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## President's Page

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## President's Page



### *Of Not So Ordinary Matters*

*"Respect and love ought to be extended to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily we will be able to enter into dialogue with them." Gaudium et Spes. II, 28.<sup>1</sup>*

*"Every analysis must necessarily start from the premise that . . . every human being is endowed with a dignity that must never be lessened, impaired or destroyed but must instead be respected and safeguarded . . ." Pope John Paul II*

Scuds, Patriots, smart bombs, I.V. injections and Nintendo briefings. Death machines in the Persian Gulf and death machines in Michigan. Antiseptic and clean. It's easy. No bloody limbs, only collateral damage. No honor guard at Dover. No murder trial.

I'm saddened. Each of these is one of God's. Each unborn, each Iraqi, every hostage, every prisoner; every less than perfect infant, every frail and lonely someone's mother; each of those 100,000 now dead with AIDs and the 100,000 and more to come.

I resolved last fall to try to broaden our agenda. Not just broaden but deepen as well. Too few were listening to us. What we had tried hadn't worked. Our optimism of just one year ago about the state of the world has faded. There are other problems — other problems that threaten human existence itself. There are too many connections to ignore.

My resolve is only strengthened. We need to look at it **all** in a different and coherent way. Is there something that ties all of our concerns together?

What fantastic advances we have made in technology, in the technology of death and destruction! What efforts have we made, what time have we expended in the promotion of the humanization of life and love and compassion?

This war may leave us even more confused. There is a danger that the value we place on human life will have diminished even more. I pray that when this is published, the slaughter will have ended. What has been wrought will remain; the suffering will only have begun to take its toll. It will be a time for healing.

Mark Twain — yes, Mark Twain — wrote a poem which was only published posthumously. He was advised to withhold it because it would be regarded as sacrilege. Perhaps it was too honest. The poem was his “War Prayer.”<sup>3</sup> It isn’t just about war. It is also about tolerance and understanding, and human suffering and living, and death. It should also remind us that each individual is on a journey which is not a solitary trek.

Twain tells of a nation at war, burning with patriotism, flags fluttering, a country choked with emotion, convinced of the righteousness of the cause.

And then in church the preacher begins a prayer, a passionate pleading asking God to crush the foe and to grant to his crusade honor and glory and victory.

An aged stranger, pale even to ghastliness, with long white hair, a messenger from God, appears and moves slowly, quietly up the aisle. The message he delivers is simple: “He has heard the prayer of His servant your shepherd and will grant it if such shall be your desire.”

It is only asked that the full import of the pleading of the preacher be understood. And for us to know that there are two prayers, “one uttered, the other not.”

A blessing for you may be a curse for your neighbor. Rain for you may be a blessing, but ruin your neighbors crop.

We pray that our shells may “tear their soldiers to bloody shreds.”

“Help us cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead”;

“Help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded writhing in pain”;

“Lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire”;

“Help us to wring the hearts of the unoffending widows with unavailing grief”;

“Help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land.”

Enough, you say. I agree.

It’s early Spring. From San Francisco to Washington at thirty thousand feet. The Sierras are covered with snow and the Wasatch and the Rockies. As we think of God looking down, we all seem the same. We **are** all the same. Each human is precious. And from God’s vantage point, as well, each

person equally so.

The Christian challenge is to do what will promote the dignity and worth of everyone. It is so because of **imago dei**; we are all made in the image of God. And because He became incarnate and died for us. God became one of us not just for you and me, but for everyone.

There is a vital central point easily forgotten. The *what* can ignore the *why* of the stand we take. Too often we argue that there is "a right," a right to health, a right to life, a right to bear arms, even now a right to oil. Are any of these absolute?

We shouldn't hide, or allow others to hide, behind euphemisms or slogans.

On the abortion issue, we get into difficulty because we allow ourselves to be drawn into an argument focused on rights. Whose rights? We can too easily accept a motto and forget the path that brought us there. Granting individual rights and freedoms may compromise others. Is there some more fundamental basis for our stance that gives a better answer? On what is it founded?

In most instances, rights are relative, not absolute. *Why* is there such a right? What are they designed to protect? That is the *real* issue. Why is there a right to health care? There is one, not because it is in the constitution or our code of law but because, in our time and in our land, access to basic health care is necessary to insure the dignity and worth of each person.

On both sides of almost every issue, on both sides of every war, there are people of good faith. We need to find solutions that answer not the question of who is right and who is wrong. Rather, how can we best recognize the equality, insure respect for, and nourish the dignity of each and every one? Our position on unborn life will be stronger if we take a coherent stand on all life, both born and unborn.

There is a danger, of course. We may find our days less comfortable; the answers not so simple.

Our ultimate aim should be to bring about whatever is necessary to protect and nurture the worth of each and every person. It is only with that in mind, and in action, that what we claim is coherent.

How did Christ treat the orphan, the widow, the prostitute and the leper? Should we not expect that others will judge our commitment to the unborn by our attitude and our actions towards the homeless, the hungry, the imprisoned, the person with AIDS, the Muslim, the Jew, the Arab?

The measure of our commitment will be determined by our priorities. Are they rooted in a respect for the sacredness of each human life? Do they seek and work to give each the basic necessities which will allow everyone to live with dignity?

The final line of Mark Twain's War Prayer:

"It was believed that the man was a lunatic because there was no sense in what he said."

Amen.

—Robert J. Barnet, M.D.  
President, NCFPG

#### References

1. *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution of the Church). Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council. Dec. 7, 1965.
  2. *On Pilgrimage*. The Address at the United Nations. (Sec. 12). Pope John Paul II. Oct. 2, 1979.
  3. *The War Prayer*. Mark Twain, 1923.
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### First Annual Conference

The University Faculty for Life will hold its first annual conference at Georgetown University, June 8-10, 1991. Speakers will include J. Bryan Hehir, advisor to the Catholic bishops on moral questions; John F. Griffith, Director of the Georgetown Medical Center; Edmund F. Pellegrino, Director of the Center for the Advanced Study of Ethics. The conference is to enable prolife faculty to gather with their peers and develop their own understanding of abortion, infanticide and euthanasia. Participants are invited to present their own material. Since the conference is supported by a grant, the charge is only \$25. For further information write:

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