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POPE'S WORDS

On the ethics of life: Leo XIV contradicts Benedict XVI

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An Italian magazine, *Il Regno*, has unearthed a speech from 2023 in which the then Cardinal Prevost conflated abortion, the death penalty and migration. He reiterated the same ideas as pope in an interview recently. While it is right to uphold 'a consistent ethics of life', abortion and euthanasia are always murder, whereas in other cases, each situation must be considered on its own merits. As Ratzinger recalled.

It could not have been an oversight after all. That vague and problematic answer that Pope Leo XIV gave on 30 September to a journalist from the US broadcaster EWTN, when asked about Cardinal Blase Cupich's decision to honour the pro-abortion Democratic senator Dick Durbin for his work with immigrants, cannot be explained by simple improvisation.

The fortnightly Dehonian magazine *Il Regno*, in fact, made available the Italian translation of Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost's speech, delivered at the Catholic University Santo Toribio de Mogrovejo in Chiclayo ([watch the video](#)), on the occasion of the conferral of an honorary doctorate, available to its subscribers. It was 14 October 2023 and Prevost had not yet been at the head of the Dicastery for Bishops for a year.

The problematic statement, which Stefano Fontana has already analysed, was: 'Someone who says, I am against abortion but is in favour of the death penalty is not really pro-life... Someone who says, I am against abortion but I am in agreement with the inhumane treatment of immigrants in the United States — I don't know if that's pro-life'. The same thought appears again in his 2023 speech, with almost identical wording: 'A Catholic cannot declare himself "pro-life" just because he is anti-abortion, while also supporting the death penalty'. Fontana added, "Those who defend the right to life of the most vulnerable must also support the quality of life of the weakest among us: the elderly, children, the hungry, the homeless, and undocumented migrants."

But there is something more. In 2023, Prevost embraced the 'coherent ethic of life' expressed by Cardinals Joseph Louis Bernardin (died 1996) and Blase Cupich, both of whom were archbishops of Chicago: the former from 1982 to 1996 and the latter from 2014 until the present day. An ethic that Prevost summarised as follows: 'Abortion, war, poverty, euthanasia and capital punishment share a common identity: they are all based on the denial of the right to life'. To these threats against human life, he added 'other issues, such as the effects of artificial intelligence, human trafficking and the rights of

migrants'.

In his speech, Prevost criticised the imbalance in the Catholic pro-life movement in the United States, which focuses primarily on fighting abortion and euthanasia at the expense of other important issues such as the death penalty and anti-immigrant policies. While it is true that Prevost pointed out that Cardinal Bernardin did not assert a moral equivalence between these issues, demanding unequivocal opposition to both the death penalty and abortion does precisely that.

So what truth lies in these statements by Leo XIV? Certainly, the various issues mentioned call into question the problem of human dignity and the right to life. One cannot be consistently 'pro-life' if one opposes the killing of nascent human life but supports the deliberate and direct killing of an innocent adult, for example in a context of war. Similarly, one cannot be authentically 'pro-life' if one condemns euthanasia but supports the killing of migrants simply because they are migrants. The underlying principle, which admits no exceptions, is that an innocent human being can never be killed directly and intentionally. Therefore, a 'coherent ethics of life' demands that this principle be applied in all spheres and not only to nascent or dying life. This is because human beings have a special dignity that distinguishes them from other creatures in that they are created in the image and likeness of God.

However, it is equally evident that, in this discourse and in the extemporaneous interview of 30 September, Prevost does not clarify this point.

On the contrary, he confuses matters when he believes that abortion and the death penalty must always be rejected regardless. This is not true because the death penalty is imposed on a guilty person, whereas abortion is always aimed at ending the life of an innocent child. The former can therefore be lawful under precise conditions; the latter can never be lawful. The same applies to war: we cannot consider the killing of an aggressor soldier and the direct and deliberate killing of an unarmed civilian, or the latter and the indirect and involuntary killing of an innocent, to be on the same level in a context of war.

In the famous 2004 Memorandum addressed to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, dealt with this: 'Not all moral issues carry the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia. For example, if a Catholic disagreed with the Holy Father on the application of capital punishment or the decision to wage war, they would not be considered unworthy to receive Holy Communion for that reason alone. While the Church exhorts civil authorities to pursue peace, not war, and to exercise discretion and

mercy when punishing criminals, it may nonetheless be permissible to take up arms to repel an aggressor or to resort to capital punishment.' There can be a legitimate diversity of opinion among Catholics regarding waging war and the application of the death penalty, but not regarding abortion and euthanasia".

This 'legitimate diversity of opinion' is not applicable to voluntary abortion or euthanasia because homicide is always involved. On the other hand, in the cases of war or the death penalty, the aforementioned distinctions must be made. With all due respect, Pope Leo's position is hence misleading and, in spite of itself, detrimental to the human life he wishes to defend. For example, if a terrorist threatens to blow up a building containing dozens of people, it is lawful to kill them under certain conditions in order to defend innocent lives. If I were to apply the principle that consistent ethics must lead me to maintain that one can never kill, the outcome would be that many innocent people would perish because of criminals and the failure of the competent authorities to defend them.

Another conclusive aspect that cannot be overlooked in evaluating Leo XIV's 'pro-Cupich' position is the following. If one wants to uphold a 'consistent ethic of life', what sense does it make to reward a senator who has distinguished himself throughout his political career for his public support of abortion? If those who fight against abortion must also oppose any other form of killing innocent people, is not the reverse also true? The Holy Father should have remembered this at the very least. If only for the sake of consistent ethics.