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Ecumenical defense of freedom of conscience in moral matters on the example of the *Manhattan Declaration*

Abstract

The article undertakes an analysis of the *Manhattan Declaration* through the prism of defending the right to freedom of conscience and to express opinions arising from that freedom. Three groups of issues will be analyzed in turn, on which a common Christian (and thus ecumenical) expression of opinion on moral issues is necessary. These are: the sanctity and inviolability of human life, Christian understanding of marriage and family and religious freedom as a fundamental expression of freedom of conscience.

Keywords: *Manhattan Declaration*, sanctity of life, marriage, religious freedom, civil disobedience.

Ekumeniczna obrona wolności sumienia w sprawach moralnych na przykładzie Deklaracji Manhattańskiej

Abstrakt

Artykuł podejmuje analizę Deklaracji Manhattańskiej przez pryzmat obrony prawa do wolności sumienia i wyrażania opinii wynikających z tej wolności. Przeanalizowane zostaną kolejno trzy grupy zagadnień, co do których konieczne jest wspólne chrześcijańskie (a więc ekumeniczne) wyrażanie opinii w kwestiach moralnych. Są to: świętość i nienaruszalność życia ludzkiego, chrześcijańskie rozumienie małżeństwa i rodziny oraz wolność religijna jako fundamentalny wyraz wolności sumienia.

Słowa kluczowe: Deklaracji Manhattańska, świętość życia, małżeństwo, wolność religijna, obywatelskie nieposłuszeństwo.

Introduction

In 2009, the *Manhattan Declaration. A Call of Christian Conscience*¹ was published. The *Declaration* is a kind of manifesto signed by theologians from the Eastern Orthodox Church, Catholics and evangelical Christian leaders. The text of the declaration was drafted by Robert George (Professor, McCormic Professor of Jurisprudence, Princeton University), Timothy George (Professor, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University) and Chuck Colson (Founder, the Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview, Lansdowne, VA). It was subsequently signed by more than 150 leaders of Christian churches and communities. Although the most quoted by the media was a small passage referring to the possibility of civil disobedience, the declaration as a whole raises the extremely important issue of freedom of conscience in the context of protecting the sanctity and inviolability of human life, protecting the understanding of marriage as the union of one man and one woman, and the right to religious freedom, including the free expression of faith-based views and the adoption of a lifestyle consistent with faith.

The Manhattan Declaration has so far aroused little interest among theologians. Not counting one French-language study describing the declaration as an example of “ecumenism in the trenches”, practiced by a conservative section of Catholics together with evangelicals who together form a mainstay of the American Christian Right.² To fill this gap, a closer look at this ecumenical attempt to speak out on issues of great importance to Christians is needed.

A synthesis of all the issues of the *Declaration* was included at the very end of the document. These words, which constitute a manifesto that is a public commitment of its signers, are quoted here in full:

Because we honor justice and the common good, we will not comply with any edict that purports to compel our institutions to participate in abortions, embryo-destructive research, assisted suicide and euthanasia, or any other anti-life act; nor will we bend to any rule purporting to force us to bless immoral sexual partnerships, treat them as marriages or the equivalent, or refrain from proclaiming the truth, as we know it, about morality and immorality and marriage and the family. We will fully and ungrudgingly render to Caesar what is Caesar’s. But under no circumstances will we render to Caesar what is God’s.

¹ Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience. 2009 (11.10.2023). https://www.cov-life.org/uploads/articles-and-papers/Manhattan_Declaration_full_text.pdf.

² Philippe Gonzalez. 2016. La Manhattan Déclaration, ou « l’œcuménisme des tranchées ». Catholiques conservateurs et évangéliques dans la droite chrétienne américaine. In *Évangile, moralité et lois civiles. Gospel, Morality, and Civil Law*. Eds. Joseph Famerée, Pierre Gisel, Hervé Legrand, 307–336. Münster: Lit Verlag.

The *Declaration* points to three important issues, which it discusses in turn after a brief preamble: (1) human life, (2) marriage and (3) religious freedom. The context for the creation of the declaration is the socio-political and legal situation in the United States, nevertheless, the issues raised in it are relevant globally, including, of course, in Europe and therein in Poland. Nor should the picture be clouded by the temporal circumstances of the declaration's creation: 2009, the time of Barak Obama's presidency in the US. This is also the time before the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the famous *Roe v. Wade* case³, which had long been used to justify the legality of abortion in the United States.

The *Manhattan Declaration* asks Christians, but also all people of good will, to what extent does the legislation of individual countries bind the consciences of Christians, and to what extent is it possible and/or necessary to express conscientious objection or even civil disobedience? The *Declaration* provides clear answers to these questions, prompting a clear position. In our inquiries, we will examine the core content of the Declaration, defining, we believe, the common teaching of much of Christianity on topics such as the sanctity and inviolability of human life, marriage and the family, and freedom of conscience in relation to religious freedom.

1. The sanctity and inviolability of human life

First and foremost, God is the one who gives us life. If we acknowledge that God is the giver of life and that our existence is a result of His will – meaning we didn't create our own lives or serve as the origin of our existence – but rather, our lives stem from the Lord God, then it's clear that life is a gift from God. Additionally, since our lives are derived from Him, it implies that our lives are, in a way, owned by God. Consequently, we arrive at the following conclusion: human life is absolutely sacred and untouchable, and no one has the authority to determine when a person's life begins or ends, not even the individual themselves.

The *Manhattan Declaration*, referring to the abortion law popularized in the US since 1973, the famous Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, points to the spread of the elimination in state after state of the law prohibiting the use

³ In a far-reaching 1973 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. Constitution generally protects the right to abortion. In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court officially overturned *Roe v. Wade*, declaring that the constitutional right to abortion, upheld for nearly half a century, no longer existed. The court justified its statement on the grounds that the substantive right to abortion was not "deeply rooted in this nation's history or tradition." Daniel Salliman. 2022. Goodbye *Roe v. Wade*: Pro-Life Evangelicals Celebrate the Ruling They've Waited For (30.11.2023). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/june/roe-v-wade-overturn-abortion-supreme-court-ruling-pro-life.html>.

of federal funds to finance abortions, which contributed significantly to the sharp increase in the number of abortions. This led to the spread in the US of what St. John Paul II defined as the “a culture of death”⁴, that “inevitably cheapens life in all its stages and conditions by promoting the belief that lives that are imperfect, immature or inconvenient are discardable”⁵.

No one, even if permitted by an unjust law, can under any circumstances decide to prematurely terminate human life while still in the womb. Therefore, consent to abortion for any reason is out of the question. This vision of the sanctity and inviolability of life stands in stark contrast to the views of many groups that have made a profitable industry out of killing unborn children.

How important is the right to freedom of conscience, which includes the right to express opposition to obvious evil, is shown by the example of many activists of pro-life movements who have been persecuted with the police and judicial apparatus for peacefully demonstrating their beliefs. The cases of Mary Wagner and Isabel Vaughan-Spruce have received the most media coverage. Mary Wagner, an activist in the Canadian pro-life movement, endured several months in different prisons. Her repeated convictions stemmed from her attempts to speak at abortion clinics, where she sought to dissuade mothers from choosing abortion. Wagner faced charges even for simply being outside a clinic, distributing leaflets or flowers. Subsequently, she was arrested even when she remained silent, without any materials to distribute, solely by being present to testify to the sanctity of every human life.⁶ In the UK, Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, a member of a pro-life organization praying outside an abortion clinic have been charged with a new, hitherto unknown type of crime: “thoughtcrime”. She “was standing silently in a public street. She was doing, saying and displaying absolutely nothing, apparently lost in thought”.⁷

Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta took advantage of the media attention focused on her by winning the Nobel Prize to express the opposition of a righteous conscience to the ongoing crime of killing unborn children in the bosoms of their mothers. During her Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in 1979, identified the pri-

⁴ John Paul II has repeatedly written about the culture of death, which he defined as the concept that human life can be a means to some other end and not solely an end itself. See *idem*. 1995. Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Men and Women religious, lay Faithful and all People of Good Will on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life (12.11.2024). https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

⁵ Manhattan Declaration. Life.

⁶ Agnieszka Ruck. 2018. Pro-life activist Mary Wagner marks first jail-free Christmas in seven years (22.11.2023). <https://www.catholicregister.org/item/28667-pro-life-activist-mary-wagner-marks-first-jail-free-christmas-in-seven-years>.

⁷ Andrew Tettenborn. 2022. Thoughtcrime is now a reality in Britain. Why was an activist arrested for praying silently in the street? (29.11.2023). <https://www.spiked-online.com/2022/12/22/thoughtcrime-is-now-a-reality-in-britain/>.

mary obstacle to peace in our time – abortion.⁸ Where does this disturbing trend of ending unborn lives originate? Could it be traced back to a rejection of the divine order established in the creation of humanity?

The authors and signatories of the *Manhattan Declaration* also make specific commitments to take action to save the innocent lives of unborn children: “We will be united and untiring in our efforts to roll back the license to kill that began with the abandonment of the unborn to abortion. We will work, as we have always worked, to bring assistance, comfort, and care to pregnant women in need (...). Our message is, and ever shall be, that the just, humane, and truly Christian answer to problem pregnancies is for all of us to love and care for mother and child alike”.⁹ The first of these assumptions has already been partially met by bringing about a review of the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in *Roe v. Wade*. The invalidation of that ruling has allowed successive US states to restrict the right to abortion or ban it altogether, and abortion industry organizers and supporters can no longer obtain cancellation of anti-abortion laws at the state level in the Supreme Court. Also, the growing pro-life movements in the US, in addition to bringing about changes in state legislation in favor of unborn children, are organizing increasingly dense networks of support centers for mothers at risk of abortion. In this way, they are expanding the ‘Culture of Life’.

The inherent dignity of human life, originating from the Creator, is irremovable and not determined or granted by anyone or anything else; rather, it is inherent to every individual. This dignity stems from the divine act of creation, in which the Lord God imbued His image and likeness in humanity. Accepting the irrevocable dignity of human life as an axiom, along with recognizing it as a divine gift, necessitates providing absolute protection to human life. Consequently, this absolute protection must extend to the very act of conception, where individuals cannot engage in any form of manipulation. Therefore, genetic manipulations, including *in vitro* fertilization, must be ruled out. The *Manhattan Declaration* refers to this when it points out the dangers of researching techniques ostensibly beneficial to advancing human health, but in reality being embryo-destructive

⁸ “I feel one thing I want to share with you all, the greatest destroyer of peace today is the cry of the innocent unborn child. For if a mother can murder her own child in her own womb, what is left for you and for me to kill each other? Even in the scripture it is written: Even if mother could forget her child – I will not forget you – I have carved you in the palm of my hand. Even if mother could forget, but today millions of unborn children are being killed. And we say nothing. In the newspapers you read numbers of this one and that one being killed, this being destroyed, but nobody speaks of the millions of little ones who have been conceived to the same life as you and I, to the life of God, and we say nothing, we allow it. To me the nations who have legalized abortion, they are the poorest nations. They are afraid of the little one, they are afraid of the unborn child, and the child must die because they don’t want to feed one more child, to educate one more child, the child must die.” Mother Teresa. 1979. Acceptance Speech (23.11.2023). <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1979/teresa/acceptance-speech>.

⁹ Manhattan Declaration. Life.

research. Among such is the development of the so-called therapeutic cloning technique: “This would result in the industrial mass production of human embryos to be killed for the purpose of producing genetically customized stem cell lines and tissues”.¹⁰

Similarly, unwavering protection is imperative for human life throughout its entire course, even in its twilight phase. No individual should have the authority to prematurely end a life, euphemistically termed a ‘gentle’ or ‘good’ death, as seen in the concept of euthanasia. The authors and signatories of the *Manhattan Declaration* draw attention to the resemblance between the promoted concepts of so-called assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia by liberal social movements and the principles of eugenics implemented in the mid-twentieth century in Europe by the German Nazis. The Nazis advocated the elimination from society of those whose lives, in their judgment, were deemed ‘unworthy of life’ (*lebensunwertes Leben*).¹¹ Recent reports from Belgium have reverberated globally, recounting a botched attempt at euthanasia in a woman’s home. In an attempt to legally end her life, a doctor and nurses administered a lethal poison, but the dosage proved insufficient. Failing in their first method, they resorted to suffocating the ailing patient with a pillow.¹² In contrast to Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Canada, and other countries, euthanasia is still prohibited in all 50 states of the USA. Advocates for euthanasia are campaigning for its legalization without explicitly naming it, avoiding obvious associations with eugenics. As indicated in the *Manhattan Declaration*: “The only difference is that now the doctrines of the eugenicists are dressed up in the language of ‘liberty,’ ‘autonomy,’ and ‘choice’”.¹³

Lack of respect for the inalienable dignity and inviolability of human life is, in addition to abortion and euthanasia, and in addition to genetic manipulation and attempts at ‘therapeutic cloning’, the source for other pathologies affecting human life. The *Manhattan Declaration* mentions here “cases of genocide and ‘ethnic cleansing’, (...) the neglect and abuse of children, the exploitation of vulnerable laborers, the sexual trafficking of girls and young women, the abandonment of the aged, racial oppression and discrimination, the persecution of believers of all faiths, and the failure to take steps necessary to halt the spread of preventable diseases like AIDS”.¹⁴

¹⁰ Manhattan Declaration. Life.

¹¹ Manhattan Declaration. Life.

¹² Talia Wise. 2023. Belgian Woman Suffocated with Pillow After Euthanasia Cocktail Left Her Screaming (19.10.2023). <https://www2.cbn.com/news/world/belgian-woman-suffocated-pillow-after-euthanasia-cocktail-left-her-screaming>.

¹³ Manhattan Declaration. Life.

¹⁴ Manhattan Declaration. Life.

All of these threats to human life, its inalienable dignity and integrity, as described above, call for clear opposition from Christians of all denominations and all those who, like Christians, believe in the sanctity of human life. As the examples in the US of successive achievements in the field of defense of human life against abortion show, uniting forces and consistent exercise of freedom of conscience can contribute to making this world a better place.

2. Defending the Christian understanding of marriage and family

The divine act of creating man and woman reveals God's intent for the differentiation between the sexes. Initially, God fashioned man and woman to complement one another, fostering a community of love and life while actively participating in the creation of humanity by bringing forth new individuals. Additionally, the creation of man and woman underscores God's purpose for gender differentiation. Therefore, it is an anthropological error to acknowledge genders other than male and female, as doing so not only contradicts empirical and biological perspectives but also denies the divine act of creation.

Renowned biologist Richard Dawkins, an avowed atheist, faced substantial backlash when he asserted publicly that empirical science, including biology, recognizes only two genders: male and female.¹⁵ According to Dawkins, an individual can only be identified as either a woman or a man, with no other alternatives. Dawkins defended J.K. Rowling, the author of the 'Harry Potter' series, who encountered intimidation from transgender activists for expressing reservations about unrestricted gender reassignment surgery. Rowling was even excluded from a gala celebrating characters from her books simply because she publicly critiqued the assertions of the LGBTQ+ community.¹⁶

The *Manhattan Declaration* stresses the compatibility of the Christian understanding of marriage with the order of creation described in the Bible and emphasizes the dignity of spouses as co-workers with God in the transmission of life: "In Scripture, the creation of man and woman, and their one-flesh union as husband and wife, is the crowning achievement of God's creation. In the transmis-

¹⁵ Ryan Foley. 2023. Richard Dawkins says JK Rowling being 'bullied' by trans activists: 'There are 2 sexes' (11.12.2023). <https://www.christianpost.com/news/richard-dawkins-defends-jk-rowling-there-are-2-sexes.html>.

¹⁶ Tingle Rory. 2023. 'The attempt to intimidate me is meant to serve as a warning to women': JK Rowling tells 'Witch Trials' podcast that backlash she's received over her trans views is being used as threat to silence others (19.10.2023). <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11802481/JK-Rowling-says-backlash-trans-views-used-silence-others.html>.

sion of life and the nurturing of children, men and women joined as spouses are given the great honor of being partners with God Himself”.¹⁷

The divine act of creation, in which the Lord God designed man and woman to complement each other, forming a community of life and love and bringing forth new life, implies that a man’s attraction should be exclusively directed towards a woman, and vice versa. Therefore, homosexuality is seen as contradicting the divine act of creation, as it goes against the intended complementarity between man and woman. This is why, as the *Manhattan Declaration* points out, there can be no agreement to redefine marriage towards the recognition of single-sex and multipartner relationships. The recognition of such unions being introduced into legislation “is a symptom, rather than the cause, of the erosion of the marriage culture. It reflects a loss of understanding of the meaning of marriage as embodied in our civil and religious law and in the philosophical tradition that contributed to shaping the law”.¹⁸ Even for those who do not accept the religious justification for the preservation of marriage as the union of a man and a woman, such a marriage is and will remain the best institution from the point of view of securing the future of society: “In spousal communion and the rearing of children (who, as gifts of God, are the fruit of their parents’ marital love), we discover the profound reasons for and benefits of the marriage covenant”.¹⁹

However, can the existence of people in homosexual and polyamorous relationships in society be omitted from the public debate? In Euro-Atlantic culture countries where the law does not prohibit such relationships, unlike various African countries, although not everywhere allowing their formalization legally, attempts are made to statistically determine the number of so-called non-heteronormative individuals. According to the Pew Research Center’s findings from July 2022, 1.6% of individuals in American society are transgender and non-binary.²⁰ The same Center provides information regarding the results of a study on the level of legal acceptance of same-sex relationships in American society: “About six-in-ten adults (61%) express a positive view of the impact of same-sex marriage being legal, including 36% who say it is very good for society. Roughly four-in-ten have a negative view (37%), with 19% saying it is very bad”.²¹ The

¹⁷ Manhattan Declaration. Marriage.

¹⁸ Manhattan Declaration. Marriage.

¹⁹ Manhattan Declaration. Marriage.

²⁰ Brown Anna, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Kim Parker and Rachel Minkin. 2022. The Experiences, Challenges and Hopes of Transgender and Nonbinary U.S. Adults. Findings from Pew Research Center focus group (8.11.2023). <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/06/07/the-experiences-challenges-and-hopes-of-transgender-and-nonbinary-u-s-adults/>.

²¹ Gabriel Borelli. 2022. About six-in-ten Americans say legalization of same-sex marriage is good for society (8.11.2023). <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/15/about-six-in-ten-americans-say-legalization-of-same-sex-marriage-is-good-for-society/>.

cited data allows for two conclusions: the percentage of transgender and non-binary individuals remains relatively stable in American society, despite consistent advocacy for acceptance of non-heteronormativity. The second observation is that the ongoing emphasis on accepting transgender and non-binary identities significantly raises the level of social acceptance for relationships involving such individuals, which has already surpassed half of those surveyed by the Pew Research Center in the USA. The *Manhattan Declaration* also acknowledges this issue. While it directly labels homosexual relationships and polyamory as “immoral conduct”, it simultaneously declares “compassion for those so disposed” and respect for them “as human beings possessing profound, inherent, and equal dignity”. It is – as the Declaration points out – because “rejection of sin, though resolute, must never become the rejection of sinners”.²²

In many countries of the so-called Euro-Atlantic culture, changes in legislation have already occurred, accepting the legal formalization of LGBTQ+ relationships. While the level of legal resemblance to traditional marriage (i.e., between one woman and one man) varies among different states, undoubtedly, the mere allowance for the formal legal registration of such relationships imbues them with certain characteristics of marriage and assimilates them into societal perception as marriages. This has further implications for religious communities as well. The formalization of non-heteronormative relationships in civil law prompts a desire to attain the same level of acceptance from churches and religious communities. This applies fully to the Roman Catholic Church as well. It is no wonder that in countries where societies have already become accustomed to the existence of civil partnerships among LGBTQ+ individuals, pressure has been exerted to obtain church blessings for such ‘irregular’ couples. It is noteworthy that the declaration *Fiducia supplicans* issued by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith fulfills these expectations.²³ It is also noticeable that church blessings for ‘irregular’ couples, including same-sex couples, receive varying degrees of support among Catholics in different countries, and a straightforward correlation can be observed with the prior acceptance in societies, including Christian communities, of the formalization of such relationships under civil law.

The *Manhattan Declaration* also addresses the important issue of same-sex and polyamorous relationships in the context of legal equality. Individuals involved in such relationships subjectively perceive them as genuinely marital. The *Declaration* emphasizes that “They fail to understand, however, that

²² Manhattan Declaration. Marriage.

²³ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. 2023. Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings. (20.12.2023) https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html.

marriage is made possible by the sexual complementarity of man and woman, and that the comprehensive, multi-level sharing of life that marriage is includes bodily unity of the sort that unites husband and wife biologically as a reproductive unit”.²⁴ Nevertheless, advocates for legal equality of same-sex and polyamorous relationships with traditional marriage between a man and a woman often cite the argument of equality in civil rights. At this juncture, the authors and signatories of the *Manhattan Declaration* vehemently resist, asserting that marriage is not an abstract or neutral concept that can be arbitrarily defined and redefined solely based on the authority wielded in this regard. Therefore, “No one has a civil right to have a non-marital relationship treated as a marriage”.²⁵ It should also be noted that regarding the recognition of marital status for non-heteronormative couples, the previously skeptical majority is now under pressure, and even blackmail, from the boisterous minority. In this way, it is not the rights of the minority that are not being realized, but rather the rights of the majority that are endangered, as the aggressive minority demanding the implementation of the ‘equality’ agenda deprives parents, including Christian parents, of the right to educate their children according to their own beliefs and introduces homosexual and gender propaganda into schools and kindergartens.

Here, too, there is room for the courageous expression of dissent by all who recognize marriage between one man and one woman as the only union that is in accordance with the Creator’s intention and as such secures the dignity, freedom and future of human beings.

3. Religious freedom as a fundamental human right

The same inalienable and undeniable human dignity that comes from the divine act of human being’s creation, in which God has included in human his image and his likeness, is also the source of religious freedom. The Second Vatican Council made a very strong statement on the religious freedom, including the freedom of human conscience, with the declaration *Dignitatis humanae*: “This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. (...) The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in

²⁴ Manhattan Declaration. Marriage.

²⁵ Manhattan Declaration. Marriage.

the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right”.²⁶

The *Manhattan Declaration* presents exactly the same understanding of the issue of religious freedom when it states: “The right to religious freedom has its foundation in the example of Christ Himself and in the very dignity of the human person created in the image of God – a dignity, as our founders proclaimed, inherent in every human, and knowable by all in the exercise of right reason”.²⁷

Man’s inner capacity to discern what is good and what is evil, which is known in the Christian tradition as conscience, the inner voice of God in the human heart, demands to be respected and protected. Every human being capable of using their mental and spiritual faculties is fully equipped with a conscience, not only those recognizing their dependence on God the Creator. This means that conscience is a natural attribute of a human person, and his or her ability to recognize what is good and what is evil does not depend solely on the process of education, although in this process the judgements of conscience acquire their rational justification. The *Manhattan Declaration* also takes up here the theological reflection contained in *Dignitatis humanae*, stating: “Christians confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience. Immunity from religious coercion is the cornerstone of an unconstrained conscience. No one should be compelled to embrace any religion against his will, nor should persons of faith be forbidden to worship God according to the dictates of conscience or to express freely and publicly their deeply held religious convictions. What is true for individuals applies to religious communities as well”.²⁸ It follows that the public demand for respect for the sanctity of human life, and for the conjugal union of husband and wife, cannot be restricted in any way. Even more so, views to the contrary can neither be more privileged in public debate nor, still less, promoted by civil law. Meanwhile, in both the U.S. and Canada, as well as in many European countries, one can observe the use of civil law to restrict freedom of conscience by eliminating “conscience clauses,” which secure the right to refuse to act against one’s conscience when the same actions are permitted by state law. “Conscience clause” in such situations, for example, allows one not to take action against unborn life, or to refuse to promote homosexuality or other so-called non-heteronormative behavior.

²⁶ Second Vatican Council. 1965. Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae*. On the Right of the Person and of Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious. Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965 (22.11.2023). https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html. Nos 2–3.

²⁷ Manhattan Declaration. Religious Liberty.

²⁸ Manhattan Declaration. Religious Liberty.

By citing examples of the above-mentioned situations, the *Manhattan Declaration* points to the general principle of respect for the law even when it is not subjectively recognized. The exception to this rule, however, is the possibility of objecting to rights that are “gravely unjust or require those subject to them to do something unjust or otherwise immoral”. In such cases, the *Declaration* states, “civil disobedience is not only permitted, but sometimes required”.²⁹ This principle stems directly from the freedom of conscience of the human person, who has the right to recognize that he or she must object to a bad law, or that civil law is opposed to God’s law. On such a principle, Peter and John could not show obedience to the Jewish law formulated by the Sanhedrin, but chose to obey God himself (Acts 4). The authors of the *Manhattan Declaration* here summarize the famous phrase of Martin Luther King, Jr. in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, who, citing St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, said, that “just laws elevate and ennoble human beings because they are rooted in the moral law whose ultimate source is God Himself. Unjust laws degrade human beings. Inasmuch as they can claim no authority beyond sheer human will, they lack any power to bind in conscience”.³⁰ The arguments cited here clearly demonstrate the primacy of conscience over state law. God’s law, recognized by man in his rightful conscience as superior to man-made law, provides moral justification for the expression of conscientious objection through an act of civil disobedience. Such an act, however, does not absolve either the individual or the community from making every effort to change state law so that civil disobedience to it is no longer necessary.

Conclusions

The *Manhattan Declaration* is a needed and clear voice of Christian authorities among scholars and leaders of Christian churches and communities. It forms a clear position on the sanctity and inviolability of life, on the understanding of marriage only as the union of one man and one woman, and on religious freedom. Because it is signed by members of different Christian churches, it has become a strong ecumenical voice in American society. It represents a clear realization of the right to freedom of conscience and calls for the practice of acts arising from the need to speak out on important public issues in full respect for the freedom of conscience of Christians. This expression of freedom of conscience can mean going as far as civil disobedience.

²⁹ Manhattan Declaration. Religious Liberty.

³⁰ Manhattan Declaration. Religious Liberty.

However, some may ask the following question: what is the point of writing, signing and publishing similar declarations? Are declarations such as the *Manhattan Declaration* capable of making a difference? The answer does not immediately appear to be clear-cut. For people using reason enlightened by the Christian faith will certainly agree with it – but they do not need to be persuaded of the assertions contained in the declaration. People using reason not enlightened by faith will use it either to pursue the truth honestly intellectually or to combat it. People not using reason will not read it, or if they do read it, they will not understand it. So what is the point in publishing such a declaration? Well, it seems that despite the reservations initially expressed, the sense is manifold. The bearing of the declaration is based on the objective truth it contains and on the authority of its authors and signatories. It is intended to reassure those who have hitherto held the same opinion, to try to convince the unconvinced and to make clear the opinions of a large section of society which is committed to Christian teaching based on Revealed Truth. In this way, it is intended to contribute to the existence of a strong voice in the public debate and, consequently, also to the change of an unfavorable law, as the case of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* showed. It is about generating public pressure and multiplying that pressure. It is about producing pressure from public opinion and multiplying that pressure. Here, the *Manhattan Declaration* achieved partial success on the aforementioned verdict, paving the way for more US states to introduce legislation to better protect conceived life. It is also an important voice on issues not yet dealt with, such as the terror of the leftist gender ideology, the pressure to accept homo- and alter-sexuality as normal. It is also important to emphasize the primacy of the voice of individual conscience over the pressure of so-called political correctness, which often turns into ideological dictatorship. In extreme cases, this can – and should – lead to acts of civil disobedience.

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