



In Joy and Hope

by

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Human dignity, unity and life

There are certain times in the course of a year when we celebrate core human and religious values. Each January, this opportunity is given to us as citizens of our country and as a people of faith. In a brief two-week period of time, there are three significant celebrations that deserve our thoughtful reflection, prayer and discernment.

On Jan. 15, our nation observes a national holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King has become the symbol of the struggle for human rights and dignity and the ongoing quest to eradicate racism and prejudice.

From Jan. 18 to Jan. 25, we celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity when Christians once again pray for the unity among people who believe in Jesus Christ. Finally, on Jan. 22, we recall the Supreme Court decision of 1973 which legalized abortion in our country. It is a day to appreciate the gift of life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death.

Human dignity

At the heart of our existence as human beings is the fact that all people are created in the image and likeness of God. We are daughters and sons of God who has shared the gift of life with us. Though there are differences among people because of race, language and culture, we share a common humanity which makes us brothers and sisters to one another. These differences should not be a cause of prejudice, but rather a source of enrichment.

There is no better reminder to us of our obligation to respect each and every person than to read the Last Judgment scene in the Gospel of Matthew. At the end of time, the ultimate question will be whether we have seen the face of God in those around us, especially the poor, the needy, the hungry. This year's celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day should be a day when we strive to respect the human dignity and value of each and every human being.

Unity

At the Last Supper, there was the great prayer of Jesus for the unity of his disciples ... "that all may be one." Despite this prayer, we know from history that disciples of Jesus have experienced separation and division for centuries.

In recent years we have become far more aware of ecumenism, which is the movement that seeks to restore the unity of the divided Christian churches. Vatican II heralded a new moment in ecumenical efforts with the initiation of not only ecumenical dialogues among theologians, but the encouragement of grass-roots ecumenical activities.

Unity among Christian churches is far from being a reality. Yet, tremendous strides have been made to celebrate what Christian churches share in common, while recognizing the differences. Honest ecumenism calls people of faith to know and practice their own faith, while seeking to know and respect the faith traditions of others. Ecumenism calls people as well to respect the guidelines of individual churches regarding worship.

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Today, the dialogues continue; Christians come together to pray; our common faith challenges us to act together on behalf of Gospel values. Yet, unity is still the dream that remains unfulfilled. During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Christians are asked to pray for unity among people of faith.

Human life

The final value that we celebrate during January is the gift of life. On January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court of United States made abortion on demand both legal and accessible. Our faith teaches us that life is a gift from God. It is a gift we need to welcome and respect from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death.

Abortion denies this gift to the unborn child. Abortion is a gross and unwarranted violation of the most basic of human rights, the right to life. Though our culture emphasizes the importance of the right to choose as an essential element of individual freedom, the choice for an abortion denies the child the right to choose life.

At the other end of the life spectrum is the reality of euthanasia. Euthanasia generally refers to taking the life of a terminally ill person in order to escape the physical and mental pain that often accompanies the terminal stages of a fatal illness. Euthanasia is a violation of the sanctity of human life. Life is not a gift from God that we can destroy when we so choose.

It is ironic that as a nation we pride ourselves in our concern for the most helpless and volatile among us. Yet, we can dismiss so easily the cry of the unborn child and the value of the aging and dying among us through abortion and euthanasia. January 22 is a day when we should pray for all people to respect the gift of life.

The Gospel of Life

In many ways, the call for a greater appreciation of human dignity, unity and life is the major challenge that Pope John Paul II offered to us last year in his encyclical, "The Gospel of Life."

The Holy Father maintains we live in a "culture of death" as a result of extreme individualism without any connection to the values of truth and objective good. Our society gives priority to having over being, the satisfaction of personal pleasure over respect for those who are weak, and considers life worthwhile only to the extent that it is productive and enjoyable.

Pope John Paul II calls to our attention the story of Cain and Abel. When God confronts Kane on what he has done, Cain responds, "Am I my brother's keeper!" At the heart of our commitment to human dignity, unity and life is our willingness to say, "Yes, I am my brother and sister's keeper!" May God's gifts of grace and peace be yours.