

Te Kahu o te Ora
A Consistent Ethic of Life

From the Catholic Bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand

Te Huinga o ngā Pīhopa Katorika o Aotearoa
New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference

catholic.org.nz

Dedication

This document is dedicated to the memory of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1928–1996), Archbishop of Chicago (1982–1996), whose active promotion of the consistent ethic of life planted the seeds for this Statement.

Preface

Along with many others, we believe: "The right to life is the supreme right of human beings. It is basic to all human rights, and without it all other rights are without meaning."[1] We believe that this right exists from conception to natural death and belongs to every person at every stage of their life, irrespective of who they are.

In Aotearoa, we have seen the right to life eroded in recent years. Major legislative changes mean it has become much easier to obtain abortions. Euthanasia is now legally available.

At the same time, we have become increasingly aware of the fragility of human life and the planet and its ecosystems that we are part of and upon which all life depends; "The poor and the earth are crying out"[2] as the right to life is eroded in new and frightening ways. This awareness, which confronts us daily in the shape of environmental disasters wreaking unprecedented destruction, demands that we re-double and re-shape our efforts to protect God's gift of life – all life. We now know that creation can no longer be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting that we live in. Our duty to protect human life and the biblical injunction to care for the earth which we share with the rest of God's creation are closely entwined. As Pope Francis has written:

[1] Te Kāhui Tika Tangata – Human Rights Commission. (2023) Human rights in Aotearoa.
[2] Pope Francis. (2015). *Laudato si' – A Christian prayer in union with creation.*

We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.[3]

An integrated approach is the logical response to a fundamental theological truth; biologically, spiritually, culturally and ethically, everything is intrinsically connected. In the post-Vatican II era, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin gave that truth renewed prominence in 1984 through the concept of a consistent ethic of life. Today, almost 40 years on, facing new threats as well as old ones, the consistent ethic of life provides us with a framework for a more robust moral response; one that honours the moral connections between issues that we have previously treated as if they were separate.

In 1997, the NZCBC highlighted the significance of Cardinal's Bernardin's contribution by publishing a statement titled ***Te kahu o te ora – A consistent ethic of life***. Now, in 2023, 26 years on from the original statement, the idea of a consistent approach to life is more important than ever. This is especially the case at this time of reckoning for the Church as it deals with its own inconsistencies related to sexual, physical and other forms of abuse.

Therefore, we are pleased to offer to you, the Catholics of Aotearoa, a revised version of Te kahu o te ora – A consistent ethic of life. We trust this document will continue to inspire the active protection and promotion of life through a commitment to social policies and practices that enhance well-being for all. We encourage you to share this document with all persons of good will, and we pray it will foster life-giving conversations and actions within Aotearoa and beyond.

Support Life Sunday, 8 October 2023

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[3] *Laudato si'*, n. 139.

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Te Kahu

The reference to “kahu” is rich with meaning.

For Māori, kahu commonly refers to a cape or garment, something that offers protection against the elements. The kahu huruhuru, a specific kind of cape, is traditionally crafted from the feathers of the most beautiful birds woven into a muka (flax fibre) foundation. It is a thing of skilfully constructed beauty that requires months of highly specialised work. Kahu huruhuru were designed to be worn by chiefs, and they signified and bestowed ***mana*** and ***dignity***. They were also treasured because Māori considered birds to be messengers from the spiritual realm.

In addition, kahu can refer to the membrane enveloping the embryo/foetus, the protective sac where every new life receives the nourishment it needs to flourish and develop within – the first garment that each of us is gifted with.

At the end of a person’s life, a precious cloak may be used to adorn their casket, signifying the full flowering of that life in death.

Aptly translated as “the garment of life”, the title ***Te kahu o te ora*** also provides a clear and deliberate link to the “seamless garment” of Jesus that Cardinal Bernardin used to explain his specific approach to faith and life.



Te kahu o te ora – A consistent ethic of life

Introduction

We live in a country of extraordinary beauty that is blessed with wonderful gifts from our Creator.

We recognise the sacrifice and generosity of the many people who work tirelessly to serve the needs of their neighbours and our world. Their actions arise from and propagate a deep sense of hope for a more caring, equitable and just society and a more sustainable way of living.

We do not need to look far to recognise that our world requires a lot of healing. All around us, we experience divisions that are the result of human behaviours and institutions. These include:

- poverty;
- a lack of healthy affordable food, quality housing, education and healthcare;
- ongoing indifference to the sanctity of human life;
- the degradation of the environment;
- increased social isolation, anxiety and mental illness;
- racism and many other forms of unjust discrimination, abuse and violence.

As Catholics reflecting on the violence and abuse around us, we must also look critically at, and where necessary reform, our own Church structures, processes and behaviours.

The concept of a consistent ethic of life – te kahu o te ora – is founded on the conviction that all life is sacred. As such, it offers us a scripturally and theologically grounded way of looking at, and making sense of, our world.

Human life is sacred because we are created in the image of God – te tapu i te tangata. This intrinsic dignity, conferred by God, provides our moral stepping-off point. However, human sacredness and dignity are endowed not only by what is intrinsic but also by what is extrinsic to us. That is, it is endowed in and through the lived experience of our physical relationships – te tapu o te tangata. This is the tapu we enjoy because we are embodied social beings. We are socially and spiritually related to God, to one another and to the land.

The notion of the consistent ethic of life mirrors this rich notion of dignity in its central idea that everything is connected.

The theological and moral implications of this connection call us to foster a broad attitude of respect for life.[4] This respect must infuse every aspect of our lives and world – every issue. While each issue is distinct, our choices in one area affect our decisions in other areas.[5] Advocacy on any one life issue positively influences, and is positively influenced by, advocacy in every other area. For example, challenging the attitude of domination that lies behind the destruction of our planet and the environment contributes to making abortion unthinkable. This is because the same attitude of domination is part of the logic of abortion. Stated positively, the inherent connection between issues means that when we uphold the idea of life as a divine and sacred gift in one area, we promote that notion in every area of life.

[4] Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. (1983). Gannon Lecture, Fordham University.
[5] Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. (1984). William Wade Lecture, St Louis University.

It is neither possible nor necessary for every person to engage in each issue. However, "it is both possible and necessary for the Church as a whole to cultivate a conscious, explicit connection among the several issues"[6] and therefore to be actively involved in every issue. As Cardinal Bernardin put it: "The Church … must be credible across a wide range of issues; the very scope of our moral vision requires a commitment to a multiplicity of questions."[7]

A consistent ethic of life provides us with a holistic and integrated way of seeing the world. It frames the reign of God in terms of right and just relationships with other persons and the ecological wellbeing of creation – te tapu i te whenua.

In the face of the many challenges to God's creative order and harmony, our faith in God constitutes a source of hope that continues to motivate us towards positive action. This is especially the case when the way forward remains uncertain and challenging. Writing about Cardinal Bernardin and his development of the consistent ethic of life, Bernardin's biographer commented: "Hope has to come first. From hope, we can begin and pursue the paths of peace that seem impossible. Hope is our license to believe in the impossible."[8]

[6] Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. (1984). William Wade Lecture, St Louis University.
[7] Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. (1984). William Wade Lecture, St Louis University.
[8] Millies, S. (2018). "If we'd listened to Cardinal Bernardin, the Catholic Church would not be where it is today." *National Catholic Reporter*.

The context

Theology is the process of faith seeking understanding. It calls for ongoing faith-informed reflection on our lives and the world around us, with a view to taking positive action.

We are part of an increasingly complex and changing world. The advent of a multiplicity of novel platforms for instant communication has quickly and dramatically changed the way we live. This includes the shape of our relationships and the ways we work, learn, gather information, access entertainment and purchase commodities and services. Other technological breakthroughs in science and medicine are bringing multiple benefits for humankind, as well as for the planet we inhabit and share.

We have become much more deeply aware that our "Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us … now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her."[9]

The well-being of the planet faces severe threats from ongoing increases in the average temperature, rising sea levels, adverse weather events, pollution, exploitation and mismanagement of its resources. Many species face extinction. Never in human history has the future of the planet depended so much on us making wise choices on behalf of the whole created order.

Meanwhile, many of the long-standing challenges remain: abortion, euthanasia, discrimination and the continued development of sophisticated

[9] *Laudato si'*, nn. 1–2.

weapons of destruction alongside the ongoing threat of nuclear weapons. At the same time, the continuing globalisation of the economy has not, as promised, lessened the inequity between the rich and the poor.

Too often, the driving forces for change are greed and the desire for power rather than the common good and solidarity of humanity. At times, technological developments run ahead of our ethical reflection on their consequences for human life and the planet.

The story of our past includes colonisation and a distorted human-centric disregard for our planet. We must recognise that the legacy of this past is political institutions and social structures that are inherently unjust. Any form of injustice built into national or international structures does violence to fundamental human rights and dignity and is sinful.[10]

However, structures and attitudes can be reformed. In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of many global and national movements to restore the rights of those people who are excluded, discriminated against or marginalised because of their sexuality, gender, race, country of origin or disability. We have also seen the rise of many movements committed to addressing the environmental crisis.

We must overcome the inaction that accompanies apathy and denial. We must make long-term transformational changes that are both personal and collective. We must also resist the temptation for quick fixes for our world. The necessary changes cannot occur without us significantly modifying our attitudes and lifestyles. Negotiating the many challenges of our time requires greater listening, power sharing, courage, collaboration, generosity, humility and sacrifice than ever before.

The continuance and flourishing of life's diversity requires a rich vision. For Catholics, this is rooted in a theological vision. The consistent ethic of life can be an integral part of this vision.

[10] *Gaudium et spes*, n. 25.

Our biblical and moral tradition

In the Scriptures we read: Choose life, not death (Deuteronomy 30:19,20a). Through God, all life was created and continues to be created.

Starting with the opening chapter of Genesis, the Hebrew Scriptures consistently proclaim the goodness of creation. They also give witness to God's abiding concern for, and faithful accompaniment of, the Hebrew people as they journeyed through the wilderness and desert to the new life of the promised land. So, too, God accompanies us today through the internal and external deserts of our lives.

In the incarnation of Christ Jesus we have the most powerful witness of God's accompaniment of humankind – God emptying self and assuming our human likeness, being in every way like us (Philippians 2:6-11) except sin.

God's sharing in our life and our sharing in the very life of God endows every human life with an inestimable value and an innate dignity. This means we must resist all calculations of "worth" or "quality of life" according to socially determined, functionalist criteria related to people's usefulness.[11] However, this does not mean we should be unconcerned about quality of life.

[11] *Evangelium vitae*, n. 2.

Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10). This highlights a divine concern for the "quality" of life. The "abundance" of life Jesus speaks of includes the richness, beauty and diversity of the Earth because all creation declares the glory of God (Psalm 19:1) and because the Lord takes care of all creation.

The Earth exists as the expression of God's wisdom, set on its foundations by God never to be shaken (Psalm 104). The primary purpose of Jesus' death and resurrection was so the sin and death that destroy the harmony of God's creation might be overcome forever and a "new creation" begun. The whole of creation is groaning in anticipation of this (Romans 8:22).

Although the recent Christian focus on a more sustainable and integrated approach to living may seem novel, its roots go deep into the Judaeo-Christian Tradition. The Hebrews had an acute awareness that right relationships between humans cannot be separated from a right relationship with the land. They showed this awareness by celebrating the Jubilee year every 50 years.

The Jubilee was a year of "liberation par excellence". It involved freeing people from debts, servitude and slavery, restoring property and rest for the land from cultivation (Leviticus 25:1-13). These observances were grounded in the belief that the Earth and all that is in it belong to God. The Jubilee year reinforced the notion that everything is a divine gift while also keeping human egoism and arrogance in check.[12] Respect of people for each other goes hand in hand with respect for the world we inhabit.

[12] The Holy See. (1997). *The Jubilee in the Bible.* https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01051997_p-78_en.html.

What we urgently need to do is recommit ourselves to an "integral ecology" that recognises:

- that humankind is part of creation and not separate from it;
- that "the degradation of nature is closely linked to the cultural models shaping human co-existence"; [13]
- the "intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet";[14]
- that those with fewest resources and least power are disproportionately bearing the burdens of the current ecological crisis;[15]
- that intergenerational solidarity is not optional but rather a basic question of justice because the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us;[16]
- that the "external deserts are growing, because the internal [spiritual] deserts have become so vast".[17]

Ultimately, we need to understand "the conviction that everything in the world is connected" with greater urgency than ever.[18] As the Bishops of Aotearoa wrote in 2006, "Our world is facing an ecological crisis, which could equally be called an economic crisis, or a poverty crisis. Its public face is the suffering of the poor and the degradation of our environment..."[19]

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world [are] a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel".[20] At this point in our history, the biblical call to protect and nurture life means we need to widen our understanding of what it is we are protecting. We need to ask how we might implement the imperative for a form of justice that includes all of creation – a truly integral ecology.

[13] Pope Benedict. (2010). *World Day of Peace message.*
[14] *Laudato si',* n. 16.
[15] *Laudato si',* n. 7.
[16] *Laudato si',* n. 159.
[17] Pope Benedict. (2005). *Inaugural homily.*
[18] *Laudato si',* n. 16.
[19] NZCBC. (2006). *Statement on environmental issues.*
[20] World Synod of Catholic Bishops. (1971). *Justice in the world.*

A consistent ethic of life

As discussed above, the "right to life", properly understood, includes the right to flourish and develop according to our fullest potential. Anything that undermines the flourishing of God's creation constitutes a tear in the seamless garment of life.

With this in mind, we urge a renewed commitment to a consistent ethic of life. This approach makes the sacredness of all God's creation a basic and central moral point of reference. It highlights our obligation to protect and enhance all life, including the life of our planet.

As already noted, promoting and embracing a broader vision of the right to life does not in any way diminish our concern for the threats to human life that issues such as abortion and euthanasia pose. Rather, it is an expression of the wider theological and moral implications of the key principles that lie at the heart of our unconditional commitment to human life.

Cardinal Bernardin's approach offers a "corrective lens" that can help us widen the parameters of what we see as morally significant. At the same time, it can also help us bridge the gap between inconsistent moral positions on matters concerning human life.

To quote Cardinal Bernardin, "as individuals and groups pursue one issue, whether it is opposing abortion or capital punishment, the way we oppose one threat should be related to support for a systemic vision of life".[21]

[21] Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. (1984). William Wade Lecture, St Louis University.

More specifically, the concept of the consistent ethic of life can act as a counter to the culture of domination (between humankind and by humankind over God's creation) that is all too readily evident. Just as a kahu embraces all that is good and wholesome, so too the consistent ethic of life forms a canopy of non-violent moral teachings embracing the connections between all parts of God's creation. Importantly, a consistent ethic of life enables us to honour and deal with the real-life complexity of the issues – old and new – we find ourselves living with as we seek to apply our Catholic ethic of life.[22]

The consistent ethic of life draws on the Church's traditional principles and brings them together in a more expansive and cohesive framework. These principles include:

- the inviolable dignity of human life, the central thread of the garment of life – te aho o te kahu;
- a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable that includes Mother Earth and all life;
- an active commitment to all of God's creation as a "gift";
- an awareness that a robust commitment to the right to life calls us to work towards greater justice within our political and economic policies and structures.

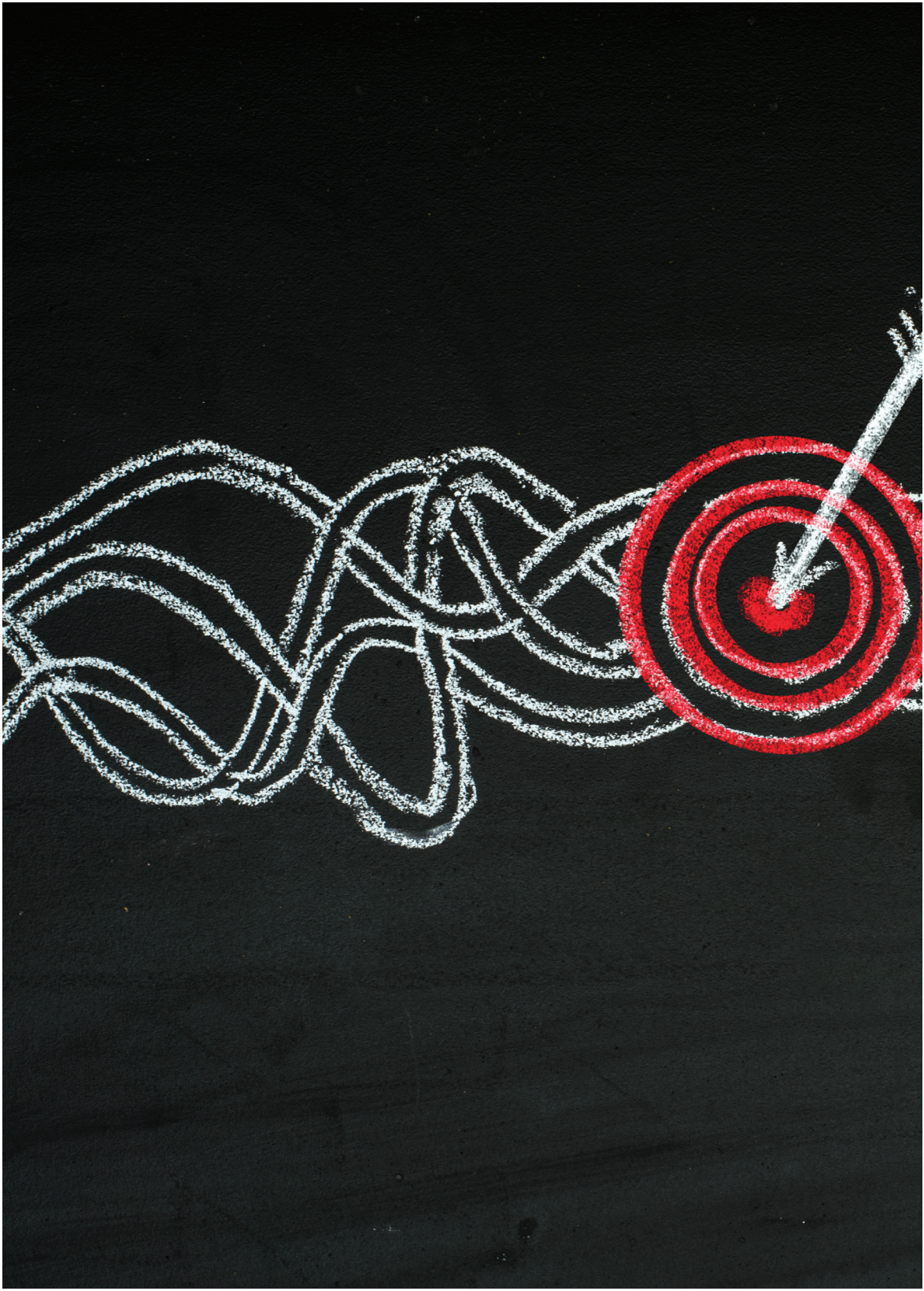
These principles are essential components of the common good. Together, like the kahu, they form the fabric of a "seamless garment" (John 19:23) of ethics. If practised, this ethic can help us to maintain, and where necessary restore, harmony and right relationships within humankind and between humankind and the rest of God's creation.

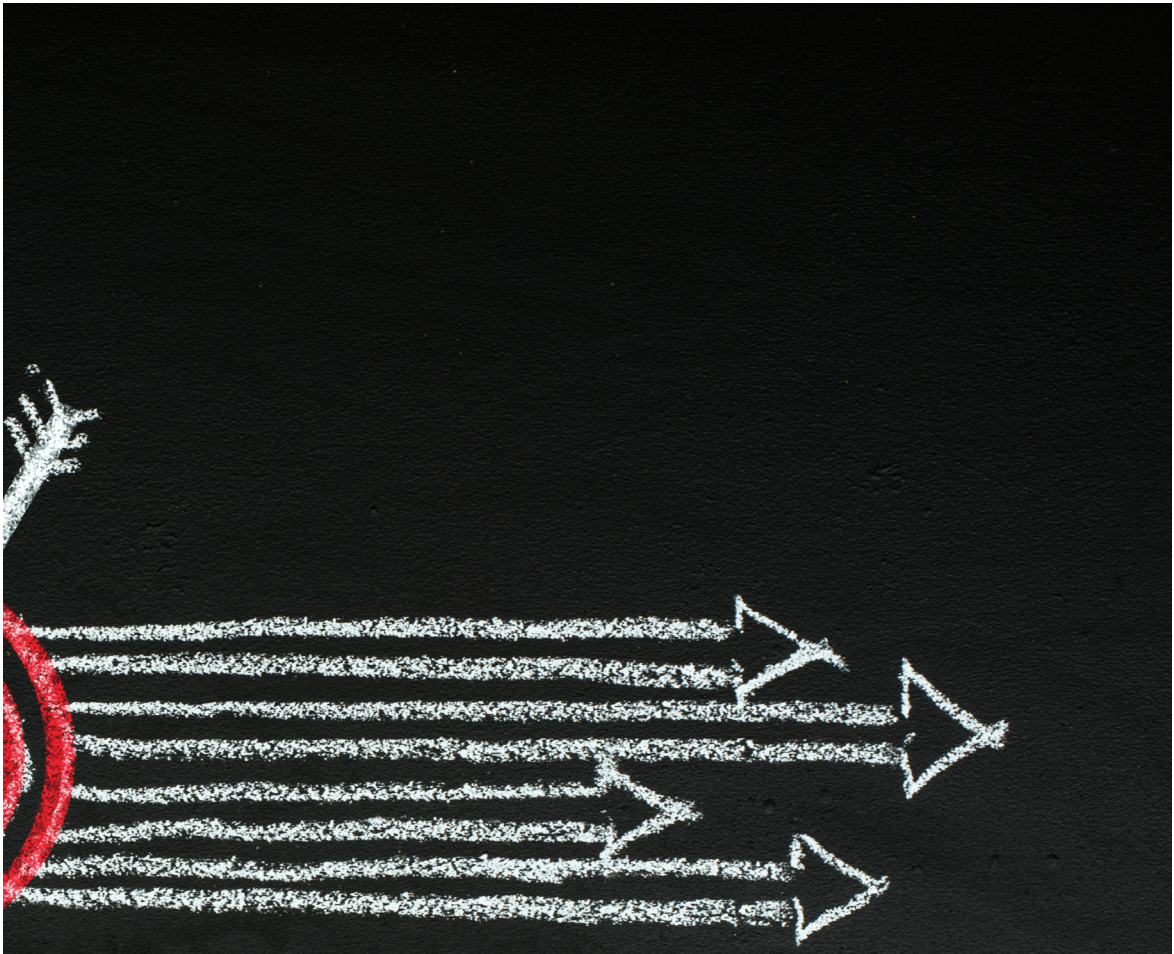
[22] Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. (1984). William Wade Lecture, St Louis University.

In the words of Cardinal Bernardin, "A consistent ethic of life seeks to present a coherent linkage among a diverse set of issues. It can and should be used to test party platforms, public policies, and political candidates."[23]

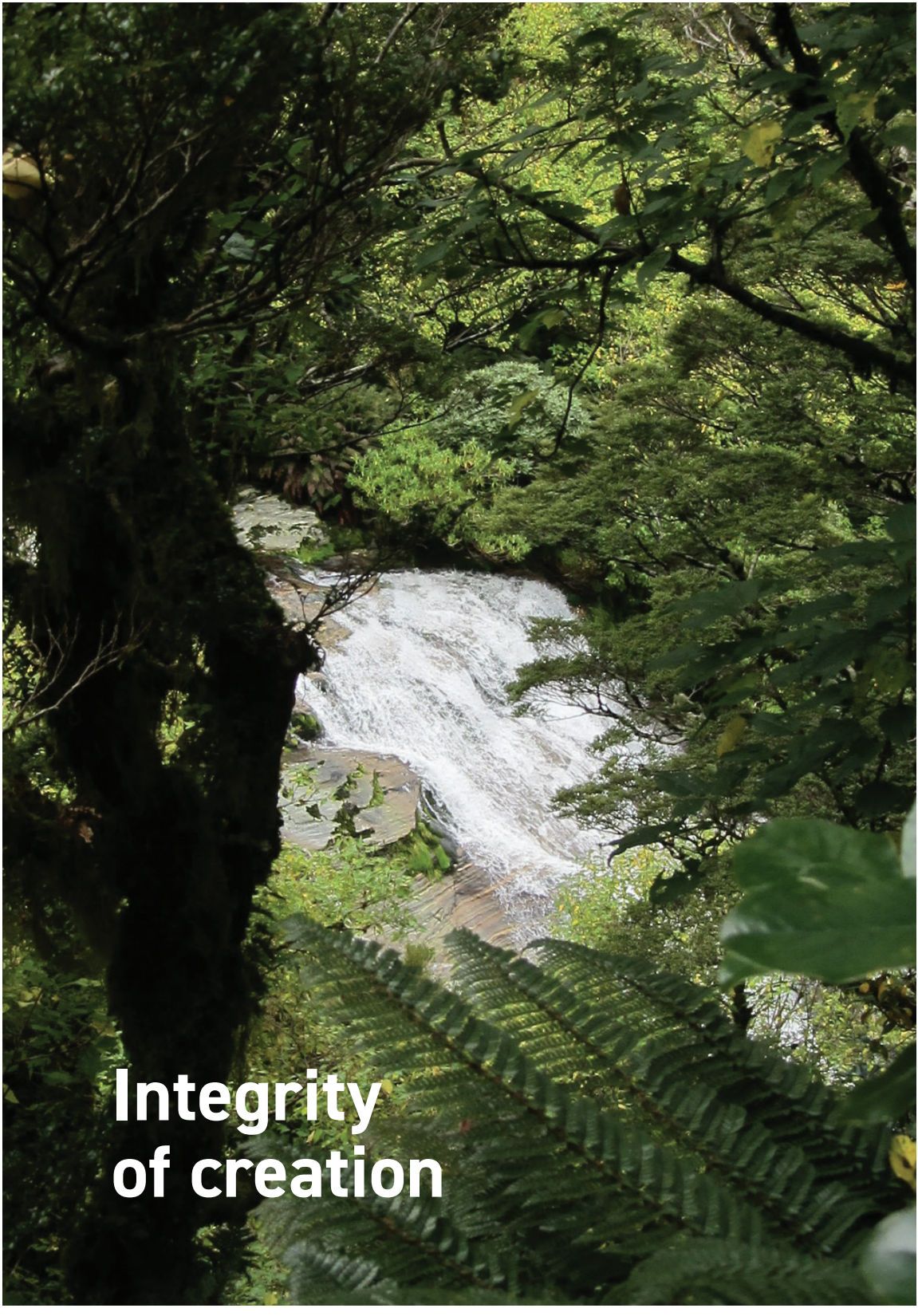
As we contemplate new challenges to the well-being of humankind and our planet, and while the traditional threats to human life remain as real as ever, we can appreciate that Cardinal Bernardin's insights into the consistent ethic of life have a timeless quality.

[23] Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. (1984). William Wade Lecture, St Louis University.





Engaging with and applying a consistent ethic of life...



Integrity of creation

Integrity of creation

Respect for the integrity of creation is a central element of Church teaching. This is a theme that Pope Francis regularly emphasises.

Pope Francis has written that "The bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures."[24] Recent pontiffs, going back to Pope Paul VI, have pointed out the intrinsic connection between unchecked human activity and a distorted sense of seeing no meaning in our natural environment other than what serves human beings for their immediate use.

Extreme weather events are becoming more normal. They are fuelled by unprecedented melting of the ice caps and glaciers, rising sea levels, typhoons and cyclones, flooding and extreme heat events that are growing in number and ferocity. These events are clearly connected with human activity and a lack of respect for the integrity of creation. We in Aotearoa have experienced that we are not immune from the devastation they bring.

Within creation, all life forms are interconnected through ecosystems that are now increasingly fragile. The well-being of nature is essential because it provides us with pure water, clean air, the healthy soil that we need to grow our food in and other essential minerals and raw materials.

[24] *Laudato si'*, n. 68.
<< Photo by John Kleinsman

A consistent ethic of life is in keeping with te ao Māori. It respects the sacredness of creation and our role as partners in life with the Earth, the oceans, the lakes, the animal world, the mountains, the fish of the sea and the birds in our forests and gardens. From these sources, we draw life and nourishment – both physical and spiritual.

In times of deep crisis, it can seem easier and more comfortable to either ignore evidence of the climate crisis or take a selective approach to it by choosing arguments that satisfy our desire to retain our current lifestyles.

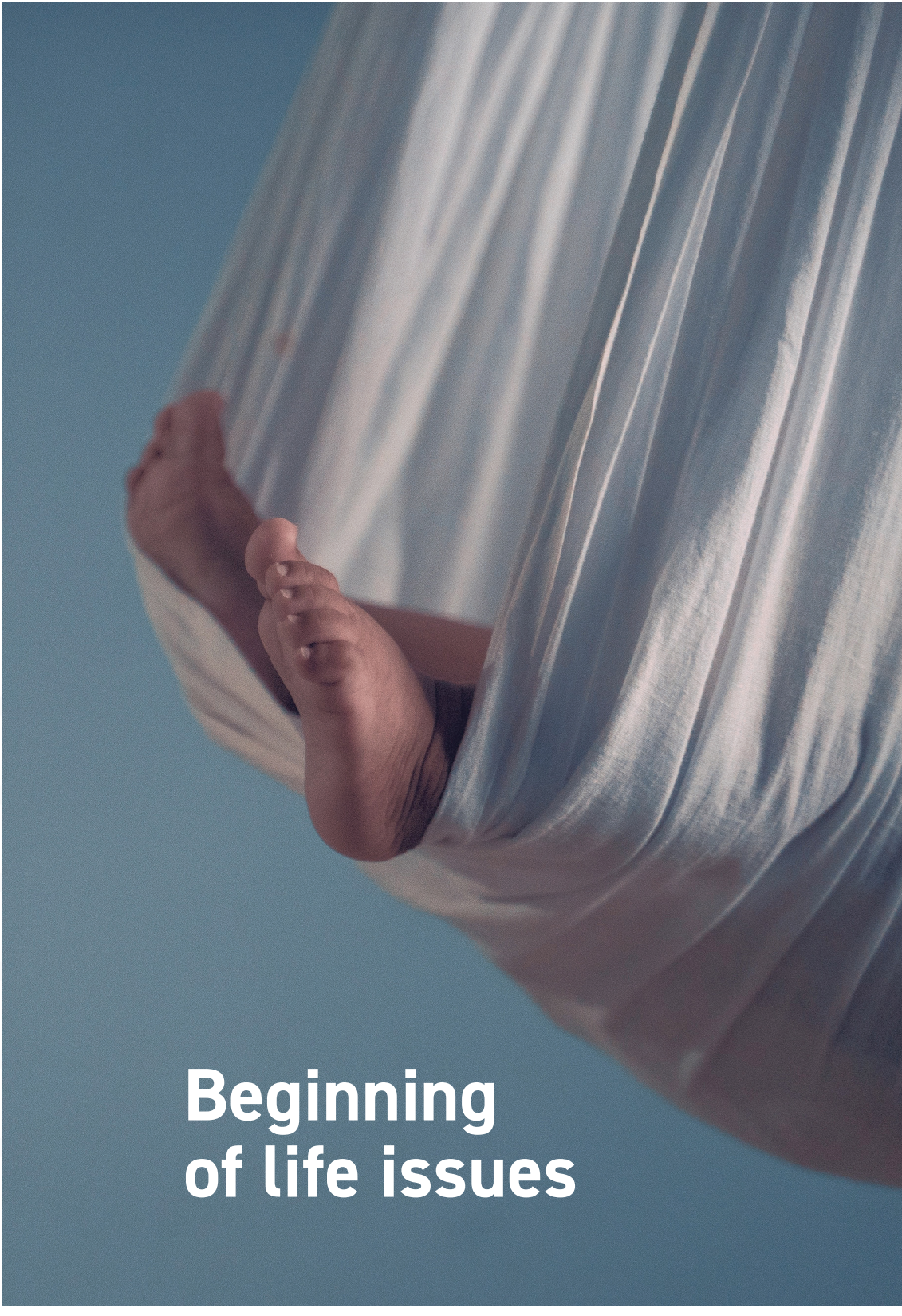
A consistent ethic of life points us towards a cosmological vision for life that is rooted in a humble understanding of the rightful place that our species, humankind, occupies in God's plan for creation. It is a vision based on the relational notion of "integral ecology" that:

- rejects the idea that the ecological crisis is simply a series of problems to be solved;
- sees the crisis as a symptom of a deeper human and spiritual crisis based on humankind's fractured relationship with God's creation, with each other and ultimately with God;
- simultaneously emphasises the moral responsibility we hold for the current situation as well as the moral obligation we have to act urgently and positively for a very different future for humanity and the planet than currently beckons.

Acknowledging that "the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity," Pope Francis writes that "we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships."[25] Any reflection on human relationships starts with the way we think about and relate to human life from its earliest beginnings.

[25] *Laudato si'*, n. 119.

› Photo by Praveen Kumar Mathivanan on Unsplash.



Beginning of life issues

Beginning of life issues

The Church teaches that human life begins at conception and that each life possesses an intrinsic and unconditional dignity. This starting point shapes our response to abortion as well as the Church's approach to human-assisted reproductive technologies.

Laudato si' notes, "Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is … incompatible with the justification of abortion."[26] Abortion is "the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth".[27] It is an affront to the God-given gift of life and must always be rejected. The prohibition of destructive research on human embryos is consistent with the belief in the unconditional dignity of human life from the moment of conception.

The unborn child is clearly one of the most vulnerable, innocent and defenceless of all human beings. This imposes a significant moral obligation on us all. At the same time, every pregnancy involves at least two lives – the child and the mother – and often impacts many others.

[26] *Laudato si'*, n. 120.
[27] *Evangelium vitae*, n. 8.

This means we need to remember that our obligations and responsibilities extend to creating an environment within families and society where pregnant mothers and their partners are supported and children are made welcome. In cases where continuing a pregnancy poses challenges for those most directly involved, it is vitally important that people do not see abortion as the only or most desirable possibility.

An approach based on a consistent ethic of life means that we need to ask ourselves: "Are our faith communities seen as places of non-judgemental welcoming love, compassion and care?" "Are our faith communities places of practical assistance (extending beyond the point of birth) that women facing the challenges of a pregnancy will want to turn to?" We must also apply these questions to those situations where now-routine prenatal testing reveals that an unborn child may be disabled.

The serious underlying societal issues that can become key factors in shaping an abortion trajectory include poverty, lack of community support, lack of employer support, lack of state support, prejudice and/or lack of knowledge about disabilities and coercion from a partner, family or friends.

It is understandable that couples unable to conceive naturally turn towards technology to overcome infertility. Even if "the manner in which human conception is achieved … cannot be approved, every child which comes into the world must be accepted as a living gift of the divine Goodness".[28]

However, the way we conceive children matters because all of our actions say something about how we regard the people most directly involved – whether as persons whose dignity is equal to our own or as beings that are subject to our control or domination.

[28] *Donum vitae,* Part II, B, 5.

Reproductive technologies introduce new elements into human procreation that threaten the intrinsic dignity of the human person. They have the potential to redefine fundamental understandings of parenting while undermining our belief that children are a gift and not a commodity. A "dynamic of violence and domination"[29] becomes evident when so-called "spare embryos" are abandoned or destroyed and when prenatal testing is used to judge which embryos/fetuses are worthy of living.

Several other key beliefs lie at the heart of a Catholic-Christian approach to human procreation. These are that:

- conception is an act of collaboration between God and the parents;
- there is no such thing as an unwanted child;
- it is in the interests of the child to hold together the biological, gestational and social aspects of parenthood that define the generation and nurturing of human life;
- the exclusive right of couples to become parents only through each other rather than using a third party.

[29] *Donum vitae*, Part II.
[>>] Photo by Hunt Han on Unsplash.



End of life issues

End of life issues

As Catholics, we believe life is a gift from God and that, although death is a mystery, it is always in God's hands.

We believe that the journey towards death is an important part of the human life journey. It is a time of personal growth and integration, and a time of anticipation of the eternal life that the risen Lord promised us (John 14:2).

In the last two decades, there have been significant developments in palliative care. Modern practices of pain relief can manage to make even the most difficult deaths bearable, if necessary, using palliative sedation.

Sadly, the message that many who face death voice is that they do not want to be an emotional, physical or financial burden on family or society. This negative message reflects a particular moral logic that values the strong, productive and independent over the weak, elderly and disabled. This logic, aptly named ableism, brings its own dangerous definitions of "compassion" and "mercy".

One of the ways we witness the existence and growth of ableism is in the growing social isolation that our elders experience. Research shows that this is a factor in people requesting an assisted death/ euthanasia.

Real-world experience is highlighting how the practice of euthanasia is placing a most dangerous and immoral power in the hands of human

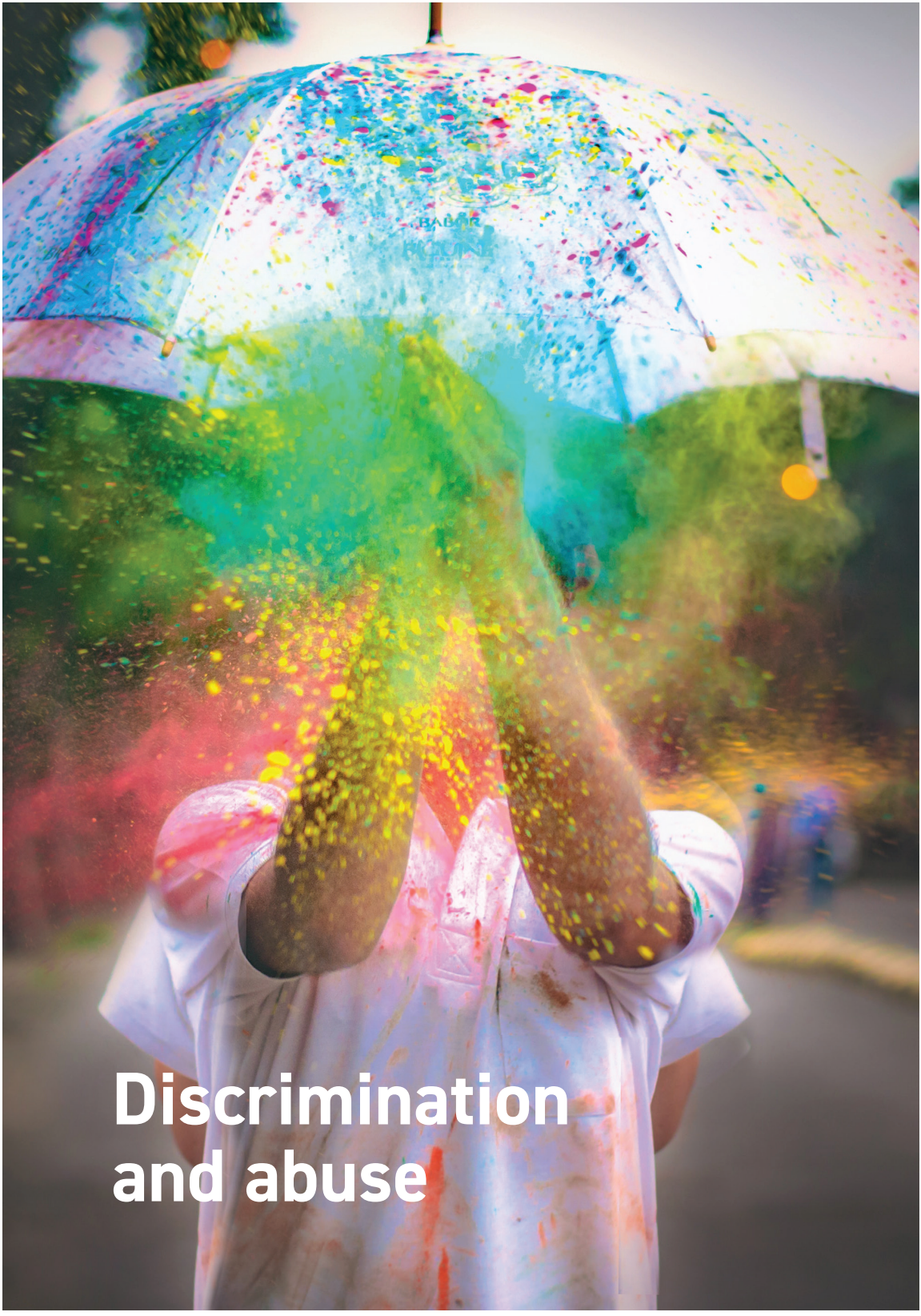
beings. In countries where assisted death has been practised for some time, the legislation has been broadened to include those with long-term illnesses or disabilities who are not actively dying, including persons with mental illness. In addition, we are seeing the demise of euthanasia as a "voluntary choice" as supporters of assisted death argue for state-sanctioned "merciful" killing of those who are not competent – the disabled, infants and those with dementia.

A consistent ethic of life challenges the ableist social narrative that underpins assisted death. It demands that we commit to care generously and unconditionally for the dying and those who are disabled. We are called to care always, even when there is no cure, while neither directly hastening death nor unnecessarily prolonging life. At the same time, we recognise the limits to treatment and the right of anyone to say no to medical interventions that are overly burdensome or properly judged to be medically futile.

It remains a significant ongoing concern that, within Aotearoa, palliative care is not equitably accessible and remains seriously underfunded relative to other parts of healthcare. Euthanasia, meanwhile, is fully funded.

The money available for healthcare and life-saving treatments is not unlimited. Therefore, as new and often expensive treatments are developed, politicians and public servants are continually faced with difficult decisions about how to provide public health services – for example, primary healthcare, surgical procedures and pharmaceuticals – justly and fairly.

To ensure a just health system, we require policies and structures that deliver fair and equal access to quality healthcare across ethnic and socio-economic divides. In this context, equitably distributing healthcare funding provides another legitimate limit to the sorts of treatments that can be provided.



Discrimination and abuse

Discrimination and abuse

Discrimination on any grounds is to be rejected. As Church teaching states, there is "no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex because … [we] are all 'one' in Christ Jesus".[30]

So, too, abuse of all types – physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual, psychological and financial – is to be called out and rejected.

Within the Church, we currently live with the awareness and deep shame of the sexual, physical, spiritual and emotional abuse that Catholic personnel, many of them clergy and religious, perpetuated within Catholic institutions. This shame must motivate us to seek meaningful forgiveness and provide restorative justice for the real persons whose lives have been devastated by such abuse.

A consistent ethic of life proclaims the dignity of every person. Created in the image of God and united by our common humanity, we all share a common dignity, "having the same filial [sisterly and brotherly] grace and the same vocation to perfection".[31]

This means we are called to live in active love, respect and tolerance of all who are different from ourselves. It also means recognising and providing a preferential option of care and protection for those who are most vulnerable and, consequently, susceptible to abuse from those in positions of greater power.

[30] *Lumen gentium,* n. 32.
[31] *Lumen gentium,* n. 32.
<< Photo by Divya Agrawalon on Unsplash.

As Pope Francis has recently reiterated in direct response to questions about the Church's attitude to those who identify as gender diverse, "The Church is 'mother' receiving everyone" and "Everyone meets God on their own way inside the Church ... and the Church guides everyone on their own path."[32]

As the Church welcomes individuals, it also exercises its pastoral ministry which must go beyond simply welcoming. It involves "accompanying people step by step on their way to maturity"[33] while offering them the wisdom of our theological understanding as they seek to faithfully know and follow Christ as part of the Catholic family.

The evils of racism, sexism, ableism and ageism are an affront to the dignity of the human person. These evils are built on the premise that one person, sex, group, culture or race is inherently superior to another. Too often, they form the basis of social and institutional structures, including Church structures, that preclude full participation and membership.

Within Aotearoa, the realities of structural discrimination are readily apparent. Certain ethnic and lower socio-economic groupings of people, including Māori and Pasifika, have poorer health, educational and other social outcomes (such as rates of incarceration) than other groups. The Treaty of Waitangi, the founding covenant for Aotearoa-New Zealand, was intended to safeguard the rights and dignity of two different peoples (tangata whenua and tangata Tiriti)[34] and we must work hard to ensure that happens.

The dignity and equality of all has been won through the death and resurrection of Jesus. However, it is only achieved when Christ's victory is reflected in all our personal and societal relationships.

[32] Pope Francis. (2023). *World Youth Day address.*
[33] Pope Francis. (2023). *World Youth Day address.*
[34] New Zealand Catholic Bishops. (1990). *A commemoration year for Aotearoa-New Zealand.*
[»] Photo by Jon Tyson on Unsplash.





Poverty

Poverty

Our world is characterised by extremes of wealth and poverty. As Pope Francis stated in his 2023 message for the World Day of the Poor, a "great river of poverty is traversing our cities and swelling to the point of overflowing". Every Christian is called to become "personally involved" in the struggle against it.[35]

Sustainable economic growth can improve the material well-being of people. Small and localised enterprises should be encouraged so that people can benefit from full participation. However, poverty is perpetuated wherever economic policies place free trade and economic growth above the well-being of people or base it on exploiting workers and the environment.

Poverty is a common cause and effect of inadequate and substandard housing, hunger, disease, family stress, domestic violence, alienation, drug addiction and hopelessness. Within Aotearoa-New Zealand, the number of disenfranchised families continues to grow; people who are shut out of the economic mainstream and deprived of its major benefits.

Poverty within families impacts negatively on our children's well-being and development, with intergenerational consequences. It has become increasingly clear over the last two decades that poverty is only growing.

[35] Pope Francis. (2023). *World Day of the Poor message.*

It is well recognised that the impacts of the climate crisis are causing new forms of poverty. The world's poorer nations are, once again, disproportionately bearing the impacts of this. Pope Francis describes this scenario as a "grave social debt"[36] that the rich nations that have disproportionately benefited from misusing resources in the past need to pay.

It is important that poverty deprives no-one of their human rights and meaningful participation in society. Although we must never turn our faces away from anyone in need, and while we commend and support those who selflessly provide charity in the form of accommodation, food and healthcare, charity is never enough.

A consistent ethic of life enjoins us all to actively commit to restoring justice and creating a world where people are not deprived of their personal agency in providing and caring for their families. This calls for a reform of social and economic policies and structures, including a fair and equitable tax system, appropriate welfare safety nets and a fair and just living wage.

From the earliest times, Church theologians have consistently taught that the Earth's resources belong to us all for the benefit of all creation. They have taught that more wealth than what a person needs for the ordinary necessities of life belongs not to the possessor but to those lacking the necessities. "Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs."[37]

[36] Pope Francis. (2023). *World Water Day message*.
[37] St John Chrysostom. *Homily*. In Lazaro 2,5: PG 48,992.



War and peace

War and peace

Upholding Church teaching on wealth means the billions of dollars a year spent on defence systems and weapons of war should, in justice, be spent on the needs of the dispossessed and the poor.

"We regard the arms race, which constitutes a significant proportion of the world's economy, as outright theft from the poor of our world who have to go without."[38]

After World War II and into the Cold War, the Catholic moral tradition offered arguments in favour of the limited storage of nuclear armaments. These arguments were based on what the US Bishops once called "a strictly conditioned moral acceptance of deterrence", but only as a "step on the way toward a progressive disarmament". However, the huge amounts that continue to be spent around the world give the lie to the idea that we are on a path of progressive disarmament.

A consistent ethic of life demands that mass weapons of destruction, both nuclear and conventional, be eliminated and that comprehensive peace accords based on mutual respect be developed.

Pope Francis has been unequivocal on this. He has condemned the possession as well as the use of nuclear weapons. "If we also take into account the risk of an accidental detonation as a result of error of any kind, the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned."[39]

[38] Federation of Catholic Bishops of Oceania. (1995). *Nuclear testing in the Pacific.*
[39] Pope Francis. (2017). *Address to Holy See's Dicastery for Integral Human Development.*
<< Photo by Антон Дмитриев on Unsplash.

Promoting peace built on justice was a major emphasis of the Second Vatican Council's teachings.[40] Rejecting war as a legitimate means of settling disputes is central to a consistent ethic of life. Never in history has the human family slaughtered as it has done since the start of the 20th century. The death toll from these wars has reached hundreds of millions.

There are never any "winners" in wars, and it is always the most vulnerable – the elderly, disabled, women and children – who suffer the most. The human traumas from war extend into, and seriously harm, future generations.

Aside from the intolerable waste of the Earth's resources on weapons of war (while people in many parts of the world starve and are prevented from accessing modern healthcare), the disasters of war include:

- the death and maiming of innocent civilians;
- the destruction of family life, crops and land;
- the contamination and poisoning of the environment;
- the curtailment of civil rights;
- the imprisonment of dissenters.

More recently, we have become aware of the broader and long-term devastation of war on fragile ecosystems and its threat to the survival of species within the fragile balances of their ecosystems.

The intended and unintended consequences of war diminish God's gift of life and run contrary to the Corporal Works of Mercy taught in the Gospels.[41]

[40] *Gaudium et spes*, n. 63.
[41] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2447.
[>>] Photo by Sora Shimazaki on Pexels.



Justice and correction systems

Justice and correction systems

A consistent ethic of life reminds us that the inherent dignity of a person remains even after they commit a serious crime.

We are to sing of both justice and mercy (Psalm 101). Believing this forces us to think critically about the different arguments for imprisoning people that are commonly used. This, in turn, hinges on our understanding of what justice looks like and how justice and reparation are best served.

The experience of going to prison involves an element of punishment linked to the loss of certain freedoms. However, a punitive approach to imprisonment is alien to a Catholic-Christian notion of justice because it is more aligned with an attitude of revenge. Nevertheless, imprisonment can be required for the safety of the wider community.

The other primary motivation for imprisonment must be to rehabilitate the individual in question. In the words of Pope Francis, one cannot speak about offenders repaying debts without offering them a window, and they cannot change their lives without seeing a horizon.[42]

[42] Pope Francis. (2019). Address to Vatican Conference on the Catholic Church's pastoral care of prisons.

At the same time, we must consider the deeper causes of crime. In Aotearoa, levels of incarceration remain unacceptably high, especially among Māori and Pasifika. Most people in prison come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, have low levels of education, have suffered multiple forms of abuse and are from minority and culturally disadvantaged ethnic groups. Their offending is most frequently related to drug and alcohol addiction.

A consistent ethic of life calls us to think about how we can change the social conditions and structures that hinder the most vulnerable from fulfilling their potential.

A commitment to justice includes supporting educational, vocational, social and cultural programmes within prisons to build up offenders' sense of identity and self-worth. Equally, because most people in our prisons suffer from mental illness and/or addiction issues, a consistent ethic of life demands that prisons provide effective health care and addiction recovery programmes, as well as spiritual and psychological care.

Practical support for prisoners and their families must continue once they have completed their period of incarceration. Often, those leaving prison face a hostile world that does not recognise them as trustworthy. This denies them what their dignity demands – suitable housing, support and employment – which undermines their efforts at effective rehabilitation.

In a society that is better able to restrain those who have offended and more able to work for their reform, the death penalty is now considered incompatible with a consistent ethic of life. Continuing what was first started by Pope Saint John Paul II, Pope Francis took the final step in the Church's unequivocal abolition of the death penalty with a formal change to the Catholic Catechism in 2018. This now states that "the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person".

In arguing this change, Pope Francis linked Christian opposition to the death penalty with the virtue of hope, specifically hope for an offender's rehabilitation. The same moral logic of hope has led Pope Francis to criticise life sentences without the possibility of parole. He has labelled some of these as "just a death penalty in disguise".

Finally, a concern for justice means attending to the victims of crime and their traumas. This is best achieved by developing humane restorative justice processes that allow for apology, healing, mercy, compassion, forgiveness and, wherever possible, reconciliation.[43]

[43] New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference. (1995). *Creating new hearts: Moving from retributive justice to restorative justice*. Pastoral letter.

[>>] Photo by Drew Dizzy Graham on Unsplash.





Information technology and artificial intelligence

Information technology and artificial intelligence

In the past 25 years, we have witnessed incredible developments in the power of computer technology and our ability to access it.

"Information technology" (IT) and its spin-off "artificial intelligence" (AI) have drastically changed the way we interact with people and the world, as well as our ability to control and influence our environment.

At the theological, philosophical and ethical levels, the development of AI highlights long-standing questions about the way we use technology. However, it also raises novel questions about what it means to be human and how we understand human dignity.

The advantages of IT and AI are numerous and promise further benefits for health, research, education, social well-being, employment and entertainment. At the same time, there are ample examples of the shadow side of AI and IT, including the creation of the "digital divide", which is a new form of poverty. The way the technology is used has the potential to place enormous power in the hands of a few and to reduce human agency and freedom through the non-consensual monitoring of human activity. Many voices compete as the trusted source of our moral authority while our trust in more traditional sources is challenged.

It is well established that computer algorithms, combined with the power of social media, are leading to the selective and biased presentation of information (algorithmic discrimination). This has negative consequences for informed debate and even the exercise of democracy.

Furthermore, the push to manufacture and market new IT products relies on mining rare-earth elements and other scarce metals from land and sea. This has exacerbated unethical and dirty mining practices that have a devastating impact on the environment. Too often, already-vulnerable workers are exploited even further when carrying out this mining and manufacturing these products.

Paradoxically, in an age when communication and information-sharing through social media platforms have proliferated, many, both young and old, experience an unprecedented and growing isolation. And, although IT has enabled new forms of working, delivering education, fostering the spiritual life and furthering justice through campaigns for social change (such as the Black Lives Matter and Me-Too movements), it is also being used as a tool to bully and spread disinformation and other harmful content (such as pornography).

Viewing the development of IT through the lens of a consistent ethic of life opens our eyes to the connections between the opportunities it offers and the challenges it poses. We must use this technology for the benefits of all creation. We must ensure that it does not further feed human greed and anthropocentrism – the unfettered promotion of human desires – with insufficient respect and care for Mother Earth and all its inhabitants – human and other.



Conclusion

Conclusion

In the book of Deuteronomy (30:19), God speaks to us: "I call upon the heavens and the earth to witness today that I have set before you life and death, blessings, and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants might live."

We are called to make moral choices to foster peace everywhere; to oppose abortion, euthanasia, war, the arms race, unjust incarceration and the death penalty; to protect the environment; to condemn violence in any and all forms; to eliminate discrimination, abuse and poverty; We are also called to carefully and ethically manage the growing power bestowed by emerging technologies.

Faithfulness to this call must start with an examination of our own behaviour and Church structures in areas where we have done harm and failed to act according to what is just and loving.

Our motivation for presenting a consistent ethic of life is based on a desire to promote a deeper respect for life across all issues. It is our firm belief that concern for any of the matters threatening life requires a concern for the broader issues in church and society. One aspect of life affects another. Everything is connected. All are important. Together, they make a whole. Like the seamless garment worn by Jesus, this sacred cloak of integrity, of wholeness, te kahu o te ora embraces them all.

<< Photo by Greg Rakozy on Unsplash.

Knowing how personal and local actions can assume a global significance reinforces the real ability we have to affect the balance of nature and global human well-being for the better. That choice begins with each of us and with our communities of faith. No matter how small or insignificant we may feel, we can and we do make a difference.

Iti rearea, teitei kahikatea ka taea.
Although the rearea [bellbird] is small, it can ascend the lofty heights of the kahikatea tree.



A Christian prayer in union with creation

Father, we praise you with all your creatures.
They came forth from your all-powerful hand;
they are yours, filled with your presence and your tender love.
Praise be to you!

Son of God, Jesus,
through you all things were made.
You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother,
you became part of this earth,
and you gazed upon this world with human eyes.
Today you are alive in every creature
in your risen glory.
Praise be to you!

Holy Spirit, by your light
you guide this world towards the Father's love
and accompany creation as it groans in travail.
You also dwell in our hearts
and you inspire us to do what is good.
Praise be to you!

Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love,
teach us to contemplate you
in the beauty of the universe,
for all things speak of you.
Awaken our praise and thankfulness
for every being that you have made.
Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined
to everything that is.

God of love, show us our place in this world
as channels of your love
for all the creatures of this earth,
for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.
Enlighten those who possess power and money
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,
that they may love the common good, advance the weak,
and care for this world in which we live.
The poor and the earth are crying out.
O Lord, seize us with your power and light,
help us to protect all life,
to prepare for a better future,
for the coming of your Kingdom
of justice, peace, love and beauty.
Praise be to you!
Amen.

Prayer taken from the encyclical *Laudato si'*.

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