently needs. As a successor to the Apostles, I have been entrusted by Christ and the Church with the task of overseeing the fidelity of that witness by ensuring that the Gospel shapes the consciences of Catholics and the practices of Catholic institutions within the Diocese of Tyler. I am at present particularly concerned that our witness remain strong in the area of health care.

3. In East Texas, we are confronting two serious threats to our authentic witness to the Gospel and human dignity regarding health care. The first is the practice of direct sterilization in some national Catholic hospital systems; this was initially reported last summer and confirmed as a local problem through my subsequent discussions with Trinity Mother Frances in Tyler and CHRISTUS St. Michael in Texarkana. The second is a continuing attempt through legislation like the so-called "Freedom of Choice Act" (FOCA) to deny the freedom of conscience of health care workers and institutions to refrain from participating in medical procedures contrary to human dignity. As a bishop, it is my duty to remind Catholics of our evangelical obligation to defend human dignity, which obligation cannot be altered by appeals to erroneous theological opinions or unjust legislation. I call upon every Catholic to act in defense of human dignity with a conscience formed in accord with the Gospel and request that they contact their legislators to support freedom of conscience for those providing health care. I also ask the civil community to join us in defending human dignity and the right of conscience in this matter.

### Reasons for prohibiting abortion, sterilization, and euthanasia

4. All human beings, especially those involved in health care, are bound to honor and protect the human body. The purpose of health care is to heal and, above all, to do no harm. It is the duty of all to show compassion and care, but never to kill or injure a patient. Direct abortion and euthanasia are not examples of compassion or medical care because they kill a human being. Direct sterilization is not an example of compassion or medical care because it destroys—it does not heal—the body’s reproductive capacity. No one may do evil so that good may come of it.

5. Medical procedures that treat an existing pathology (for example, cancer of part of the reproductive system) may be administered in a Catholic hospital, even if they result in sterilization. These procedures are not viewed as sterilizations either by the Catholic Church or the medical community. They are simply procedures for existing pathologies that result in sterilization. Tubal ligation and other forms of direct sterilization, on the other hand, treat no illness and serve only to destroy the reproductive capacity of a patient. They are elective procedures, not medically indicated or necessary for healing the patient. No one, especially a Catholic or a Catholic hospital, can be rightly compelled in the name of medicine to provide such procedures.

6. The prohibitions against abortion, sterilization, and euthanasia are based on reasons rooted in the dignity of the human person and the nature of medicine. These truths of reason are also affirmed in the teachings of the Catholic Church (for abortion and euthanasia, see Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, 1995; for sterilization, see statements from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Quaecumque sterilization*, 1975 and *Responses to questions proposed concerning "uterine isolation"*, 1993). These prohibitions, therefore, are not expressions of my personal opinion as bishop of Tyler; they are based on reason and on the Gospel as infallibly and universally taught by the Catholic Church. For Catholics, then, together with human reason the "absolute prohibition that such procedures be carried out... is simply an act of fidelity to the law of God" that we cannot contravene or counsel others to contravene and hope to remain faithful witnesses to the Gospel (see Pope John Paul II's *Ad Limina* address to the bishops of Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, 1998). The *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (ERD), established by the bishops of the United States, apply these teachings and have been accepted by all Catholic health care systems, including Trinity Mother Frances and CHRISTUS St. Michael. In the present context, I call attention to the fact that direct sterilizations, which include tubal ligations, are prohibited under all circumstances by ERD 53.

Acting in defense of human dignity and conscience in health care

7. As Catholics, we affirm that human dignity and the Gospel never permit direct abortion, direct sterilization, or euthanasia. Catholics and Catholic institutions who engage in such practices commit a grave violation of the Gospel and the human person. If done with personal knowledge and full consent of the will, those involved commit a deadly sin. Teachers of the Catholic faith and Catholic moralists may never condone such actions. Catholic doctors, nurses, and other medical assistants may not participate in such procedures, not even at private or non-Catholic institutions. Catholic institutions may not provide such procedures or tolerate their provision at any facility under their direct control, partial ownership, or administration.

8. Catholics who have counseled or participated in procedures contrary to the dignity of the human person should turn back to Christ and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Catholic institutions that have been involved in such procedures should cease and issue public statements acknowledging the full extent of their failure and pledging to establish means by which they will ensure violations never happen again.

9. I appeal to the conscience of all men and women and particularly to those who follow the Gospel of Christ, that is, the Gospel of Life, to witness against a culture of death. Abortion, euthanasia, and sterilization are grave offenses against human dignity. All Catholics, in particular clergy, teachers of the faith, and those working at Catholic health care institutions, should be attentive to prevent these abuses and to bear witness to the true doctrine of Christ and the Gospel of Life.

10. How is it that in the United States, with its rich history of religious freedom and of religious service to the community, consideration could be given to enacting civil or criminal laws that would rule against the obligations of our Christian life, our consciences, and our faith-based provision of health care? Certainly, the civil community cannot expect that Catholics would violate the Gospel and human dignity because the law mandated such a violation. Faced with unjust legislation of this sort, we would vigorously seek to protect the human dignity of the patient and the right of conscience for health care workers and institutions. We would, in that situation, answer with the Apostles: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

11. As Bishop of the Diocese of Tyler, I am grateful to CHRISTUS St. Michael's in Texarkana for their timely action in stopping direct sterilization, and am hopeful that Trinity Mother Frances in Tyler will soon follow suit. I issue this statement December 1, 2008, the beginning of Advent, as a follow up to my public statements of July and November 2008.