



**CATHOLIC ACTION**  
FOR FAITH AND FAMILY



**"BEING FAITHFUL EVEN UNTO DEATH"**

**By Raymond Cardinal Leo Burke**

ST. GIANNA'S PHYSICIAN'S GUILD

SAVIOR PASTORAL CENTER, KANSAS CITY, KANSAS

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## Introduction

It pleases me to be part of this day devoted to the medical, legal and theological reflection on the care of our brothers and sisters who have grown weak under the burden of advanced years, serious illness or special needs, according to the teaching of the natural moral law and the Catholic faith. I express my deepest esteem for the St. Gianna Physician's Guild and its Founder and President, Mr. Thomas McKenna, and thank the Guild for organizing so important a day of study and reflection.



The participation of Dr. Gianna Emanuela Molla, daughter of Saint Gianna Beretta Molla, brings a special blessing to our day. Dr. Molla, a geriatric physician, has devoted herself to making known the holiness of life of her saintly mother. Saint Gianna is our great teacher in the apostolate of respect for all human life, from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. She teaches us, most of all, by the example of her life, dedicated to the safeguarding and fostering of human life, in her family and through her medical art, even to the heroic offering of her life to bring to term the infant conceived in her womb. In Dr. Gianna Emanuela Molla we experience directly the fruit of her mother's heroic sacrifice.

Saint Gianna is also a powerful intercessor for us, as we seek to understand more deeply the gift of human life, made in the image and likeness of God, and redeemed by the suffering and death of God the Son made man. She knows the great challenges which we face, in our time, to observe the most fundamental precept of the natural moral law, the law which God has written on the heart of every man, that is, to safeguard and foster all human life. Surely, she is interceding for us, today, that our study and reflection will produce much fruit for the advancement of the respect for human life, especially the lives of our brothers and sisters who are suffering and dying, who have the first title to our care.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, God the Son Incarnate, uncovers for us the great beauty of human life. He is the fullness of the expression of God's immeasurable and unceasing love of man. In a most particular way, He teaches us the meaning of human suffering and dying. If we are to understand and to love our brothers and sisters who share, in a particular way, in the Passion and Death of Christ, we need to turn to Him. I, therefore, propose to you a reflection on the mystery of Christian suffering, on suffering in communion with Christ, which I hope will inspire and strengthen our Christian care of our brothers and sisters who bear a special burden of suffering and who are dying.

## The practice of euthanasia in the United States

On March 31, 2005, Terri Schindler Schiavo died from the lack of hydration and nutrition. In what was supposed to be a healthcare facility, those in charge of her care refused to provide for her most basic human needs. Her parents, brother and sister, and others were prevented by the civil courts from providing for her the food and water which they, in their loving care, naturally desired to provide.

The day of her death was most sad for our entire nation. The United States of America, with its great abundance of material goods, refused to provide basic water and food to a citizen who was completely dependent upon others but, rather, deliberately let her die of hunger and thirst because the quality of her life was judged not to merit the protection of the law.

Those who sought her death and condoned it claimed that she was already dying, when hydration and nutrition were denied to her, and even invoked the moral teaching of the Catholic Church regarding ordinary and extraordinary means of maintaining a person in life. The simple fact is that she was not dying, until water and food were withdrawn from her. At the same time, the provision of hydration and nutrition to a gravely ill person is not considered an extraordinary means, according to Catholic teaching, unless the body no longer accepts them. Such was not the case for Terri Schindler Schiavo.

Many, especially Terri's fellow citizens whose lives are similarly burdened, have understandably asked at what point the deadly failure of respect for the dignity of the human life of those who are burdened with advanced years, serious illness or special needs will end. All citizens have cause to fear for the future of a nation in which a class of citizens is denied the protection of the law, especially in the exercise of the fundamental right to life.

The case of Terri Schindler Schiavo is not an isolated incident in our nation. More and more, the terms, "hospice care" and "palliative care," which certainly have a proper and morally good sense, are becoming code words for hastening the death of an elderly or gravely ill or otherwise heavily burdened brother or sister. I refer you, for example, to an essay by Anne Calovich, a journalist based in Wichita, Kansas, published in the February 2010 issue of *The Catholic World Report*, entitled "Nothing is Wasted: What the world tries to deny the dying" (pp. 44-45). The author tells the story of her mother's final days and the efforts of her family to follow her mother's advanced directive that no extraordinary means be employed to prolong her life but that she be provided hydration and nutrition, in accord with the Church's teaching.

The author recounts that, in her mother's last days, notwithstanding the doctor's order that she receive a feeding tube, the nurse in the hospital and the hospice service tried to dissuade, in every way, the carrying out of the order and outrightly refused to assist the children in providing hydration and nutrition to their mother. It was claimed that trying to provide water and food to the mother would cause unnecessary suffering which she would not understand because she suffered from Alzheimer's disease, that it was not necessary, and that the advanced directives and doctor's order no longer applied. Through the help of a Bishop and a devout Catholic social worker, the feeding tube was finally inserted. The author comments:

At 3 pm, the Hour of Mercy, accompanied by our prayers, the tube was placed effortlessly into Mom's nose. She showed no signs of distress from it. In fact, her color immediately improved, and her breathing became less labored (p. 45).

The mother lived for an additional three days. Her daughter noted how, on the third day, her mother's body no longer accepted the hydration and nutrition, her breathing became shallow, and she died peacefully.

The author reflected on how difficult it was for her family to do what was best for the mother and that, had it not been for the faithful doctor who gave the order for the feeding tube, "even this good Catholic family could have done the wrong thing. Not wrong from a strictly moral perspective, perhaps, but not what was best for her" (p. 45).

Anne Calovich concluded the story of her mother's last days with a reflection on the mystery of suffering and its integral part in the mystery of our salvation:

In the end, she died peacefully, surrounded by her family and attended by a priest. I saw the sufferings we were enduring – and would continue to endure until our own deaths – as the bridge that would lead us to our mother. Nothing had been – and nothing would be – wasted along the way, even our fears. A Father who wants only our salvation and has given his only Son to accomplish it will not disappoint us (p. 45).

Because Anne Colavich had assisted her mother in her suffering and dying, with faith and prayer, she was able to see the sufferings of her mother's last days as a participation in the Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and, therefore, to do what helped her mother to die peacefully in Christ.

It is not infrequent that I hear similar reports, from family members of a gravely ill parent or sibling, and from priests who are caring for the suffering and dying. We all witnessed the growing acceptance of the view of suffering and dying as useless and meaningless in the debate regarding universal health care in our nation. Studying the texts of the proposed legislation, one justifiably feared what was intended by the terms, “hospice care” and “palliative treatment,” and one legitimately wondered about the understanding of human suffering, which would guide the proposed government committee charged with the periodic review of the treatment to be received by a gravely ill citizen.

The denial of hydration and nutrition to Terri Schindler Schiavo and to others who are elderly, gravely ill or severely handicapped raises serious questions about our society’s understanding of the dignity of human life and the meaning of human suffering. The natural moral law teaches us that diminishment of activity or intensity of suffering or approaching death can never justify the taking of a human life. In fact, they all call for protection and care.

The Church, by her very nature, is the guardian and teacher of the natural moral law in society, for the natural law is written by God upon every human heart, without exception. In a society in which the natural moral law, in one of its most fundamental tenets, is routinely violated, the Church must be more diligent than ever in her witness to the dignity of every human life from the moment of its inception to the moment of natural death. She must be ever more concerned to protect and care for anyone whose life is threatened by the growing acceptance of euthanasia in society.

Before entering into a reflection upon the Christian meaning of human suffering and dying, I wish also to recall briefly the death of Blessed Pope John Paul II who was in his final agony at the very time when Terri Schindler Schiavo’s life was taken through the denial of hydration and nutrition. Blessed Pope John Paul II died on April 2, 2005, just two days after the death of Terri Schindler Schiavo. His last months of life provided for the world a powerful testimony to the dignity of human life, also when it is greatly diminished and burdened with intense suffering.

## Context of the Reflection

Our society must not be permitted to ignore what is happening through the denial of hydration and nutrition to those who are suffering greatly or are dying. As Blessed Pope John Paul II stated, with regard to abortion, we must “*call things by their proper name*” (*Evangelium vitae*. 25 March 1995, no. 58b).

In the case of the denial of hydration and nutrition, we must say what is the truth: the person dies from dehydration and starvation because we refuse to provide to him water and food. In other words, the person is killed, according to the definition of euthanasia, given by Blessed Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*):

*Euthanasia in the strict sense is understood to be an action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death, with the purpose of eliminating all suffering (no. 65a).*

In the case of the denial of hydration and nutrition, ordinary care, the provision of water and food, is withheld with the explicit intention of hastening death because the suffering of the person is judged useless or too great to bear.

Our reflection is placed also within the context of the sound teaching of the Catholic faith. Those who would undertake to study and to teach what the Church teaches must have a firm philosophical foundation, so that human reason may rightly serve theological inquiry. There are those who call themselves theologians and even ministers of religion who assert that we have a right to determine the meaning of human life, including the definition of its beginning and the determination of its end.

The secular press of Saint Louis, at the time of the death of Terri Schindler Schiavo, printed a guest editorial written by a priest who was head of a theological faculty. He wrote that it is a good thing to die when we are no longer able to relate to others as we would wish to do. Of course, he was correct that death for us has been transformed by Christ and has become the passage to eternal life for those who, by God's grace, are alive in Christ. He gravely erred, however, in the assumption that we have the right to determine when someone should die and, therefore, the right to deny to a gravely infirm person basic human care. His philosophical reasoning had its origin in Rationalism, not in the philosophy of being of Saint Thomas Aquinas (Charles E. Bouchard, O.P., "Terri Schiavo: Believe there's something more," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 24 March 2005).

In a similar manner, the former Senator from Missouri, John Danforth, who is a priest in the Episcopalian Church, declared that we have a right to control our own destiny and to order what he called a "merciful death." In the case of Terri Schiavo, he argued that, since her husband testified that she did not want to receive life support and since her condition "was irreversible," the court was right in ordering the withdrawal of hydration and nutrition (John Danforth, *Faith and Politics*, pp. 69, 72 and 74).

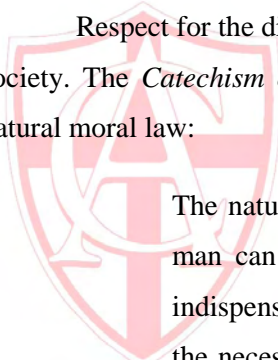
The Church, on the other hand, in her wisdom, always insists that seminarians preparing for theological studies have a thorough grounding in Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy. One of the most important fruits of the study of the philosophy of Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas is an understanding

of the natural moral law, which is the presupposition for the study of moral theology. The Church, moreover, in her Catholic universities and faculties, has insisted that all students pursue a certain number of courses of philosophy, so that, in whatever field they specialize, they will employ right reason. One thinks, for instance, of how important it is that research scientists and health care professionals understand the inviolable dignity of innocent human life and the inviolable integrity of human procreation.

## Respect for Human Life and Human Suffering

Human suffering can only be understood in the light of the inviolable dignity of innocent human life, which the natural law teaches us. Right reason teaches us the good we are to do and the evil we are to avoid. It teaches us that human life is a gift to be accorded the highest respect and care from its beginning until natural death. It, therefore, also teaches us that we are not the creators of human life and must respect the plan of the Author of Life for us and for our world. It teaches us that deliberately taking the life of an innocent person is intrinsically evil and is, therefore, never justified.

Respect for the dignity of human life is the foundation of good order in our individual lives and in society. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes clear to us the fundamental importance of the natural moral law:



The natural law, the Creator's very good work, provides the solid foundation on which man can build the structure of moral rules to guide his choices. It also provides the indispensable moral foundation for building the human community. Finally, it provides the necessary basis for the civil law with which it is connected, whether by a reflection that draws conclusions from its principles, or by additions of a positive and juridical nature (no. 1959).

Clearly, without the respect for the dignity of all human life, which the natural law teaches, our personal lives become profoundly disordered, and society soon becomes a theater of violence and death.

In his Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae* "On the Good and Inviolability of Human Life," Pope John Paul II reflected on the growing recourse to euthanasia in a culture which has grown forgetful of God and His plan for us and our world. He commented:

In this context the temptation grows to have recourse to *euthanasia*, that is, *to take control of death and bring it about before its time*, "gently" ending one's own life or the life of others. In reality, what might seem logical and humane, when looked at more closely is seen to be *senseless and inhumane*. Here we are faced with one of the more

alarming symptoms of the “culture of death”, which is advancing above all in prosperous societies, marked by an attitude of excessive preoccupation with efficiency, and which sees the growing number of elderly and disabled people as intolerable and too burdensome. These people are very often isolated by their families and by society, which are organized almost exclusively on the basis of criteria of productive efficiency, according to which a hopelessly impaired life no longer has any value (no. 64c).

The “senseless and inhumane” thinking of the secularist mind teaches us that we are justified in the killing of those who have the first title to our care. In the chaos which results, we violently attack the life of those who, in their suffering, are called to love unconditionally and who, in God’s Providence, invite us to share in unconditional love by our care for them. It is profoundly sad to note the effect of the thinking of our culture upon those whose lives are heavily burdened. They easily begin to think that their lives are meaningless and that, somehow, they should die, lest they become a burden to others.

In this regard, Blessed Pope John Paul II, in an address which he gave to the members of the International Congress on “Life-Sustaining Treatments and Vegetative State: Scientific Advances and Ethical Dilemmas,” on March 20, 2004, observed:

Moreover, to admit that decisions regarding man’s life can be based on the external acknowledgment of its quality, is the same as acknowledging that increasing and decreasing levels of quality of life, and therefore of human dignity, can be attributed from an external perspective to any subject, thus introducing into social relationships a discriminatory and eugenic principle (*L’Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English*, 31 March 2004, p. 5, no. 5b).

History teaches us the grave injustices, including infanticide and genocide, committed in a society which takes to itself the judgment of which lives are worthy and which are not. Such judgment is typical of the totalitarian state.

## Natural Moral Law and the Gospel

The precepts of the natural moral law are found in the laws of ancient Rome and other ancient societies. For Jews and Christians, they are found in the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. The Fifth Commandment, “Thou shall not kill,” demands respect for the dignity of all human life.

Christ expresses fully the teaching of the natural moral law in the Sermon on the Mount, the heart of which is the Beatitudes (cf. *Mt* 5:1-12). The Beatitudes are the summary of all that Christ teaches us



about what is morally good. They make it clear that total dependence upon God, and the acceptance of suffering and of unjust treatment for doing what is right and just are our way to life and lasting happiness.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ teaches the divine and universal charity which is God's gift to us in Him. Repeating the Fifth Commandment, He teaches that it forbids not only actual murder but also the anger which wishes evil for a neighbor (cf. *Mt* 5:22-25).

The teaching of Our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount is further exemplified in His Parable of the Last Judgment, in which Our Lord shows that our goodness, our righteousness, lies in following His way of universal charity by giving food to the hungry, by providing drink to the thirsty, by welcoming the stranger, by clothing the naked, and by visiting the sick and the imprisoned (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46). The teaching of the Parable is summed up in the words of the King:

Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me”  
(*Mt* 25:40).

Our Lord Jesus Christ, God made man, identifies Himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. He invites us to recognize Him in our brothers and sisters who are in most need, and to love them by caring for them.

### Respect for Human Life Burdened by Suffering

The natural moral law binds us in love, in a particular way, to those who have grown weak under the weight of advanced years, serious illness or special needs. It teaches us that our brothers and sisters who most depend upon us have the first title to our care. We read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect. Sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible (no. 2276).

Some have argued that, when a person is no longer able to relate to others, as he or she would most wish, then human life no longer has purpose. The gravely ill person may not be able to relate to us as he or she – and we – would most like, but indeed he or she relates to us as a brother or sister.

Sadly there has developed a terminology to describe the condition of brothers and sisters who seemingly are unable to respond to us in an accustomed way. I refer to the terminology, “persistent vegetative state.” Mr. Danforth, at the beginning of the chapter entitled “The Case of Terri Schiavo” of

his book, *Faith and Politics*, describes Terri Schiavo with the words: “In a persistent vegetative state for fifteen years after suffering loss of oxygen to the brain at age twenty-six....” (p. 69).

In his address to the International Congress on “Life-Sustaining Treatments and Vegetative State,” Blessed Pope John Paul II observed that the clinical term, “vegetative state,” is always improperly used in referring to a suffering human being:

*A man, even if seriously ill or disabled in the exercise of his highest functions, is and always will be a man, and he will never become a “vegetable” or an “animal” (p. 5, no. 3b).*

In the long-term care of the suffering person, our relationship with the person continues to develop and can, if we permit it, express great, even heroic, respect and love.

## The Meaning of Human Suffering

Our culture’s view of human suffering makes it especially difficult to appreciate the good of a life which is heavily burdened. Our culture tells us that our life should be comfortable and convenient, and it devotes itself to forming us in the avoidance of all stress, pain and suffering. Sometimes, the cultural view takes on a spiritual appearance by claiming that our life in the body or physical life has no ultimate meaning, that our ultimate happiness lies in being freed of the body.

Nature, however, teaches us the unity of body and soul in the human person. All joys and sorrows are both spiritual and physical, for we have one human nature. The Christian faith teaches us that the soul is the form of the body. We know by faith that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is through our body that we give expression to our love of God and of one another. Even as Christ was raised, body and soul, from the dead, so, when our soul has left the body at death, we will await the resurrection of the body on the Last Day. For that reason, we show great respect to our body during our life on earth and, in death, bring the body to reverent burial to await the resurrection, when Christ returns in glory.

Human suffering has always a physical and spiritual dimension, even as the suffering of Christ did. We know that the physical and spiritual suffering of Christ, by which He won our salvation, must be realized in our individual lives. Through baptism, we are buried with Christ sacramentally and rise with him to new and eternal life. The grace of the Holy Spirit, given to us in the Sacrament of Baptism, and strengthened and increased within us through the Sacrament of Confirmation, leads us to unite our suffering and dying to the suffering and dying of Christ, pouring out our lives, with Christ, in the love of God and of our neighbor.

The Heavenly Bread of our earthly pilgrimage is the Body of Christ offered up for us, His Blood poured out for us. It is a true share in His Eucharistic Sacrifice, a true union of our fearful, doubtful and sinful hearts with His glorious pierced Heart, which purifies and strengthens us to love purely and selflessly as He loves. Suffering is, in no way, meaningless to us. Rather, it is for us an invitation to be ever more perfectly united to Christ, to be purified of whatever keeps us from loving God and one another, and to be ever more generous in that love.

### Letter to the Colossians 1:23-26

Saint Paul, in his *Letter to the Colossians*, writes about his own suffering, reminding us that the Church and we, individual members of the Church, continue Christ's mission in the world through our share in His suffering and dying. He declares:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the Church, of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to His saints (*Col 1:23-26*).

It is not that Christ's redemptive work is, in any way, lacking. Rather, we are called to share in His redemptive work in every time and place, and in that sense, to "complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of ... the Church."

Blessed Pope John Paul II who, like Our Lord, was "a man acquainted with infirmity" from his youth, was a powerful teacher of the Christian meaning of human suffering. The loss of his mother, when he was in third grade; the early loss of his brother and of his father, the hard labor of his young adulthood, the accidents which he suffered, the hardships of the Nazi occupation and Russian occupation of Poland, and so many other experiences of the cross led the saintly Pontiff to a profound appreciation of the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation. His official biographer, George Weigel, commented on the profound influence of Pope John Paul II's father upon his understanding of Christian suffering:

Demand and promise; cross before crown – given John Paul's testimony that this spirituality of redemptive suffering has been the heart of the Gospel for him since he was a youngster, one can see here another imprint of the teaching and example of the most influential religious educator of his early years: his father, the man who first took him on pilgrimage to Kalwaria Zebrzdzowska, the year after his mother died (*Witness to Hope*, pp. 30-31).

The shrine to the Paschal Mystery, Kalwaria Zebrzdowska, remained always a favorite place of pilgrimage for Blessed Pope John Paul II. The profound spiritual influence of his father is reflected in the use of a prayer book, right up to the time of his death, which his father and he had always used.

Blessed Pope John Paul II offered an extended reflection upon the meaning of human suffering in his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, “On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering,” published on February 11, the Memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes, in 1984. Referring to the passage from the *Letter to the Colossians*, he wrote:

The sufferings of Christ created the good of the world’s redemption. This good in itself is inexhaustible and infinite. No man can add anything to it. But at the same time, in the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened His own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. In so far as man becomes a sharer in Christ’s sufferings – in any part of the world and at any time in history – to that extent *he in his own way completes* the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world (no. 24b).

Even as Christ pours out ever anew His life for us in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is one with the Sacrifice of the Cross, so also those united to Christ in His Sacrifice, unite their sufferings to His for the sake of the salvation of the world.

Human suffering is an invitation to enter ever more deeply into the mystery of Divine Love. Pope John Paul II expressed this profound truth:

In this dimension – the dimension of love – the Redemption which has already been completely accomplished is, in a certain sense, constantly being accomplished. Christ achieved the Redemption completely and to the very limit; but at the same time he did not bring it to a close. In this redemptive suffering, through which the Redemption of the world was accomplished, Christ opened himself from the beginning to every human suffering and constantly does so. Yes, it seems to be part *of the very essence of Christ’s redemptive suffering* that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed (no. 24 c).

While society may consider human suffering to be useless and a diminishment of our human dignity, we know that just the opposite is true. Human suffering, embraced with the love of Christ, brings immense blessings to the Church and the world, and sheds an ever greater light upon the dignity of every human life.

In his “Message for Lent 2005,” his last Lenten message to us, in which Blessed Pope John Paul II reflected upon the great gift of advanced years or old age, he raised the question:

What would happen if the People of God yielded to a certain current mentality that considers these people [the elderly], our brothers and sisters, as almost useless when they are reduced in their capacities due to difficulties of age or sickness? Instead, how different the community would be if, beginning with the family, it tries always to remain open and welcoming towards them (no. 3c).

In the suffering of our brothers and sisters, we see the Face of Christ and are invited to assist them in offering up their sufferings, with Christ, for the needs of the Church and of the world.

### Example and Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary

In all of Blessed Pope John Paul II’s reflections upon the meaning of Christian suffering, the Blessed Virgin Mary has an irreplaceable role. As his episcopal motto declared, he belonged totally to Mary, “*Totus tuus.*” At the maternal school of Mary, he learned to purify his heart of all wrong attachments and to dare to give his heart completely to Christ, with the purity and selflessness of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. In Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s homily for the Funeral Mass of the saintly Pontiff, he expressed strikingly the relationship which the Mother of God has with all Christians from the moment of her Divine Son’s death on the Cross:

Divine Mercy: the Holy Father found the purest reflection of God’s mercy in the Mother of God. He, who at an early age had lost his own mother, loved his divine mother all the more.

He heard the words of the crucified Lord as addressed to him: “Behold your Mother.” And so he did as the beloved disciple did: he took her into his own home (cf. *Jn 19:27*) – *Totus tuus*. And from the mother he learned to conform himself to Christ (*L’Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English*, 13 April 2005, p. 3).

Americans, inhabitants of the continent of America, have experienced their relationship with the Mother of God in a most privileged way through her appearances on the continent from December 9<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> of 1531. The apparitions of the Mother of God, who instructed the gravely-ill Juan Bernardino, uncle of her messenger, Saint Juan Diego, to call her Our Lady of Guadalupe, are seemingly the most extraordinary of all of the Blessed Virgin Mary’s appearances.

From the moment of her first appearance, she announced her mission: to establish a little chapel, a place of pilgrimage, in which she might show the mercy of God to all of her children of America and of the world. As the great sign of her maternal desire to make us one with her Divine Son and, therefore, recipients of the immeasurable outpouring of God's mercy, she left her image on the *tilma* or mantle of Saint Juan Diego. To this day, the image which has no human explanation as to its origin and whose fabric, cactus cloth, should have disintegrated some thirty to forty years after her apparitions, remains in tact and radiates a miraculous maternal love. I have personally experienced her maternal love while gazing upon the *tilma*.

Time does not permit a lengthy description of all the gifts of Divine Mercy received through her intercession. I mention two. Within eight years from the date of her apparitions, some nine million of the native Americans converted to the Catholic faith, giving up the diabolical practice of human sacrifice and embracing the Christian way of life with a remarkable fervor and fidelity. What is more, the European explorers and settlers, and the Native Americans, who were on the verge of a most bloody conflict, united to form a new culture, the *mestiza* culture, which yet today looks to the Virgin of Guadalupe, *La Morenita*, as its source and inspiration.

Before the most daunting challenge of transforming the culture of death in our society, we must turn to the Mother of God, who will lead us to her Son Who alone reveals to us the deepest meaning of life, of human suffering, and of eternal life. Blessed Pope John Paul II, in his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America* (The Church in America) urged the Church on the continent of America to invoke the Virgin of Guadalupe as Mother of America and Star of the New Evangelization. Sadly, Our Lady of Guadalupe and her gift of Divine Mercy have not been known, as they should be, in North America. It is my hope and prayer that the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe at La Crosse will bring pilgrims from all over our nation and continent to the Mother of God who, in turn, will lead them to her Divine Son in the apostolate of the Respect for Human Life.

At the conclusion of *Salvifici doloris*, the Blessed Pope John Paul II reflected upon the Blessed Virgin Mary's presence with us and her intercession for us in our sufferings:

*Together with Mary*. Mother of Christ, who stood *beneath the Cross*, we pause beside all the crosses of contemporary man (no. 31e).

He also reminded us of the grace-filled example and intercession of the saints.

## The Saints, Their Example and Their Intercession

Blessed Pope John Paul II frequently reminded us to follow the example of the saints, beginning with the Blessed Virgin Mary, and to invoke their intercession in taking up the Cross, in meeting the great challenge of the New Evangelization. I call to your mind a contemporary saint who is an extraordinary teacher of the meaning of human life and human suffering, and a powerful intercessor on our behalf.

I refer to Saint Gianna Beretta Molla, the wife, mother and physician of Mesero and Magenta in Italy, who offered her life to save the life of the baby in her womb. Saint Gianna died on Easter Saturday, April 28, 1962, just one week after delivering her daughter Gianna Emanuela, today a geriatric physician who was totally devoted to caring for her aged and seriously ailing father Pietro, until his death on Holy Saturday of 2010.

I urge you to read her life and her writings. I suggest especially the memoir of her saintly husband Pietro, published by Ignatius Press in 2004, with the title, *Saint Gianna Molla: Wife, Mother, Doctor*. To understand the heroic sacrifice which she made in giving her life for her daughter, we must appreciate her spiritual life centered upon the Holy Eucharist, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the daily Rosary, and expressed in an exemplary respect for the dignity of all human life, at every stage of development. She loved children. She loved caring for the elderly. She was devoted to the formation of young women in the virtues of modesty and purity. In a reflection on her mission as physician, she wrote:

The great mystery of man – he has a body but also is a supernatural soul – is Jesus: “Whoever visits the sick, helps me.” Priestly mission: as the priest can touch Jesus, so we touch Jesus in the bodies of our patients – poor, young, old, children (Pietro Molla and Elio Guerriero, *Saint Gianna Molla: Wife, Mother, Doctor*, p. 75).

Saint Gianna’s fondest hope as wife, mother and physician was that Our Lord Jesus Christ might make Himself visible through her. Taking fully to heart the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and the Parable of the Lost Judgment, she saw in her turning-over of her life totally to God the greatest gift: life in Christ, life in God.

I am certain that all of us have been inspired and strengthened by the manner in which the saints and blessed, to whom we have devotion, have entered into the mystery of suffering with Christ. In his Message for World Mission Sunday in 1984, the year of the publication of *Salvifici doloris*, Blessed Pope John Paul II reflected upon the mystery of suffering in the life of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux:

Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, Patron of the Missions, a prisoner of love in the Carmel of Lisieux, would have wanted to travel the whole world to plant the Cross of Christ in every place. “I would like to be a missionary,” she wrote, “not only for some years, but I would want to have been a missionary from the creation of the world and to be one to the consummation of the centuries” (*Story of a Soul*). And she gave life to the universality and apostolicity of her desires in the suffering she asked of God and in the offering of herself as a voluntary victim of merciful Love. Her suffering attained its culmination and at the same time its highest level of apostolic fruitfulness in martyrdom of the spirit, in the anguish of the obscurity of faith, offered to obtain the light of faith for the many still immersed in darkness (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 76 [1984], p. 873).

## Conclusion

Before the situation in which we, as citizens of the United States of America, find ourselves, it is all too easy to give way to discouragement, to lose hope. How must the faithful in 16<sup>th</sup> century Mexico have been tempted to hopelessness before the widespread practice of human sacrifice and the violations of human life in the conflicts between the Native Americans and the Spanish explorers and settlers! But we who have been called to life in Christ and who, in fact, live in Christ, can never give way to discouragement, can never lose hope. Our Lady of Guadalupe, gazing upon us with love from the miraculous tilma of Saint Juan Diego, bids us to come to her and, through her, to go to the glorious pierced Heart of Jesus, Son of God and her Son, in Whom we find the courage to be apostles of life and the hope which will sustain us in whatever sufferings lie ahead.

Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of Life, bids us to pray with her, in the Heart of Jesus, for the safeguarding and fostering of all human life and for the end of all violations of the fundamental right to life, especially of the innocent and defenseless unborn and of those burdened by advanced years, grave illness or special needs. She invites us, most of all, to the regular confession of our sins in the Sacrament of Penance, so that we may turn our lives over to Christ, ever more completely, and so become ever more perfect messengers of the Gospel of Life. She draws us to the Eucharistic Sacrifice in which we are united with Our Lord Jesus in the offering of His life for the sake of all men, without boundary or exception, and in which we are nourished with the Heavenly Food of His Body and Blood to strengthen ourselves for the struggle of defending human life and the family, as the cradle of life, in our nation. The victory of life and love belongs to Christ alone. One with Him, especially in the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist, the victory will also be ours, notwithstanding all of our weaknesses and the many temptations which we daily suffer.



Our prayer and fasting must be offered, above all, for the sake of our leaders. Each day and many times throughout the day, we must beg Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of Life, and Saint Juan Diego, her faithful messenger, to intercede for the conversion of our nation. No one could have imagined the miracles worked by Our Lady, when she came to us as the Star of the First Evangelization of our continent. She will not fail to work the same miracles today, the time of the New Evangelization, on behalf of the children for whom she permitted her Immaculate Heart to be mystically pierced, when the Roman soldier pierced the Sacred Heart of her Divine Son.

To our prayer and fasting for the protection of human life and the safeguarding of the integrity of the family in our nation, we must join our daily obedience to the moral law, in the family and in the many places of our human activity and endeavor. We must not only be obedient to the moral law, but we must also give an account of our obedience, be ready to defend the truth of the divine moral law in the many contexts in which it is daily under attack and actually violated. The scandal caused by Catholics who betray their faith through silence or through active participation in the anti-life and anti-family policies and programs of our nation leads so many, and, most of all, our children and young people, into error about the most fundamental norms of morality and into a life without hope and without a future because it rebels against God, Who is the only source of our hope and for Whose friendship we were created.

Saint Juan Diego devoted the remaining years of his life, after the wondrous days of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, to recounting her message and inviting his brothers and sisters to be received into her all-loving embrace. He gave daily witness to the truth of God's mercy and love, shown to Him by Our Lady of Guadalupe, for the sake of all, without boundary or exception. Let us, invoking the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of Life, and following the example of Saint Juan Diego, be faithful witnesses and teachers of the Gospel of Life, every day and throughout every day. We must insist that our Catholic institutions, above all our Catholic schools and universities, our Catholic health care institutions and our Catholic charitable institutions, give uncompromising witness to the truth of the moral law.

Finally, we must engage ourselves in the public life of our nation for the sake of innocent and defenseless human life and for the sake of the family. Too often, we give way to the temptation to abandon the work of transforming public life, especially the laws of our nation and their interpretation by the courts. There are those, too, who would tell us that what the faith teaches us has no place in the political order. Fundamental to our Catholic faith is the natural moral law which can also be known by reason alone. It is not possible for any man to live responsibly as a citizen of our nation, if he does not acknowledge and obey the law which God has written upon his heart.

Our Catholic faith gives us inspiration and strength to witness to the truth of the moral law, also in civic and political matters. It demands that we never cease to work for laws which safeguard and promote human life and respect the integrity of marriage and the family. No matter how impossible the situation of our nation may seem, our faith calls us to be a light by which we all can find our way out of the darkness of the culture of death and into the light of the civilization of Divine Love. In our civic action on behalf of our most defenseless brothers and sisters and of marriage as the first and irreplaceable cell of life as a nation, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of Life, is the Star who leads us to live in Christ, to love as He loves, purely and selflessly. And that love will transform our culture.

Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke

Prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura



CATHOLIC ACTION  
FOR FAITH AND FAMILY