MORALITY AND SEAMLESS GARMENT THEORY

John Paul II: "Voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral"

The so-called "seamless garment theory" currently equates intrinsic evils such as abortion and euthanasia, which are always bad, with complex social justice issues such as the death penalty, immigration and wages which might have immoral aspects based on their circumstances but are not intrinsically evil.

The term coined by a Catholic pacifist in 1971 hitched abortion to capital punishment. It referenced Christ's untorn cloak mentioned in John 19:23–24. The late Cdl. Joseph Bernardin of Chicago made similar moral comparisons in 1983, using the term "consistent ethic of life." Speaking then of "respect for life" he lumped together abortion and capital punishment with eugenics, nuclear war and euthanasia. A few months later he adopted the terminology of seamless garment and added social justice issues such as human rights, hunger and poverty.

In drafting Catholic voter guidelines in the mid-1990s, U.S. bishops expanded Cdl. Bernardin's "consistent ethic of life" from protecting all life, innocent or not, to the promotion of "human dignity," which looped in poverty, violence and other perceived forms of injustice. In their 2015 voters guideline, U.S. bishops joined to the intrinsic evils of abortion, euthanasia and redefining marriage other merely social justice issues such as racism, employment, education, housing, health care, immigration and perceived environmental issues. While some prelates equate the morality of abortion with poverty, others rightly deny such moral equivalence.

In his encyclical Evangelium Vitae, Pope St. John Paul II spoke of intrinsic evils such as abortion and euthanasia. While making allowances for the death penalty and a just war theory in certain circumstances, the Holy Father stated, "I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral." He went on to say, "In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is therefore never licit to obey it or to 'take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law or vote for it.'"

Learn the troubling facts underlying eugenics in Moral Compass—Stem Cell Research and Human Dignity.