

## A Christmas Pastoral Letter

### A Child is Born to Us

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Christmas is a celebration of life: “A child is born to us, a son given to us.” The angels who heralded Christ’s birth invite us also to go to the manger and rejoice at the coming of a new life into the world. Of course this was a special birth, for Mary’s child was the Son of God. But every child is, in a very real sense, a son of God. Made in the image of his Lord, he was a God-like quality. The being that comes to life through the loving union of man and woman has an indestructible hold on existence and is destined to live for ever. This is his title to reverence, his claim to respect. In approaching even the most humble of God’s children we are bid, like Moses, to take off our sandals for we are on holy ground.

We live in a violent age in which this precious gift of life is all too frequently profaned. Our newspapers and television screens have made us distressingly familiar with the destruction of human life as a means towards solving human problems. We react instinctively to the cheapening of life as evidenced in an increasing number of senseless murders, of killings for the sake of a paltry gain. We deplore the folly that makes man resort to war and violence to right their real or imagined wrongs. We are troubled when we hear of scientists seeking to produce human life in a test tube or interfering with man’s genetic code. The proper awe we should have at the mystery of life sets limits, we feel, to the lengths scientists may go in their experiments and demands greater discretion than some seem prepared to display.

There are other issues directly concerned with human life whose moral implications leave people sharply divided. Recent years have witnessed in Hong Kong as elsewhere a growing demand that abortion be made more easily available; and in many countries more and more voices are being raised in favour of euthanasia.

In Hong Kong the law dealing with abortion was amended in March 1972 and is due for review soon, after two years of operation. Many concerned people will want to know how the law is being interpreted in practice and whether the new legislation has led, as some feared it would, to a situation where abortion is available virtually on demand. There are other people who feel that the present law is not liberal enough and they will press for a wider acceptance of abortion. It was depressing to read a recent press report of a plea from an influential source for the adoption of abortion as a frankly contraceptive measure. Surely there is already too much violence in our society, too little reverence for human life. The granting of legal protection to the destruction of human life because it has become an inconvenience should not commend itself to any humane person. A good criterion of the measure of civilization attained by any society is the protection it affords the weak and defenseless. The unborn child in the womb is of all God’s creatures the most in need of protection.

One can sympathise with legislators in pluralistic societies who have the difficult task

of enacting laws in disputed areas of morality. In the desire for effective solutions to pressing problems certain values, not always easy to articulate, but no less important for all that, may tend to be neglected. Catholic citizens have the right and the duty to speak out in defence of values they see threatened and they have the right to a respectful hearing of their arguments. They have the duty to remind their fellow citizens that it is not sufficient just to ask how some social objective can be achieved without also asking whether it is good for man, and in society's long term interests, that it should be achieved at all or achieved in this particular way.

Our concern for the sanctity of human life must also show itself in active concern for the quality of men's lives. We in Hong Kong are constantly being reminded of the problems resulting from overcrowding. These are felt especially in the areas of nutrition, housing, education, employment and the opportunities for individual fulfilment. The United Nations Organisation has declared 1974 Population Year to alert mankind to the challenges facing the world through a rapidly increasing population. Opinions may differ over how many people the earth can support.

No doubt this problem raises many questions and causes deep anxieties.

If the Church is to make her own "the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men of this age," she cannot remain indifferent to a problem which is causing worldwide alarm.

As a community we can make a practical contribution to the objects of Population Year by giving greater support to the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council. By providing educational, counselling and medical services, the Council aims at assisting couples to achieve the goal of responsible parenthood. Pope Paul, summarizing the teaching of Vatican II, reminds us that "it is for parents to decide, with full knowledge of the matter, on the number of their children, taking into account their responsibilities towards God, themselves, the children they have already brought into the world and the community to which they belong" (*Populorum Progressio*, n. 37). It is to enable parents to achieve this goal while remaining loyal to the demands of their conscience that the CMAC works to make known and properly appreciated methods of family regulation.

Peace, the sanctity of human life, the quality of men's lives: these are inextricably bound up with one another. Without peace the whole human family could be wiped off the earth, so potentially destructive are the modern weapons of war. Without attention to the quality of men's lives, the rising expectations of a rapidly increasing population will pose an ever present threat to peace. Without respect for the sanctity of life, men will continue to resort to the destruction of human lives to gain their ends.

Respect for the sanctity of human life is ultimately a question of attitudes and attitudes in society can only be influenced by the formation of strong currents of public opinion. This is something which depends on all of us, for public opinion is in fact made up of the convictions of the individual.

Pope Paul, in his message for World Peace Day 1974, "Peace depends on you too,"

stresses this point when he pleads with us never to despair of bringing lasting peace to our distracted world. We must all, each and every one of us, contribute to the forming of public opinion in favour of peace, so that the rising generation will grow up with the firm idea that war is utterly abhorrent to civilised man and violence a totally unacceptable means of settling our differences. If we can plant this conviction in their minds there is yet hope for the future of the human race.

May the Prince of Peace, who came into this world “to gather together into unity the scattered children of God,” bring you, your families and dear ones, His gifts of peace, love and happiness this Christmastide and all through the coming year.

+ Peter Lei  
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