



*Address of Bishop Serge Poitras on the Respect of Life*  
Life Coaliton  
Days'Inn, Timmins  
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I am pleased to greet you, who are engaged in promoting *respect for life, from its conception to its natural end*, as all Catholics are invited to do. Indeed, we are the disciples of the One who is the *source of life*, the one who offers us *eternal life*, the one who sent his Son to the world so that we might *have life and that we have it more abundantly* (Jn 10, 11).

In addition to natural factors such as diseases and death which is inevitable, life has also always been threatened by human malice; thus wars and multiple forms of violence trivialize mortality in a certain way. As an accurate reader of the contemporary world, Saint John Paul II even spoke of a '*culture of death*', which is devastating all corners and facets of our world, especially in our Western civilization. We see this phenomenon in our country as an average of 100,000 abortions are carried out every year; one can easily imagine what that represents in the world, and even more if we count the years since this deadly act was legally authorized and is now promoted as a right. We are also witnessing the promotion of euthanasia, discreetly hidden under the euphemism of *medical assistance to die*, or *assisted suicide*: in the Netherlands where this so-called medical aid was legalized in 2002, there were about 5300 cases in 2014, with a marked increase from one year to another.

Thus it is necessary, as human beings and as Christians, to face this growing phenomenon, to identify its implications and above all to promote a culture of life. That's my goal tonight.

### Introduction

Civilization is based on the fundamental principle of respect for human life. In this regard, the physician Hippocrates, who died in 370 BC, proposed an oath that doctors still take, though with textual variants.

*"I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrong-doing. Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course. Similarly I will not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion. But I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art.*

It is interesting to note that Hippocrates refused to give a "*poison*", something that would kill the patient. He knew that some people of his epoch would have liked to eliminate others for all kinds of reasons (disappearance of an opponent, revenge ...); according to him, the doctor is at the service of the patient's life and not of his death.

Hippocrates also refused to give an 'abortive pessary': The pessary was a small instrument that is introduced into the pregnant women in order to kill the fetus. The doctor can not cause abortion.

In virtue of his special knowledge, the physician has in fact a unique power over the lives of others: he can help them live and he can kill; he can administer a vaccine that saves or a virus that destroys. The Hippocratic Oath sketches a fundamental issue: the ethical horizon, the need for moral criteria. Indeed, science cannot be neutral; it must reflect on good and evil issues.

We see in this ancient text that marked our civilization the refusal of a medical action for the interruption of pregnancy and for the acceleration of death. This approach, the result of human wisdom, deeply corresponds to the Christian faith: already in the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, God prohibits murder: "*You shall not kill.*" According to this precept, Christians refused abortion: "*You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause the newborn to perish,*" said for example the Epistle of Barnabas (19: 5); in the Roman world, the father had the right of life and death over the newborn; infanticide was common; Christians stood out clearly and courageously in favor of life and of the defense of the weak; mechanisms of protection of these children whom nobody wanted existed early in the history of Christianity.

#### First part : some philosophical considerations

Before going any further in our topic, I would like to offer a few philosophical considerations that could serve as a general frame for our reflection.

- 1- A long time ago, while I was studying philosophy before beginning theological studies, the anthropologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a master, famous for the depth of his thought and his vision. I remember reading one of his books, "*Man's Place in Nature,*" which greatly impressed me.
- 2- In this book, as in the rest of his philosophical work, Teilhard marveled at Creation in which he distinguished three major phases: the emergence of matter, the origin of life (which is what he called '*biosphere*', derive from 'bios' in Greek which means 'life'), then the appearance of the human mind (which he describes as the '*noosphere*', 'noos' in Greek means 'spirit'). Each phase appears as a qualitative leap in beings, an unpredictable step, a kind of miracle.
- 3- When you look at the world in which we find ourselves, which we are part of, the description of Teilhard that I have briefly outlined provides an interesting framework for our discussion tonight on respect for life. It enables us in fact to identify more accurately the unprecedented nature of life and of the even more astonishing human life.
- 4- When we look more closely, we realize that inanimate matter is unable to perceive the sphere that is superior to it, namely life; the stone in the garden (not Pierre Teilhard de Chardin !) can not perceive the existence of the flowers, their beauty, fragrance, the flight of birds; and nevertheless they are all realities that exist. For

their part, living beings, even the most advanced, do not perceive the originality of human life: the flower is not aware of the person to whom it is offered for her birthday; the lion that I meet in the bush does not see me as the Bishop of Timmins, but as its next meal.

- 5- The human person is thus located in a particular sphere; she is the summit of beings that we know. Although today some give more importance to their dogs, the human being has a value and a dignity that distinguish him from all other visible beings.
- 6- Our faith teaches the same thing: indeed, in the narrative of the creation, everything is oriented towards the appearance of the man who is created on the sixth day, after God has deliberated in a special way about him: "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness*" (Gen 1, 26). Psalm 8 and sings: "*When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and a son of man that you care of him? You have made him little less than a god, crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him rule over the works of your hands, put all things as his feet*" (Ps 8: 4-7). The Second Vatican Council summarizes this reality: "*Man is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself*" (GS 24.3: *Catechism* 356).
- 7- We must be convinced of this unique place of man in nature, in line with the vision of Teilhard, and also in connection with the vision of our faith. In a draft book of religious education, I read recently the statement that '*all life is sacred.*' This can not be true: a bug's life is not sacred, nor that of the animal; only the life of the human being is sacred.
- 8- Daily life itself spontaneously shows us the sanctity of human life: when there is a fire in the house, whom do we save first? the dog or the baby? Along the same line, I remember having read in a newspaper that firefighters asked people not to call their dog their 'baby': in fact, we must not risk the life of a firefighter to rescue a dog, as nice as it can be; the life of a firefighter is more valuable than that of an animal. On the other hand, the person who owns a dog can do euthanize when he or she wants to and he or she will not be brought to court; if the same person were to suffocate her child, she would be accused of a criminal offense and would be liable to imprisonment.
- 9- The human being is in a line of beings with whom he is interdependent (the environmental movement draws our attention to this aspect), but he goes far beyond this limitation: he is the only one who is aware of himself; the presence in him of a mind (rational soul) also allows him to be opened to the existence of a higher class than himself: in that sense we say that man is '*capax Dei*', able to conceive the existence of a God, Creator, intelligent origin of the universe, something no animal can do.

- 10- This first step of our reflection invites us to consider human being as the pinnacle of our world; therefore he has an inherent dignity that must be respected. I would now like to look more closely at this man, his constitution.
- 11- A second element of philosophy can then enlighten our reflection: the structure of being in matter and form. 'Matter' is something indeterminate; 'form' is what gives it its identity. For example, in a certain way, wood is indeterminate: with wood I can make stairs, a chair, a table, a library, a wall, a fence ... The 'form' specifies what this or that is, what distinguishes it from another, what its nature is; take the example of a chair: this is a piece of furniture for sitting on (with four legs, and a back); if I add arms, it becomes an armchair; if I raise the back, it becomes a throne ... In reality the union between 'matter' and 'form' is needed: the artisan who wants to build a 'throne', has the idea in his head ('form') but it becomes reality with the material he chooses: a particular wood, a given metal, a particular tissue ... This reality is expressed by a specific name: the word 'table' refers to something else than 'chair', even if it has four legs. I can decide to change the name of something; but this does not change the essence of the thing: the word 'water' can be said in many ways: H<sub>2</sub>O, water, aqua, agua, udor: it is the same reality that lies beneath the word.
- 12- Some might be tempted to see in the human being a 'matter', a set of biological cells similar to those of the animals; nevertheless, there is in him a proper 'form', which essentially distinguishes him from animals; this is called the soul. The human being is not an "angel", a spirit without a body; he is not just a body without a soul. It is both soul and body. It is not his size that makes him more human: a person of 600 pounds is not more human than a 12 pound baby; it is not the color of the skin that makes him more human (white or black are equal in human dignity); the scientist is not more human than the illiterate poor woman. Human dignity lies on belonging to our species, with its own chromosomes.
- 13- I would like to mention another important philosophical principle that affects beings in development: potentiality and actuality. 'Potentiality' evokes a capacity, a possibility; 'actuality' means precisely the realization of this capacity. Some people have great intellectual abilities: life circumstances may or may not allow their manifestation; young geniuses cannot reach maturity because the conditions of their development are not there (material poverty, emotional, social problems ...). Nature itself shows us these amazing potentialities, especially in seeds: can you imagine that in a pine seed is an entire potential tree, which can grow only when favorable conditions are present. However a pine seed necessarily gives a tree that corresponds to its nature: a pine seed will not give an apple tree.
- 14- Human being is in development, 'in potentiality': he is given capabilities that need to be actualized. From the moment of his conception, we can see, like biology shows clearly, that the entire human genetic structure is already present, distinct from both the father and the mother; he expects his own characteristics to show and he will never be anything else than a human being.

15- I thought it might be useful to dwell on these considerations to begin our reflection on respect for life of the human beings. They remind us that the human being is the summit of visible creation and should be treated with special respect; he is a distinct kind (separate from animals); he has a unique dignity; he is a being in development.

Second part : Respect for life from conception versus Abortion

16- Let us look now at the respect of life from the moment of conception, and its great opponent: Abortion. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says :

*2270 Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception.*

*From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person - among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.*

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.*

*My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.*

*2271 Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law:*

*You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause the newborn to perish.*

*God, the Lord of life, has entrusted to men the noble mission of safeguarding life, and men must carry it out in a manner worthy of themselves. Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes.*

17- For forty years now, abortion has been greatly widespread in the Western world, under a very easy to identify strategy. To justify it, health reasons were mentioned first: women who clandestinely abort, without hygienic conditions, may die from infections and bleeding; we must avoid this danger and operate in optimum conditions, in sanitized environments, with doctors and nurses ...

18- Then therapeutic reasons were given, for instance the actual or potential diseases of the fetus. The name therapeutic abortion was used: to prevent the birth of potentially disabled children, it was necessary to destroy them. At the time of introduction of this intervention, I remember we were assured of the existence of 'strict guidelines': medical and ethical expert committees were to rule on the

necessity or desirability of such an intervention. It hardly took time before these committees ceased to function and the reasons for acceptance spread. Now we are denied interventions of this kind; they are viewed as interferences in the private lives of people and a result of a lack of respect of their autonomy.

- 19- Since abortion is a word charged with negativity, some want to reduce anxiety in people who use it; they replace the word by an acronym: Voluntary interruption of pregnancy (VIP); medical interruption of pregnancy (MIP); elimination of the products of conception (CPE). This fits well with a contemporary social trend: we change words, thinking that in this way, we change the reality. For example we no longer speak of blind, but of *unsighted* persons, (these persons do not see more !); instead of deaf, we speak of *hearing-impaired* (they do not hear badly: they do not hear at all). CPE: three little letters that cannot traumatize, because they hide their real content.
- 20- Abortion then became a birth control method; teenagers can use it, get an abortion without their parents being informed. In some places it is even forbidden to show young people the reality of abortion: one might say that it could traumatize them. As if the being that is aborted were not traumatized! We know the abortion methods: the day after pill, suction-aspiration, dilatation and evacuation, dilatation and extraction, each more horrible than the other; they destroy what is and will never be anything else than a human being who is stopped not only in his development but in his existence itself. Rarely do we hear about the children who survive abortion, they are left to die, they are equated to waste. We also see the neonatal infanticide: it seems that many doctors have performed euthanasia of newborns, even if infanticide is legally prohibited. We have not even referred to the physical and psychological consequences of abortion on mothers and families.
- 21- The reasons for abortion continues to expand. In addition to potential diseases or infirmities, in some countries, female fetuses are eliminated, with dramatic social effects it causes, for example in China, while the population is now experiencing a disturbing imbalance: there are no more enough women for the number of men.
- 22- Thus, from initial tolerance and supposedly well 'framed' implementation, abortion became a right that no one can deny: the woman's right to dispose of her body (but the child is not the woman's body: which woman can keep the child in herself for twelve months or more: whether she wills it or not, the fetus will come out). This is seen as an 'exclusive' women's right on the child who is nevertheless the product of the union of man and woman (23 chromosome pairs from one and the other).
- 23- In Canada there are no legal restrictions on abortion. The Criminal Code states: "A *child becomes a human being when it has completely proceeded in a living from his mother's womb*". Some often talk about 'partial birth'. What substantial change happens between the child in the womb and the child that is born? This is the same being, with the same number of chromosomes: the human dignity is not acquired at birth, but at the conception!

- 24- In France, they are talking about a new crime: obstruction of abortion. Someone who tries to deter another person from carrying out an abortion is accused of the crime of obstruction; some want even to close websites that present the actual content of abortion.
- 25- What must we do as Catholics? First we have to appeal to the principle of reality. We all have the experience of playing with young children: we place a towel in front of our face and we cry 'cuckoo': the child laughs; with the towel on our face, the child does not see us anymore, for him we no longer exist, even if in fact we continue to exist; for him, we have no real existence, independent of him; we exist only when he becomes aware of us.
- 26- It is the same thing for abortion. We are invited to promote respect for life, first to cease 'hiding' the reality of abortion: stop talking CPE, but using the word abortion, especially since it hurts.
- 27- We must show the wonder of the developing embryo and fetus in the womb of the mother. Modern technology allows us to witness this extraordinary phenomenon: at the moment of the union between sperm and ovum, a new being appears in the world, a being which has his own genetic makeup, distinct from parents, but own and irreducible to him. What I said above about the biosphere and the noosphere finds a remarkable illustration here.
- 28- The fetus is a being in gestation: he has not reached his full maturity, it is obvious. But there is more than a mass of cells, as some would have us believe: these are human cells, which will never result in anything else than a human being. All the genetic makeup of our species is there. With abortion someone voluntarily stops this process, destroying this being and his potential. We must show the reality of abortion, what that word actually covers up. Let us not forget the post-abortion syndrome.
- 29- We need to value motherhood. Women have the privilege and responsibility to bear life. We owe them our gratitude and support.
- 30- Finally, we must support those tempted by abortion, by providing the required assistance for themselves and for unborn child.

### Third part : euthanasia and assisted suicide

- 31- At the end of life is death, which comes naturally, and no one escapes it. To this universal reality, human beings make their own contributions; they are indeed capable of causing the death of others. This is already visible in the first pages of the Bible, when Cain kills his brother Abel, whose spilled blood cries out to God. Human history is interwoven by homicides and murders between individuals and peoples.

- 32- Early in our history, some tried to channel, to limit the possibility of killing another human being; in fact someone can defend his own life from an aggressor, in what is called legitimate self defense. To protect society from a dangerous and possibly recidivist criminal, the death penalty was authorized for some very serious crimes; one must however prove beforehand that this person actually committed this evil, because no one is allowed to impose justice by his own means; this duty belongs to neutral and objective bodies. Specific rules were also written for the war, described as 'just war' under certain conditions, with specific requirements for compliance with the defeated enemy ... I do not want to dwell on this, because it is not our focus tonight.
- 33- In the Roman Empire, the right to life and death existed for certain categories of persons; the father could decide whether his newborn would live or not; he could also put his slave to death, since slaves were more or less legally equated with animals in his possession. In fact, the slaves who constituted 2/3 of the population of Rome, were considered inferior beings.
- 34- Christianity granted to gradually perceive the senselessness of this division between human beings: created in *the image and likeness of God*, all human beings are called to be brothers and sisters, because they are children of the same Father. By the mere fact that they exist, they are endowed with the same dignity that must be respected; no one is superior to another due to race, intelligence, sex, or power, to the point of having a right to the life of the other.
- 35- History reveals a willingness to soften death in some cases: in Roman law, criminals were condemned to crucifixion; and so Jesus and Peter were crucified. For their part, the Roman citizens, like St. Paul, had the privilege of being 'beheaded'; they died too, but the punishment was shorter. In France, for centuries, criminals have been beheaded too; in the eighteenth century, to reduce the risk of a missed decapitation and thus to shorten the sufferings, Mr. Guillotin invented an instrument more effective than the sword, an instrument that bears his name: the guillotine. In the US, the electric chair was once used; it has now been replaced by lethal injections.
- 36- In line with these 'softened' deaths for criminals, some sought to provide a '*sweet death*' for certain categories of people. This is the meaning of the word "euthanasia" which etymologically means 'good death' (eu: good and thanatos: death). I note here that we find a common root with our word *ev-angle*: however, instead of good news is a good death!
- 37- In connection with *eugenism* (good race), some thought that certain categories of people were less worthy of living, as lower beings. During the Second World War, because they believed that they were a race that was superior to the rest of humanity, the Nazis 'euthanized' millions of people they considered worthless: the mentally ill, the handicapped, Gypsies, Jews; their law justified this deadly behavior. At the end of the war, other nations were amazed and horrified to see that such treatment had



been inflicted on people whose only crime was that they did not meet the Nazi's criteria, and for this reason, saw their human dignity and their very existence destroyed.

- 38- Behind this 'euthanasic' mentality is the pretention of taking the life of an innocent person, considered less valuable for various reasons (race, intelligence, physical or psychological condition ...). In civilized countries, euthanasia is still prohibited.
- 39- Because of recent history that showed many horrors, the word 'euthanasia' frightens and people are reluctant to use it; like the word 'abortion' that hides under three letters (CPE), one then hides euthanasia under a more vague expression, which is assisted suicide, or medical care in dying.. Because the name is change, some believe that the reality is changed, like the child who thinks his mother is no longer there because she is hiding behind the towel.
- 40- The goal is clear: to kill the person; to justify this action, we no longer use notions of racial superiority, but some focus on the register of feelings: with the word 'medical care', attention is drawn to 'compassion' for the other, to the suffering we want to relieve; in fact, in order to eliminate suffering, the person is eliminated.
- 41- The increasing introduction of this medical aid in dying is tied in part to recent medical advances. In fact, for fifty years, medical science has enabled the survival of people who would once have died. This has led many to wonder if we must always save a particular patient and at any price: is there some extraordinary care required? Is there no risk of falling into aggressive therapy, painful and ultimately useless? The infinitely sad episode of 'thalidomide' in 1960 also showed the limits of science: in order to reduce nausea in pregnant women, thalidomide had the side effect of the tragic birth of profoundly disabled children, without arms or legs: some distraught parents even killed them.
- 42- These extreme elements have helped to prepare human mentality to accept medical help in dying. In countries where it has been established, for example in the Netherlands in the early 2000s, strict guidelines were established: one has to be suffering in terminal illness, with an unbearable suffering; an independent medical opinion is required; expert committees will, they say, study the case.
- 43- Now in all countries where this practice is established, there is an escalation of reasons to justify it: it is not only about terminal illness, but any disease or infirmity which reduces the quality of life, that causes degeneration, psychological pain; others consider discriminatory to impose limits of illness, age ..; recently some require euthanasia because they feel they have succeeded in their life, they have nothing else to expect. An article in the *Quotidien Chicoutimi* last week, some said that current Canadian law will evolve and be less restrictive. Medical aid in dying has become a personal right that nobody can challenge and all must work for its implementation.

- 44- We are committed to a 'slippery slope' that no one knows where it will stop; sick children have been euthanized, without their consent. Some wish to 'die with dignity', a very subjective notion: who indeed may define the conditions of 'dignity': what is worthy for some is not necessarily worthy for others; the requirements of the people of the third world are very different from ours: it is their life 'unworthy' because they live in conditions other than ours? It is risky to let the politicians determine the conditions of dignity.
- 45- It is not a certainty that this 'right' to die will not soon become a 'duty', an obligation to die. Some seniors may feel compelled to use to this measure, in order not to be a burden to those around them; others would feel that their life has no more value; others might raise the economic cost of treatment of those who are seriously ill or disabled: would it not be simpler to get rid of these people?
- 46- Already there is the tendency to get people and institutions to carry out euthanasia. The rights of the medical staff (doctors, nurses, pharmacists) not to collaborate in this action are challenged. The applicant's right becomes absolute, and the freedom of conscience of health workers is greatly threatened: even if Hippocrates would not give poison to the sick, some today would compel him to do so.
- 47- In the escalation of the culture of death, the rights of palliative cares centres are now challenged since they do not offer this so-called 'service': as if all health centres should always provide all possible forms of care! A gerontology centre does not have to provide room for deliveries; no one can go there and telling her right to give birth there! A pregnancy home does not have to provide care for AIDS patients! If someone chooses a palliative care centre, it is because he is sure to receive a particular type of care. If another person wants medical help to die, she has to go where this is offered. Palliative care centres are a guarantee for the patient who uses them: the person who goes there knows that her life will be respected, she will be helped to support her suffering, to lucidly face death.
- 48- The implementation of this 'medical' to die threatens the relationship of trust with the doctor: the patient may indeed wonder whether the drug brought to him is to save his life or take it away; in the Netherlands, some elderly have moved from their country precisely because they have lost confidence in the caregivers.
- 49- We are invited to remember that the human being does not find his dignity from his living conditions, but from his nature: his mere existence gives him his dignity. We must remember also that a Society shows its value when it is able to take care of its weakest members. Nobody has the right to take the life of someone else: this is the basis of civilization, social peace, security. Otherwise, who can guarantee that my own life is not threatened? It will be enough for legislators to determine that some people no longer have the right to live after a certain age, or in such conditions. I think in that sense of the movie *Logan's Run* (Age de cristal), 1970: leaders had determined that people were not to exceed 30 years of age; when they reached this age, people had to disappear!

- 50- The human person has to rediscover the sense of dignity that remains even in his ailing condition. The doctor does not have to remove all suffering; he should seek to decrease it; to do this, he has no obligation to eliminate the sufferer. This is intrinsically evil, even at the request of the person.
- 51- We are encouraged not to leave ourselves trapped by euphemisms', these words that hide reality, in order to make us agree smoothly with; assisted suicide is not something medical or a care, since it is aimed at death. As it is with abortion, it is necessary to show the reality of this death that invades the body under the guise of 'cleanliness'. Today we would find despicable to use the guillotine to end someone's suffering; however, with injected medication, the result is the same, except we do not see the internal violence: the person is in the 'clean' mood of a health center, with clean sheets, clean staff; we do not see what is happening inside the body: the person is asleep, she is injected with products affecting vital organs and leading to her death.
- 52- We must promote the introduction of palliative care, which decreases the demand for euthanasia; in this case, the person is indeed surrounded by multidisciplinary care: medical, psychological, emotional, spiritual. The light of faith also offers the meaning of suffering that the saints perfectly illustrated; Christ who experienced the physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual suffering becomes present, supports and strengthens us. Each of us can be his instruments.
- 53- As Christians, we oppose absolutely any direct and deliberate action to hasten death in order to end the suffering. However, this does not mean that we have an obligation to use all possible means to prolong life in all cases: there is a limit to particular means that someone is morally obliged to use to keep others alive. To renounce extraordinary or disproportionate means is not equivalent to euthanasia; it rather expresses acceptance of the human condition before death (*Evangelium Vitae* 65). We do not have to use aggressive therapy; however, we must ensure the basic conditions (food, hydration, hygiene) that are common to everyone.
- 54- In sum, assisted suicide and euthanasia are contrary to the dignity and inherent worth of the human person, to the true compassion for our brothers; they are contrary to the protection of vulnerable people; contrary to the healing ethics of the medical profession; contrary to true freedom.
- 55- We are invited to promote respect for each person, sick, elderly, disabled; to surround them with our presence and our support; to offer them the light of faith and the support of Christ. We must work for the establishment of palliative care everywhere; for the freedom of conscience of health workers.
- 56- We can help our Catholic brothers and sisters to respect the life they have received from God and to welcome death without wanting to accelerate it.