

The Right to Life

by Fr. Vladimir Berzonsky

‘The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and the serpent shall eat only dust. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.’ (ISAIAH 65: 25)

At a conference of priests in our area recently, a physician made it a point to visit at meal time and to plead the case for our state’s “Right to Life Society.” How odd that life needs defending. In the times we find ourselves, legislation is fast changing: particularly, laws that make it an offense to murder unborn children are being tested by those who think it right that a woman bearing a child has the “right” to dispose of that child prior to the time of birth.

Once we have accepted the principle that we as persons can decide all problems without recourse to a set of standards for all people, there will be no end to our innovations. If unborn children have no “right” to life, but can be disposed of at the whim or convenience of its “mother,” why can we not decide that the retarded child be mercifully deprived of life: the aged, the mentally retarded, those with incurable diseases, all could be charged with the responsibility of proving their right to exist. The practices resulting from this philosophy was received with abhorrence a generation ago, when it was carried out in Hitler’s Germany. It appears that victory has not yet been fully achieved ... at least, not over the dehumanizing of humanity.

I had been exposed to the thought of Albert Schweitzer during my late teens. Unlike many of the philosophers, his ideas are both easily understood and consistent. What seemed most impressive was Schweitzer’s attitude to life: in his term, “reverence for life.” To conceptualize reverence is itself in our times a formidable task, but reverence for life at least used to be taken for granted by many Christians. It means simply that life in any form is good, and worthy of existence. Evidently even the prehistoric cave men who sketched in charcoal on their cave walls images of mammoth and sabre-toothed tigers revered, or at least respected the vitality they saw in those animals.

We seem to have lost that respect for living things. For us, animals in cages are to stare at, as we do our television sets. Even people are mere objects, masses which we try to avoid; they jam our highways, take up the picnic tables and everywhere get in our way. Dare we even suggest that contractors and excavators consider the wildlife they destroy, to bring us “civilization?”

Dr. Schweitzer’s concept of reverence for life meant not only humanity, not even the animal kingdom; he predicted there would come a time when the human conscience would be so sensitive to the goodness in living things that we would not destroy unnecessarily even a blade of grass, nor break a branch off a tree. Upon seeing an ant drowning in a puddle, one would stop to bend a twig towards the creature.

I do believe one day Dr. Schweitzer’s vision may be realized, just as Isaiah’s must come about, but it will happen only when the world turns once again to God. In the Lord we are brothers and the world is put in our custody. Only when we respond to Him, do we feel ourselves entrusted with the care for its welfare.