

**PASTORAL LETTER OF THE ARCHBISHOP AND AUXILIARY BISHOP OF  
BAMENDA ON THE SACREDNESS AND DIGNITY OF HUMAN LIFE  
TO ALL THE FAITHFUL AND PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL**

“God created man in the image of himself,  
in the image of God he created him,  
male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27)

Dear brothers and sisters,

1. “I thank my God whenever I think of you; and every time I pray for all of you, I pray with joy” (Phil. 1:3). This is particularly true now because of the difficult socio-political situation in which we have been living during the last few years. We thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has called all of us to be saints (cf. Rom. 1:7), for your faith and endurance. You are all present in our thoughts and prayers in a special way as we begin once more the holy Season of Lent. Lent is a time when we contemplate the Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the unique Saviour of the world. By his Passion, Death, and Resurrection, Jesus conquered sin and death, reconciled us with God and restored us to the dignity of the children of God. Lent is a time when we endeavour to open up to God and to our neighbour through prayer, fasting and almsgiving. That is why we invite you to meditate on the sacredness and dignity of human life during this Season of Lent.

**The Biblical Foundation of the Sacredness and Dignity of Human Life**

2. Human life is the most sacred gift with which God, the author of life, has endowed the human being. Right from creation humanity has been called to share in the divine life because “God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). This is the basis of the sacredness and the dignity of human life. Without this divine dimension the human person will be nothing but dust as the Ash Wednesday liturgy reminds us: “For dust you are and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). Aware of this the Psalmist exclaims: “what is man that you should spare a thought for him, the son of man that you should care for him?” (Ps. 8:4).

3. This sacredness and dignity of the human person has been made even more wonderful by Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, who became flesh and dwelt among us (cf. John 1:14). By the Incarnation, the Son of God “was for a short while made lower than the angels” (Hebrews 2:7) and “emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; ... and humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8). By his Resurrection he was raised high by God “so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11). By his Incarnation, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, identified himself with every human being and raised human dignity even to a higher level. He tells us that whatever we do to any human

person is done to him (Mt. 25:40). Our human dignity is a gift of God's tremendous love for which we should continuously thank him and of which we should jealously take care.

4. The first incidence of the profanation of human life recorded in the Bible is the brutal and senseless murder of Abel by his brother Cain (Gen. 4:1-16). This is because he cannot control his emotions of anger against God and envy of his brother (vv. 5-7). The blood of his innocent brother that he sheds will continue to cry out to God from the ground that had opened its mouth to receive it (v.10). Nevertheless God continues to protect the life of Cain, who is afraid that he might be killed in revenge, by putting a mark on him. He tells him that anyone who kills him will pay for it sevenfold: "if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be taken for him" (Gen. 4:15). Later on the Decalogue formally forbids the shedding of human blood: "You shall not kill" (Ex. 20:13).

### **Rampant Profanation and Disrespect of Human Life and Dignity**

5. When human beings forget about their sacredness and dignity, they consequently often behave as irrational beings and become a prey to one another. This seems to be the case in the situation in which we now find ourselves. Since the beginning of the crisis of the Anglophone Problem which escalated on 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2016, there has been increasing and rampant profanation and disrespect of human life and the dignity of the human person. This has taken unimaginable and alarming proportions. Violence has become common place because of the frequent confrontations between the military and the secessionists. Nearly every day we hear gunshots which are now jokingly referred to as "popcorn" from various corners of our towns and villages. There is indiscriminate killing of innocent people with impunity. It seems that human life has lost its value and sacredness and the dignity of the human being is rubbed in mud. Hospitals and health facilities are vandalized for reasons hard to explain. Human Rights are being violated with impunity in such a way that some wounded persons are denied medical care and are taken away from hospitals and health centres for summary extra judicial execution. Cold blooded killing has become rampant and sometimes it is actually celebrated by opposing parties. In fact, people are quick to kill those they suspect or consider as their enemies. The breaking into houses, the burning of houses, leaving hundreds of people homeless, and the looting and burning of property no longer make news. Some men and women, students and teachers, parents and children, religious men and women are not only molested but kidnapped for ransom. Life seems to be valueless and meaningless. The question on every lip is: what is life?

6. We are also experiencing a frightening disrespect for the dead. Human corpses, sometimes terribly mutilated, are abandoned in the streets and in the mortuaries without identification. The corpses of some of those who have been killed are thrown into streams and rivers or dumped near others' compounds to make them suspects. Some of those killed are burnt to ashes. We have seen dead bodies with heads, legs or other parts of their bodies chopped off. It has now become normal to hear an announcement over Radio that there are unidentified corpses in the Bamenda Regional Hospital Mortuary. It is now not unusual to see fresh or decomposing dead bodies on the public high way. A lot of disrespectful things have

been and are being done on dead bodies. Many people have been prevented from taking and burying their loved ones. All this is against the sacredness and dignity of the human person. This is unheard of in our African tradition where the dead are venerated.

### **The Teaching of the Church on the Sacredness and Dignity of Human Life**

7. The teaching and tradition of the Church upholds that **the bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the resurrection (CCC, n. 2300)**. The triviality with which many seem to consider human life in the present moment in the North West and South West Regions is a cause for great concern. We are deeply concerned about the many innocent people who have lost their lives, about the plight of the many people who are destitute, sick and suffering, the men and women struggling for survival, and who are forced to seek refuge and livelihood outside their homes, outside their region of origin and outside their country because of the ongoing senseless, fratricidal war. All human life is a precious gift from God and every human being has dignity, worth, value and meaning, regardless of size, shape, gender, ability, tongue or race because he/she is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen.1:26-27). The Second Vatican Council teaches that “the dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists, it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges the love and entrusts himself to his creator” (G.S. n.19).

8. Human life is the most precious and sacred gift from God, the author of life. It is “sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can, under any circumstance, claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being” (C.C.C. n. 2258). Its value is intrinsic, for it derives from God. “Of all visible creatures only man is ‘able to know and love his creator. He is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake’ and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity” (C.C.C. n. 356). The Catechism of the Catholic Church goes on to state that: “being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone” (C.C.C., n. 357).

9. Human life is sacred from conception until natural death. This teaching of the Church is based on the belief that our lives have their origin in God and return to God when we die. We believe that we live our lives under God’s providential love and care. At times this is difficult to understand, especially when tragedy and sorrow enter our lives. However, as Christians, we believe that our lives come from, and are cared for by someone greater than us - a loving God and Father, who has given us the dignity of his adopted children and wants all of us to discover him, live in the security of his love and return to Him. Every human life, regardless of his or her stage of development is sacred. As Pope Francis emphasizes, “equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned

and the underprivileged, the vulnerable, infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery and every form of rejection” (G.E. n. 101).

10. The divine injunction “Thou shall not kill” equally prohibits all acts of the abuse and disrespect of human life and human dignity. Such acts include torture “which uses physical or moral violence to extract confessions, punish the guilty, frighten opponents, or satisfy hatred” (C.C.C., n. 2297). The abuse of human dignity sometimes leads to the loss of life. Taking delight in torturing the dying person, removing the wounded from hospital or abandoning the wounded to die unattended to are all sins against the Fifth Commandment. It is sad, shameful and totally unacceptable that even ambulances and private cars carrying patients, wounded persons and pregnant women have not enjoyed the freedom they need to bring such people speedily to hospital for treatment, as should be the case. This is to the disgrace of all those who apply rules disproportionately, or to those who, acting arbitrarily, have ignored international conventions regarding behaviour during war.

### **The Necessity and Urgency to Safeguard the Sacredness and Dignity of Human Life**

11. The situation we are living now cannot leave us indifferent. All acts that rub human beings of their life and dignity should be vehemently condemned no matter who their perpetrators are. Human life and its God-given dignity should always be respected and protected, even during war and in situations such as the one in which we find ourselves. It is therefore urgent and imperative that we do something and immediately to prevent the situation from getting worse as it has happened in other countries. In order to achieve this, all are invited: individuals, families, groups, Christian communities, the civil society, the government and the International Community to work towards finding a lasting solution to stem the abuse of human life and dignity that is going on now in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. We want to reiterate that violence and the approach of “neutralising” the secessionists is not the right solution because violence only begets violence.

12. We, therefore once more earnestly appeal to the competent authorities that the military should desist from the wanton killing of innocent civilians and the burning down of houses which is the basic cause of the displacement of the populations. We plead that there may be no more delay in addressing effectively the real causes of the present crises. ***“No matter what difficulties we face in our country, a solution will never be found in violence, but rather in a dialogue between opposing groups”***. This message that was sent to the Heads of State of all African countries 26 years ago by the Standing Committee of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) is still relevant to us today. We call on all the protagonists to put down their arms, stop this senseless fratricidal and suicidal war and have the courage to enter into dialogue with one another. There is no other way outside frank and meaningful dialogue. Might is not always right. True dialogue calls for humility. The process is not just about sitting around a table, but changing the way of thinking, talking and communicating with one another. Participants must be willing to address the root causes of a crisis, not just the symptoms. There can be no way forward without dialogue.

13. We appeal to the separatists to put down their arms in favour of dialogue as the most appropriate way of solving the Anglophone Problem. This dialogue should first be among themselves because a household divided among itself cannot stand. We call on them and on other armed groups which are exploiting the situation to refrain from the use of violence and stop shedding the blood of their brothers and sisters which like the blood of Abel is crying out to God from the ground (cf. Gen. 4:10). We pray that they refrain from all forms of abuse of human life and dignity such as intimidation, harassment, torture, abduction, extortion and maltreatment which inflict untold suffering and hardship on their brothers and sisters. We must all unite to fight against exploitation, corruption and injustices of all kinds if we want to build a better society for ourselves. We should respect the common good, our own lives and the lives of other people.

14. During this crisis the fundamental human right of the children to education has been greatly violated. We would like to reiterate the importance and necessity of the education of the youth as the indispensable instrument of the liberation and development of the human person. The best way of preparing a better future which we are all dreaming of cannot be through stopping our children from going to school. What is needed is the education of the heart. As someone said; “The heart of education is the education of the heart”. We should always treat others as we would like them to treat us. This is the golden rule (cf. Mt. 7:12).

15. The Church recognizes the importance of the media and the fact that if the means of social communication are properly utilized they “can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men's entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God. The Church recognizes, too, that men can employ these media contrary to the plan of the Creator and to their own loss. Indeed, the Church experiences maternal grief at the harm all too often done to society by their evil use” (IM, n. 2). While social media have made the world a global village and eased communication which can strengthen relationship among the people of God and enhance the quality of life, they can become a dangerous tool in unscrupulous hands, when they are used to misinform the people, propagate hate language and division instead of love and unity. It is regrettable that some of the information presented by the media during this crisis has not always promoted the sacredness and the dignity of human life. We call on all and sundry to refrain from the spread of false information, horrible and degrading images of the human person and incendiary language which instil fear and hatred in the hearts and minds of the people. The advice of Pope Francis to young people on Tuesday 21 March 2017 immediately comes to mind “Don't let yourselves be led astray by this false image of reality! Be the protagonists of your history; decide your own future”. This advice holds good for us today.

16. There is the need for education especially about the evil of torture which degrades both the tortured and the torturer. In fact, Article 10 of the International Convention against Torture, and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment says: “Each State Party shall ensure that education and information regarding the prohibition against torture are fully included in the training of law enforcement personnel, civil or military, medical personnel, public officials and other persons who may be involved in the custody, interrogation or treatment of any individual subjected to any form of arrest, detention or

imprisonment". We appreciate the efforts which some members of the military and the forces of law and order are making to protect human life and dignity. However, while the hierarchy congratulates the military on the work they do, they should not fail to condemn when they do the opposite of what they are called to do, to protect human life.

17. Our priests and religious should preach and teach the faithful on the sacredness and dignity of human life. We call on our Christian communities to reinforce their efforts in the practice of studying and sharing appropriate texts of the Word of God in the family and the Small Christian Communities. It is in this way that the Church can continue to be a light particularly in this dark period, to offer hope to the people, and to stand for truth, justice and reconciliation. It is equally in this way that, in the words of our venerable predecessor, the late Archbishop Paul Verdzekov, of blessed memory, who was a real apostle of the fight against torture, "the consciences of Christians and of Christian Communities need to be awakened and sensitized so that we may all face the reality of torture and join in the struggle for its total elimination. Victims and torturers alike need liberation. For this struggle, one of the principal and efficacious arms which Christians must use is prayer, followed by acts of solidarity with the victims of torture and their families, legal action, denunciation, and pressure on the State Institution".

18. Lent is the favourable time for conversion and reconciliation with God and our neighbour. This is the message which St. Paul addresses to us on Ash Wednesday to be ambassadors of reconciliation for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20-21; 6:2). It is a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Prayer opens us up to God; fasting liberates and strengthens us in the fight against sin and evil; and almsgiving opens us out to our neighbour. This Lent we must intensify our prayers, especially the Eucharistic celebration and Adoration. Let us pray more than ever before for the Lord's intervention in this crisis. Christ alone is the one liberator who can free men and women from all forms of servitude that dishonour humanity. It is Christ who "brings good news to the poor, freedom to captives, opens the eyes of the blind, and liberates the oppressed..." (Lk. 4:18). Let us pray for the repose of the souls of those who have lost their lives in this crisis. Let us fast and make penance and reparation for the sins of the profanation and disrespect of human life and dignity. Through fasting and penance we are in solidarity with all those who are suffering, especially the innocent ones, who share in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Let us show compassion, generosity and love to all those who are suffering: the poor, the sick, the internally displaced and all those who are in need. Let us pray for forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.

19. All of us must work for peace. This is the first step towards avoiding war. If war has unfortunately broken out, all parties must avoid arrogance and empty pride and be ready to acknowledge their failures and readiness to engage in meaningful dialogue as a way towards finding a lasting solution. Anger, vengeance, resentment are clearly immediate steps towards killings (Mt. 6:21-26). St. Francis' peace prayer is a tool that can touch our hearts and move us to seek ways of regaining peace, beginning with ourselves. ***Lord, Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace.***

## **Gratitude to all who are promoting the Sacredness and Dignity of Human Life**

20. We wish to render immense gratitude to each and every one in the Archdiocese of Bamenda and beyond who has been working hard since the beginning of this crisis to help the displaced person through their generous contributions and in various other ways. We acknowledge the heroic courage of our health institutions: doctors and nurses who continue to risk their lives to save human life. May the Lord, the chief physician, be their reward. We congratulate those members of the military, the forces of law and order, the separatists and all who have had the courage to acknowledge the fact that killing and torture are abominable crimes and have consequently refused to participate in carrying out such crimes. We remain grateful to all the people who have risked their lives and gone out of their way to save lives, help the injured and bury the dead, including strangers. By doing this they are living Jesus' invitation that "whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers that you did for me" (Mt. 25:40). Pope Paul VI emphasized this role when he said "May people look to us not just for charitable handouts but for support in their legitimate struggle against all forms of injustice and oppression (*The Development of Peoples*). We remain grateful to those who have been praying night and day for God's intervention, and those who have acted as instruments of peace and reconciliation. Christ said: "Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called sons of God!" (Mt. 5:9).

21. We call upon all the faithful and people of good will to pray together, reason together, decide together, and act together, so that the truth may prevail and the sacredness and the dignity of human life be respected. May each and every one of us become what Saint Pope John Paul II referred to as "promoters of a new way of looking at life" (E. V., n. 99). In the face of the present crisis let each and everyone repeat the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. "*I have decided to stick to love; hate is too great a burden to bear.*"

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Incarnate Word, Queen of Peace and Patroness of Cameroon intercede for us all. Amen.

*Given on 06<sup>th</sup> March 2019*

*Ash Wednesday*

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### **A Prayer for Life**

“Father and maker of all, you adorn all creation with splendour and beauty, and fashion human lives in your image and likeness. Awaken in every heart reverence for the work of your hands, and renew among your people a readiness to nurture and sustain your precious gift of life. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops).