



CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OFFICE

Diocese of Salt Lake City

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: **Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

“In a world warped by materialism and declining respect for human life, the Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and assisted suicide. The value of human life is being threatened by increasing use of the death penalty. The dignity of life is undermined when the creation of human life is reduced to the manufacture of a product, as in human cloning or proposals for genetic engineering to create ‘perfect’ human beings. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every situation is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.”

(Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions, Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998.)

The Catholic Social Teachings flow from the Old and New Testaments. The Gospel message contains a demand for justice in the world. In the Old Testament, God reveals himself to us as the liberator of the oppressed and the defender of the poor, demanding justice toward one’s neighbor from all. In the incarnation of God in Jesus the Bishops summarize, “the attitude of man toward other men is integrated in his or her attitude toward God.” In other words, how we treat our neighbor determines our relationship with God.

Because we are not confronted with the injustices many people around the world and in our own country experience, we often remain complacent to natural disasters, poverty, and injustices. Education is one of the most important means of bringing justice to our attention. With this in mind, Catholic education takes on a huge role. It must produce the agent who will effect the permanent organic change that society needs. Formation takes its inspiration from the Church’s social teaching.

The United States Catholic Bishops have challenged all of us to live out this value of **human dignity** in our lives, our example, in our teaching, and in our world community. From the beginning, Catholic schools have been strong in teaching this value. We teach respect for one another and all peoples. We demand behavior that shows respect. Our policies reflect the respect and dignity of all. And yet we still struggle with the living out of this value. It is fine to teach about **human dignity** and have it on paper, and be able to give the correct answer about it, but really living this is much harder.

Respect for the dignity of the human person begins at home and in our schools. In the last few years we have been confronted with issues of harassment and bullying. Usually these actions are more silent and hard to identify in the school. Much degradation is done on e-mail, in chat rooms, and websites like “myspace.com”. Students can be bullied and bully on the playground, in

hallways, restrooms, and in the lunch room. These trends have to be counteracted. Parents need to exercise their role by making sure internet use is not hurting their children or leading them down the wrong path.

Monitoring and teaching what is acceptable behavior toward one another needs to begin at an early age. Students have to be aware that they do not need to tolerate harassment. If they feel they are truly being “picked on” or slandered they need to know how to report this to an adult and have the courage to do so. A great challenge is being counter-cultural. What others are doing, if it is against the dignity of anyone, should be discouraged on the part of our children. Parents and school personnel are required to be vigilant in the formation of each child. Their consciences are being formed, although subtly, just as their bodies grow and their minds expand with knowledge. We are not in this task alone. The Holy Spirit directs us to live a life worthy of our calling, whether parent, teacher, or student.

Besides the daily instruction of how to treat one another, it is the responsibility of the adults in our community to form our children with a social conscience toward the peoples of the world. When something occurs in society such as the floods in Mexico and Bangladesh, hurricanes in the Gulf States, or the earthquakes in Chili and Peru, we can use these events as tools to build awareness of the plight of the poor around the world. While studying regions and countries in social studies, the abuse of immigrants, women and children can be brought to the fore. Our Catholic schools are instruments in building awareness of the injustices around the nation and world. These exposures will form impressions which will become part of the pool of information affecting decision making in the future. Depending on the age of the child, topics such as the death penalty, euthanasia, abortion, unjust war, and inequality in the distribution of wealth can be good topics for discussions in relation to *human dignity*.

The Church should not shrink from voicing concern when *human dignity* is violated. As part of the Church, we need to be informed and preparing our children to be good caretakers of one another. It is a great responsibility. Our example is a mirror for children and young adults as to how to treat others. Every person is created in the image of God. Every person is precious. All social laws, practices, and institutions must protect, not undermine *human dignity*.