

In The School of Mary

(Papal documents condensed by Deacon William Wagner)

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Pope John Paul II

Evangelium Vitae, The Gospel of Life, was issued on the Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord, March 25, 1995.

Encyclical Letter on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life:

Introduction to Summarization Before beginning a section-by-section summary of *Evangelium Vitae*, I wish to summarize in a general way what the Holy Father has done in this particularly important encyclical. Since it was issued on the Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord, March 25, 1995, it does not in a specific way address at least one of the "hot button" issues that have caught public attention since then. (i.e. embryonic stem cell research) Nevertheless in principal this encyclical deals with this issue as well. *Evangelium Vitae* is an encyclical that speaks to us with clarity in these times of critical decisions.

So often the literary battles concerning life issues are just so many skirmishes "fought" in particular arenas. These individual engagements are usually conducted within such particular "zones" as abortion, contraception, euthanasia, the death penalty, war, techniques of artificial reproduction, stem cell research, etc. Concerned with specific circumstances and singular situations, they very often do not confront the root causes and fundamental errors fueling the whole of the much broader conflict.

The Holy Father's special contribution in *Evangelium Vitae* is that he lifts, and in a sense at the same time, deepens our understanding of the malaise of confrontation. He uses a comprehensive approach in which he highlights the individual attacks on life to draw attention to that which is fundamental in the struggle and to a vision of the whole. The Pope is first of all about the treating of causes and not of offering palliatives for the symptoms.

In this instance four major areas make his approach to grappling with life issues quite different. First, he lays bare a central error; one fundamentally disruptive of the entire scheme of creation; namely, the separation of freedom from truth. Secondly, he considers the moral confusion, which creates a society transformed by a "structure of sin" into a "culture of death." Thirdly, his solution is also comprehensive in its perspective: the evangelization of a culture by the proclamation of the Gospel of Life with a view to once again re-uniting truth with freedom as a basis for a "culture of life." The Holy Father's final distinguishing contribution lies in his distinctive and definitive method of condemning the major attacks on life.

Freedom

To expand just briefly upon each of the four areas of concern, we begin with the separation of freedom from truth. Pope John Paul II says that in seeking the deepest roots of the struggle between the "culture of death" and the "culture of life" we have to go to the very heart of the tragedy; "the eclipse of the sense of God and of man."(#21) (*Each of these numbers refers to a numbered paragraph in the encyclical.*) Man's

dignity arises not out of the recognition accorded him by some group of laws or lawmakers but out of his very own origin. The Holy Father says that in bestowing life upon each human person, God bestowed much more than "mere existence in time" but "a drive towards fullness of life;" "the seed of an existence which transcends the very limits of time."(#34) By living as if God did not exist, man not only loses sight of the mystery of God, but also of the mystery of the world and the mystery of his own being.(#22)

In denying (or ignoring) his relationship with the Creator, man has introduced a profound distortion into his life. He pays no recognition to the very source of his dignity, of his incomparable worth, of his divine vocation. In short, he no longer knows that truth about himself. Hence he is incapable of functioning according to the constitutive truth that he is God's man and not his own. It is the death knell of true freedom for he has exchanged the truth for a lie.

Because man's knowledge of himself is no longer verified in reality, his freedom also suffers a distortion. He no longer lives according to the "ought" factor meaning that when it comes to the natural world, human beings are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones which they cannot violate with impunity.(#42) Freedom falsified in this manner becomes extremely individualistic and self-centered. It exalts the individual in an absolute way and gives no place to solidarity, to openness to others and service to them.(#19) Society, in effect, has become "a mass of individuals placed side by side but without any mutual bonds" and thus "social life ventures on to the shifting sands of complete relativism." (#20) Freedom separated from truth can only become tyranny.

A Culture of Death

A second characteristic, which distinguishes this encyclical's approach, is the manner in which the Holy Father helps us understand how individual sinfulness can come to malevolently form an entire culture.

In *Evangelium Vitae* Pope John Paul draws a picture of individualistic freedom run-a-muck in society today. It is a freedom of the strong against the weak who have no choice but to submit. (#19) He draws together from a vast array the attacks on life, which in "generalized opinion" no longer are considered crimes but have "assumed the nature of rights protected by the State." Even more serious is the fact that these attacks are often times carried out in the heart of and with the complicity of the family. (#11)

Because of the vastness of the scope of confusion concerning good and evil there is such a massive default in the public conscience that the Holy Father says we are confronted with a "veritable structure of sin." To his way of thinking it is characterized by the emergence of a culture, which takes the form of a "culture of death." (#12) Within modern society driven as it is by technological utilitarianism, there is now in place a morality almost solely defined by an excessive concern for efficiency. (#12) At the same time it fosters an irresponsible sexuality rooted in a contraceptive "pleasurism" which leads inexorably to an abortion mentality (#13) and a totally unrealistic attitude toward control over life and death. (#15) At the basis of this philosophy of life is a Marxist idea: "praxis (practice) makes truth."

Although John Paul will bring the full force of his papal authority to bear upon them, abortion and euthanasia are not the only life issues of concern to him. All human life is eventually at stake. For example, he maintains the sacredness of life even in the face of a "true right to self-defense" (#55) and a legitimate capital punishment as an absolute last resort. (#56) As surprising as it at first may seem, "not even the murderer loses his personal dignity," he says. (#9) Only God is the master of life! (#55)

The Solution: Create a Culture of Life

A third characteristic which makes *Evangelium Vitae* distinctive is the Holy Father's approach to a solution for the crisis of life. In order to bring about the transformation of a culture many things must happen. Fundamentally, the Church must begin with the evangelization to which she has been called. The proclamation of the Gospel of Life is an integral part of that Gospel which is Jesus Christ himself. (#78) Even though we have been sent as a people, yet each bears an individual responsibility. Most importantly the Gospel of Life is to be celebrated in daily living (#86) and the Holy Father goes on at quite some length spelling out just what this entails.

Rooted in the Church's mission of evangelization, the renewal of cultural life must first of all begin in the Church's own backyard; within the Christian community itself which far too often has likewise become accustomed to separating the Christian faith from its ethical requirements. (#95) The first step is a formation of conscience which esteems the essential link between life and freedom. Where life is not welcomed and loved, there is no true freedom. (#96)

Perhaps even more fundamentally necessary is the recovery of the bond between freedom and truth; regaining that sense of "innate dependence" on God. For where God is denied and people live as if he does not exist, eventually human life itself ends up being compromised. (#105)

John Paul II's all encompassing strategy of transformation begins at the very roots of the culture so as to permeate the entire milieu. It requires that everyone have the courage to adopt a new life-style involving practical choices at the personal, family, social and international level. All must give primacy to *being over having*, to *persons over things*. The Pope says that this new style of living means passing from indifference to concern for others, from rejection to acceptance of them. Most importantly, no one must feel left out. Everyone has his proper role to play. (#98)

Abortion and Euthanasia

There is one final note of distinctiveness in this encyclical. It concerns a style or methodology not previously employed by this Pontiff or any of his predecessors where the condemnation of abortion and euthanasia are concerned. Some brief comment is appropriate. On three separate occasions Pope John Paul uses a very precise formula by means of which he obviously wishes to throw the full weight of his Papal authority behind the condemnation of these heinous attacks on life.

The first occasion is his condemnation of all direct and voluntary killing of innocent human life(#57). The second occasion is specifically with regard to abortion(#62) and the final occasion is directed at euthanasia.(#65) In each instance he joins himself to a Tradition, which is ecclesiastically both broad and deep. Additionally, he expressly points out in all three cases that the doctrine is based upon the natural law, the Scriptures and the Church's Tradition as taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. This is in clear and striking contrast to what had been done previously. Obviously the critical nature of the times requires the seriousness and precision of the language.

Conclusion

Finally, recognizing the great disparity of worldly resources available to those promoting the "culture of death" as opposed to those fostering the "culture of life and love," the Pope reminds us of our necessary reliance upon God for whom nothing is impossible. Nothing is refused to those who ask. But we must be persistent in asking. Pray and fast. Some devils are driven out in no other way.(#100)

Introduction

As we begin this encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II wants us know that the Gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus' message; that man is called to a dimension of life that exceeds his earthly existence, extending to the supernatural realm. This vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life. By his Incarnation the Son of God wished to unite himself to every human person. In doing so he reveals not only the boundless love of God but also the incomparable value of every individual

The Holy Father says that the Gospel of God's love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the Gospel of Life are a single and indivisible Gospel. Therefore man, living man, a concrete reality, represents the primary and fundamental way for the Church. For this reason the Church takes seriously, with clarity of statement and direction, her role of protecting her children from the growing malicious threats to human life. The Holy Father finds it necessary to restate in a most forceful way the Second Vatican Council's condemnation of these crimes and attacks against human life.

What he finds disturbing is that a broad sector of public opinion has come to justify a number of these crimes in the name of the rights of individual freedom. An even more disturbing phenomenon is the fact that the laws of States, often in contradiction to their Constitutions, have made such heinous practices not only permissible but altogether legal. "This," the Pope says, "is a disturbing symptom and a significant cause of grave moral decline." Along with the tragic destruction of human life, there is also the equally menacing consequence in which human conscience finds it increasingly difficult to distinguish between good and evil where the basic value of human life is concerned.

In this encyclical John Paul is reacting to the desires of an extraordinary Consistory of Cardinals held in Rome in April of 1991. He goes on to confirm that it is also the fruit of cooperation of the Episcopate from every country of the world. As such, *The Gospel of Life* is meant to be a precise and vigorous

reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability. At the same time it is a pressing appeal to all of us to do that which we can to respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life!

Chapter 1 *The Voice of Your Brother's Blood Cries to Me from the Ground*

Present-Day Threats to Human Life

The Holy Father wants us to know that God did not make death. Death entered the world because of the envy of Satan and the sin of our first parents. Death entered the world in a violent way when Cain slew Abel. Sadly, this page is rewritten each day in human history. In the account of Abel's murder, scripture reveals the presence of anger and envy in man, consequences of original sin from the beginning. Man has become the enemy of his fellow man.

Brother kills brother. The Pope reminds us that every murder, like the first fratricide, is a violation of our spiritual kinship in which we all share a common good: *equal personal dignity*. Abortion and euthanasia in addition violate also a kinship "of flesh and blood."

"Am I my brother's keeper" is still an answer heard as individuals, groups and society very often attempt to justify atrocious crimes in the name of ideologies. John Paul thinks of the people who refuse to accept responsibility for their brothers and sisters, especially society's least.

First among the sins that cry to God for justice is willful murder. Human life belongs to God. Anyone who attacks human life in some way attacks God himself. God as well as the earth curses Cain. Yet God is merciful and places a mark upon him lest those who would come upon him might wish to kill him. In this regard the Holy Father draws an important conclusion, "Not even the murderer loses his personal dignity, and God himself pledges to guarantee this."

Thus we note the paradox of the mystery of the merciful justice of God. John Paul teaches us, "God, who preferred the correction rather than the death of a sinner, did not desire that a homicide be punished by the exaction of another act of homicide." Here indeed is a thought to ponder deeply.

The Holy Father says that the question that the Lord posed to Cain, "What have you done?" is still valid and continues to speak to the people of our own day. It is impossible to catalog completely the vast array of threats to human life both explicit and hidden. In this encyclical John Paul wishes to attend principally to attacks on life at its beginning and at its end. These are coming to assume the nature of "rights" so that even the state is called upon to give them legal status. More serious according to the Pope is the fact that these attacks occur many times "in the very heart and with the complicity of the family" that is by its nature the "sanctuary of life."

This has occur because there now exists a crisis of culture which makes it very difficult to grasp clearly the meaning of what man is, his rights and his duties. The Holy Father says that very often these crimes against life are disguise through the use of "cleaned-up" medical terminology. This is done in order to distract attention away from the fact that these are attacks against the right to life of an actual human person.

What we are being confronted with is a much larger reality that can only be described, in John Paul's words, as a "veritable structure of sin." It emerges as the Pope puts it as a culture that in truth takes the form of a "culture of death." It is fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents in a society excessively concerned with efficiency. In a certain sense this can be viewed as a war of the powerful against the weak. Pope John Paul explains that a person because of illness, handicap or very simply by merely existing at times may compromise the well-being or life style of those more favored. In certain cases that person then can be looked upon as "an enemy to be resisted or eliminated." In this way a "conspiracy against life" is brought about, which can on a much broader scale distort relationships between even peoples and states.

This section of paragraphs in the development of the theme of the encyclical deals with "the eclipse of the value of life." To this end the growing investment of money and effort by the scientific community in making abortion more easily accessible seems to be almost exclusively preoccupied with suppressing life without any control or social responsibility.

It is asserted by its advocates that contraception is the most effective remedy against abortion. The Church is then accused of advocating abortion because she teaches that contraception is morally unlawful. However, the Holy Father incisively notes how the negative values inherent in the "contraceptive mentality" in fact strengthen the temptation toward abortion when an unwanted life is conceived. He then points out that *"the pro-abortion culture is especially strong precisely where the Church's teaching on contraception is rejected."*

The Pope makes it clear that theologically we are dealing here with two different types of moral evils. On the one hand, contraception contradicts the full truth of the conjugal act of love and opposes the virtue of chastity in marriage. Abortion, on the other hand, destroys a human being and is opposed to the virtue of justice, directly violating the divine commandment: *"You shall not kill."*

The Holy Father then points to something that is becoming increasingly obvious: the close connection, in mentality, that conjoins the two practices. Despite the differences in nature and moral gravity, they are "fruits of the same tree." He acknowledges that often there are significant pressures, which bring these practices about. Yet, these practices in many instances are rooted in a pleasure-mentality unwilling to accept responsibility in sexual matters. There is inherent *"a self-center concept of freedom which regards procreation as an obstacle to personal fulfillment."*

In John Paul's own words, as a consequence, *"life becomes an enemy to be avoided at all costs and abortion becomes the only possible decisive response to failed contraception."* What is even more tragic is that many products developed and distributed with the same ease as contraceptives function as abortifacients (i.e. they kill human life at a very early stage of development). The ensuing years since the publication of this encyclical (1995) has seen an ever-increasing sophistication of development in this area.

The Holy Father now turns his attention to techniques of reproduction that very often in appearance offer themselves as being at the service of life. They are however morally unacceptable because they

essentially separate procreation from the conjugal act. These methods have a high rate of failure exposing the embryo to the risk of death. In addition there are more embryos produced than needed. These so-called “*spare embryos*” are destroyed or are used in scientific research under the pretext of “*scientific or medical progress.*” This in effect reduces human life to simple biological material capable of being freely disposed of.

Prenatal diagnosis, morally unobjectionable in itself, frequently is used to propose abortion where a medical problem is seen to exist. This is “*eugenic abortion*” that accepts life only under certain optimal conditions. Using the same logic even infanticide is being justified. Pope John Paul says that in these circumstances we have reverted to a state of barbarism that was thought to have been left behind.

Similar threats hang over the incurably ill and the dying. The temptation becomes all the more compelling where suffering exists and the family is urged on by a “*misplaced sense of compassion.*” This is all the more aggravated by a society, which sees no value in suffering. Or worse, it considers suffering, in the Pope’s words, as “*the epitome of evil to be eliminated at all costs.*”

On a more general level, there exists an attitude that leads people to mistakenly believe that they can control life and death. A utilitarian motive often times seeks to justify society’s attempt to eliminate the cost of sustaining malformed babies, the severely handicapped, the elderly lacking in self sufficiency, or the terminally ill. In addition, these and similar forms of euthanasia often are used to increase the availability of organs for transplant without verifying the death of the individual. Morally, all of this is unacceptable.

A phenomenon, which has riveted the attention of our modern world, is the question of over-population. The Holy Father notes how in the developed countries the birthrate has collapsed while in the underdeveloped areas of the world the population is seemingly exploding. Instead of concentrating the world’s resources in order to alleviate the underdevelopment, the same policies of birth control through contraception, sterilization and abortion used in the developed countries, are being encouraged in these “problem areas.” Economic assistance is often times unjustly contingent upon the acceptance of anti-birth policies.

Motivated by fear of Hebrew over-population in Egypt, the Pharaoh of old resorted to the killing of the male children of Israel. The Pope says that not a few of the powerful of today’s world act in the same way

Threats against life in today’s society have not grown weaker but have taken on massive proportions. The Pope says that these threats are scientifically and systematically programmed. In his own words, “We are in fact faced by an objective “*conspiracy against life.*” At the same time the mass media are often implicated because they give credit to such practices as contraception, sterilization, abortion and euthanasia as being marks of progress and a victory for freedom.

The Holy Father recognizes the tremendous pressures that sometimes precipitate individual decisions against life. The decisions in themselves are objectively evil. Yet the weighty circumstances surrounding them often times mitigate the subjective culpability of the decisions taken. What is tragic

however is that at the cultural, social, and political levels these crimes against life are being interpreted as *legitimate expressions of individual freedom to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights*.

John Paul decries the fact that in an age when the inviolable rights of the person are solemnly proclaimed and the value of life is being publicly affirmed, these very rights are being trampled upon at two significant points of existence: the moment of birth and the moment of death.

In today's global arena noble assertions concerning human rights are being proclaimed while in practice they are tragically being repudiated. The Holy Father says that these attacks go directly against respect for life and that they represent a direct threat to the entire culture of human rights. The whole process has become something of a futile exercise of rhetoric. In point of fact, it is just words.

In the next section the Pope begins to investigate the roots of this remarkable contradiction. He says that in this perverted view, we discover that only those persons who enjoy full or at least the beginnings of autonomy are the proper subjects of rights. Additionally, personal dignity rests with those alone who have the capacity for verbal and explicit communication. It does not give place to anyone who is weak or radically dependent on others. In contrast John Paul tells us that the theory of human rights is based precisely on the affirmation that the human person, unlike animals and things, cannot be subject to domination by others.

Yet where these weak are concerned, force becomes the criterion for choice and action in interpersonal relation and in social life. Society has been stood on its head when a community instead of being a state ruled by *"the force of reason"* becomes one ruled by *"reasons of force."*

This contradiction also finds itself rooted in a notion that exalts the individual in an absolute way without regard to openness and service to others. Our Holy Father says that this is a completely individualistic concept of freedom, which ends up being the freedom of "the strong" against the weak who cannot but submit.

We learn an important moral in Genesis from the story of Cain and Abel. *Yes, we are "our brothers keeper!"* God has entrusted us to one another. Our God-given freedom has a relational dimension. It is when freedom is at the service of others that it experiences self-fulfillment. On the other hand, when freedom becomes completely self-centered, i. e. absolutely individualistic, it is then that it is emptied of its original content. Its meaning and dignity is contradicted.

Finally, when freedom no longer recognizes and respects its essential link with the truth, it negates and destroys itself becoming a factor in the destruction of others. This freedom, wishing to be emancipated from all forms of authority and tradition, no longer has a sole and indisputable point of reference. The individual is left now with only his own subjective and ever changing opinions.

The Holy Father will tell us in the next section that this view of freedom leads to a serious distortion of social life.

When freedom is torn from its roots grounded in the truth, we experience a serious distortion in the life of society. This perversion leads to absolute autonomy wherein everyone rejects everyone else. Society becomes a mass of individuals living side by side but without any mutual bonds. Everything is relative.

Everything is negotiable. Everything is open to bargaining, even the most fundamental of rights, the right to life.

The Holy Father now turns our attention to the political sphere where relativism ignores “right” since it no longer is grounded on the inviolable dignity of the human person. The will of the stronger is the “right.” “In this way,” says the Pope, “democracy contradicting its own principles, effectively moves towards a form of totalitarianism.” The state is transformed into a tyrant. The strictest respect for legality becomes a sham especially where abortion and euthanasia are concerned. By killing the weakest and most innocent, the dignity of the individual becomes a caricature. John Paul maintains that at this juncture the disintegration of the state has already begun. To recognize in law, the right to abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia is an exercise of absolute power over others. It is the death knell of true freedom.

This perverse idea of freedom is not the only source of the struggle between the “culture of life” and the “culture of death.” Where the sense of God is lost there also is the tendency to lose the sense of the dignity of man and his life. Pope John Paul reminds us of something that evangelical spirituality teaches. It is that with a systematic violation of the moral law comes a spiritual blindness, a hardness of heart. Again, the story of Cain and Abel teaches us. Only before the Lord can man admit his sin and recognize its full seriousness.

Consequently, when God is forgotten the creature itself grows unintelligible. *“Man is no longer able to see himself as mysteriously different from other earthly creatures. ... He is just one more living being.”* The Pope has summarized well the resulting consequence as seen in everyday life. Life becomes a mere thing over which man has complete control. Through the functionality of technology, life and death are something that can be programmed, controlled and dominated. They are *things* that can be possessed or rejected.

The Holy Father concludes that the loss of contact with God’s wise design is the deepest root of modern man’s confusion. He summarizes, “By living as if God did not exist, man not only loses sight of the mystery of God, but also of the mystery of the world and of the mystery of his own being.”

With the eclipse of God and man there comes into existence a practical materialism. The values of being are replaced by those of having. Personal aggrandizement in every form is the only goal in life. In this context suffering is rejected, is considered useless, is opposed as evil, and is always to be avoided. When suffering is unavoidable, life then becomes meaningless and the temptation to suppress it grows.

Our Holy Father asks us to be aware that within this context, the body loses its *personal* reality and becomes purely material. It is a mere complex of organs. Sexuality is also depersonalized. The unitive and procreative nature of the conjugal act is ripped apart. Procreation becomes the “enemy.” On the other hand, having a child “at all costs” takes on the nature of a right if the child is desired. Interpersonal relations are seriously impoverished.

Furthermore the Pope warns that it is at the heart of our moral conscience that the eclipse of God and man has its worst consequences. The moral conscience, both individual and social, is subjected to a

perversion that confuse good and evil especially where the right to life is concerned. John Paul concludes by saying, "When conscience, this bright lamp of the soul, calls *evil good and good evil*, it is already on the path to the most alarming corruption and the darkest moral blindness." Yet the Pope knows that it ever remains distinctly possible to hear the clear voice of Christ even within the most perverse conscience.

The Pope recalls how the unique blood of the Savior in crying out now joins the blood of Abel and all those murdered since. It is Christ's blood alone that purifies, redeems and saves. This blood pouring from the side of Christ cries for a more radical "justice" as it also calls for mercy. It reveals the grandeur of the Father's love. It reveals how precious man is in God's eyes, how priceless his life. By contemplating the precious blood of Christ, the believer comes to appreciate the dignity of the human being. It is for this one that "God gave his only Son in order that man should not perish but have eternal life. (cf. Jn 3:16)

Christ's blood reveals man's greatness and his vocation to himself, the full gift of self. It is no longer a sign of death but of life. It is from the blood of Christ, the Pope tells us, that we all draw strength to promote life. His blood is the foundation of the absolute certitude that in God's plan life will be victorious. "And death shall be no more," exclaims the powerful voice coming from the throne of God in the Heavenly Jerusalem. (Rev 21:4) And St. Paul echoes: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Cor 15:54-55)

The Holy Father concludes these last few numbered paragraphs recalling for us that there are significant positives amidst all the negativity in society. Dwelling only on the negatives would lead to a "sterile discouragement."

Even in the midst of what could be termed a "media black-out" on the many positive initiatives in society, there are hopeful signs. The Pope enumerates. There are still many married couples who, with a generous sense of responsibility, accept children as the supreme gift of marriage. Many families despite their own personal obligations are willing to accept abandoned children. Many centers exist in support of life with sacrificial and practical support of women who are tempted to have recourse to abortion.

In the field of medical science various agencies and organizations are bringing to bear their resources to alleviate poverty and endemic diseases. Physicians are being organized to bring quick relief to people afflicted by natural disasters, epidemics, or wars. Among diverse peoples there is evident a praiseworthy growth of solidarity toward a moral sensitivity and respect for life.

In the face of laws supporting abortion and the legalization of euthanasia, there have sprung up worldwide movements and initiatives to raise social awareness in defense of life. In their non-violent approach, the Holy Father says that they promote a profound consciousness of the value of human life. He commends as well the many men and women religious who have consecrated themselves to help the needy of the world. "All these deeds," the Pope says, "strengthen the basis of the civilization of love and life."

As one of the positive signs of hope, Pope John Paul points especially to the new sensitivity in opposition to war as a means of solution to conflicts between peoples. In the same perspective he notes that there is growing public opposition to the death penalty, even when such a penalty is seen as a kind of legitimate defense on the part of society. Modern society has other means of dealing with criminals than those that take away from them the chance to reform.

Growing attention is being paid to the quality of life and to ecology especially in developed countries. The discussions that have arisen among believers and non-believers in the area of bioethics are surely a hopeful sign.

The Pope wants us to be fully aware that we are facing an *“enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the culture of death and the culture of life.”* We are amidst this conflict as he puts it *“with the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life.”* The Holy Father concludes by saying that this unconditional choice of life will only reach its full religious and moral meaning when it flows from, is formed by and nourished by faith in Christ.”

Chapter II *I Came That They May Have Life*

The Christian Message Concerning Life

The Holy Father admits, “Faced with the countless grave threats to life present in the modern world, one could feel overwhelmed by sheer powerlessness: good can never be powerful enough to triumph over evil.” “Courage,” he says in response. *The Gospel of Life* is not simply a reflection. He says that *The Gospel of Life* is something concrete and personal. In effect, it is the proclamation of the very person of Jesus. Jesus, the Son who from all eternity receives life from the Father, says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” In Christ, the Gospel of life is definitively proclaimed and fully given.

This Gospel of life was already written in the heart of every man and woman, echoing in every conscience from the beginning in such a way that, despite the negative consequences of sin, it could also be known by human reason. Nevertheless, Jesus, as the Second Vatican Council says, perfected that revelation by word and work. Hence our attention is fixed on Jesus. In Jesus, the “Word of Life,” God’s eternal life is proclaimed and given, eternal life to which we are all called and toward which we strive.

In the Old Testament, especially in the events of the Exodus, Israel’s life is the object of God’s *gentle and intense love*. The Holy Father says that the Exodus was a foundational experience, “Freedom from slavery meant the gift of an identity, the recognition of an indestructible dignity, and the beginning of a new history, in which the discovery of God and the discovery of self go hand in hand.” It becomes a model for the future.

Israel grows in its understanding of the meaning and value of life itself. This is aptly portrayed in the Wisdom Literature. In the Book of Job, faith is challenged to respond to the contradictions in life. It is this mystery of suffering that especially challenges faith and puts it to the test. The innocent one overwhelmed by suffering is led to question the seeming incongruities of life. The Holy Father recalls for

us how, in Job, when the darkness is deepest faith points to a trusting and adoring acknowledgment of “the mystery.”

As the mystery of immortal life is progressively revealed in the Old Testament, the human heart begins to grasp it with an ever-growing clarity. *“He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man’s mind.” (Ec 3:11)* Pope John Paul notes how *“this first notion of totality and fullness is waiting to be manifested in love,”* and by God’s free gift is to be brought to perfection.

The Holy Father now draws an important comparison. He says that just as God had reassured Israel in the midst of danger, so now the Son of God proclaims to all who feel threatened and hindered that their lives too are a good to which the Father’s love gives meaning and value. It is to all the “poor” that Jesus speaks in word and action. The Church is therefore aware that in its mission it too is the bearer of a message of salvation to the “poor.” On a deeper level this message touches every person’s life in its moral and spiritual dimension. Only those who recognize that their life is marked by the evil of sin will recognize that they have a need for the divine physician. The Gospel reminds us that they delude themselves who think that their material possessions will sustain them.

Jesus’ life from its beginning is marked with uncertainty. He is accepted by the righteous but at the same time is rejected by a world that grows ever more hostile while it looks for the child in order “to destroy him.” (Mt 2:13) Nevertheless from Nazareth as well as from Bethlehem comes the proclamation: this life, which is born, is salvation for all humanity.

Pope John Paul tells us of how St. Paul speaks of Jesus sharing in the lowliest and most vulnerable conditions of human life. Jesus lived this poverty throughout life even unto death on a Cross. The Holy Father says that it is precisely by Jesus’ death that he reveals to all the splendor and value of life. In this entire journey amid contradictions and even the loss of his life, Jesus is always guided by the certainty that his life is in the hands of the Father.

It is an instinctive perception that life is good. It is so because the life that God gives man is different from that of other living creatures. Man’s life is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory, as the Holy Father puts it. Man has been given a sublime dignity, based on the intimate bond that unites him to his Creator. In Genesis we see that man has been placed at the summit of God’s creation. Everything in creation is ordered to man and everything is made subject to him.

Man is made in the image of God. This life that God offers to man is a gift by which God shares something of himself with his creature. Sirach recognizes that man possesses spiritual faculties that are distinctively human. (Sir 17:7) To attain truth and freedom are specifically human prerogatives. Man alone is capable of knowing and loving his Creator. In man’s life there is a drive towards fullness; a seed of an existence that transcends the very limits of time. “For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity.” (Wis 2:23)

The divine breath, which God breathed into man, is the origin of that perennial dissatisfaction that man feels throughout his days on earth. Man is naturally drawn towards God. Plants and animals do not

satisfy. Only with the appearance of the woman, in whom the Spirit of God the Creator is also alive, can the need for interpersonal dialogue be supplied. The Holy Father explains that only in this other is there a reflection of God himself, the definitive goal and fulfillment of every person.

Unfortunately, God's marvelous plan is marred by the appearance of sin in history. We come to see how through sin man rebels against his Creator and ends up by worshipping creatures (cf. Rom 1:25). More ominous yet, when God is not acknowledged as God, the profound meaning of man is betrayed and the communion between people is compromised. Alienation is its consequence.

The Holy Father speaks of how in the life of man, God's image shines forth. It is, however, in Christ that the plan of life given to Adam is fulfilled. Only Christ is the perfect image of the Father. All who commit themselves to following him are given the fullness of life. In and through Christ the divine image is restored, renewed and brought to perfection. It is in him that man finds his true identity.

The life that the Son of God came to give to human beings cannot be reduced to mere existence in time. This special life consists of being begotten of God, sharing in the fullness of his love. Jesus said that all who received him, who believed in his name, would be given the power to become children of God. This life, which Jesus promises and gives is eternal because it is a full participation in the life of the Eternal One.

John Paul emphasizes that eternal life is the life of God himself and at the same time the life of the children of God. This is a gift from God to us through Christ. The dignity of our life is linked not only to its beginning but to its end as well, to the destiny of fellowship with God himself. This is a most sublime Christian truth. Additionally, this life that Jesus gives in no way lessens the value of our existence in time; rather it takes it and directs it to its final destiny (I am the resurrection and the life ...whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Jn 11:26)

Over the next few paragraphs the Holy Father makes some rather succinct and direct statements concerning life. He says without equivocation that man's life comes from God; it is his gift. Human life and death are thus in the hands of God, in his power. This being true, it is no less true that these are loving hands. God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. He gave existence. (Wis 1:13-14)

John Paul now moves to some derivative statements. He says that the sacredness of life gives rise to its inviolability, written from the beginning in man's heart, in his conscience. It is in the depths of his conscience that man is always reminded of the inviolability of life –his own life and that of others- as something that does not belong to him. The Old Testament does not reach the point of fulfillment in this regard as does the New Testament in the Sermon on the Mount. However, the overall message, which the New Testament brings to perfection, is a respect for the inviolability of life and the integrity of the human person.

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment'. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment." (Mt

5:21-22) This commandment was already in place in the Old Testament in regard to the weak and the oppressed. Jesus extended this to concern for the stranger, even to the extent of loving one's enemy. The parable of the Good Samaritan demonstrates clearly the extent to which we must go. (Lk 10:25-37) And again, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven." (Mt 5:44f) The key element of God's command to protect human life is the requirement to show reverence and love for every person and the life of every person. Genesis tells of the breath and depth of man's dominion over the earth and over every living creature. Nonetheless, the Pope is quick to point out that man has a responsibility to the environment. The dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power. Pope John Paul helps us to see that when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones that we cannot violate with impunity.

When a new person is born of the conjugal union, he brings into the world a particular image and likeness of God. That is to say as the Holy Father puts it, "The genealogy of the person is inscribed in the very biology of generation. ...Begetting is the continuation of Creation." Through the communication of life from parents to child,

God's own image and likeness is transmitted, thanks to the creation of the immortal soul. In the act of procreation a man and a woman joined in matrimony become partners in a divine undertaking. God's gift is accepted and a new life opens to the future.

In the Old Testament, sterility is dreaded as a curse while numerous offspring are viewed as a blessing. "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward." (Ps 127:3) There are innumerable biblical passages that respectfully and lovingly speak of conception, of the forming of life in the mother's womb, of giving birth, this all connected with the action of God the Creator. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." (Jer 1:5) In Job and in the Psalms there are many expressions of awe and wonder at God's intervention in the life of a child in its mother's womb.

John Paul points out that the New Testament as well confirms the indisputable recognition of the value of life from its very beginning. The value of the person from the moment of conception is celebrated in the meeting between the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth, and between the two children whom they are carrying in the womb.

As far as the elderly are concerned, their wisdom and experience are recognized as a unique source of enrichment for the family and for society. Faced with death the believer knows that his life is in the hands of God: "You, O Lord, hold my lot." (cf. Ps 16:5) "My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass. (Ps 102:11) – even then the believer is sustained by an unshakable faith in God's life-giving power.

The Holy Father then offers us a very Catholic thought. The life of the body in its earthly state is not an absolute good for the believer, especially as he may be asked to give up his life for a greater good. Jesus himself said, "Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his for my sake and the

gospel's will save it." (Mk 8:35) And so beginning with Stephen, the deacon, the Church has venerated a countless host of martyrs.

In accepting God's gift of life we are obliged to maintain life informed by that truth. The Holy Father notes how "You shall not kill" doesn't say it all. The entire Law of God serves to protect life because it is in this truth that life finds its full meaning. Within God's Covenant with his people, God's commandment is offered as the path of life.

The Law as a whole protects life. It is therefore difficult to remain faithful to the command, "You shall not kill," without the other "words of life" being observed. Only when people are open to the fullness of truth about God, man, and history will this command, "not to kill" shine forth as a good for man. It is by observing the Law of God that we are able to bring forth fruits of life and happiness.

Pope John Paul points up how Israel struggled to remain faithful to the Law of life. Even though Prophets came condemning their offenses against life, they were more concerned with awakening hope in a new principle of life directed towards a renewed relationship with God. And so it is that God speaks in Ezekiel (Ezek 36:25-26) of a "new heart" whose essence is the gift that is fully realized in the giving of self.

In the coming of Jesus of Nazareth that law is fulfilled. A "new heart" is given through his Spirit. In Jesus the Law becomes once and for all the "gospel." This new Law finds its fundamental expression in the gift of self in love for us all. It is the law of freedom, joy, and blessedness.

The Pope asks us to meditate on the Cross, standing as it did on that first Good Friday amidst a cosmic conflict between good and evil, life and death. It was the fulfillment of the revelation of the whole Gospel of Life. Today we stand again amid a similar conflict between the "culture of death" and the "culture of life." As before neither is the glory of the Cross overcome by this darkness. We recall how at the moment of total devastation, when Jesus breathed his last, the Roman centurion exclaimed, "Truly this man was the Son of God." At that moment of "greatest weakness" the Son of God was revealed for who he truly was.

By his death, Jesus sheds light on the meaning of the life and death of every human being. The salvation wrought by Jesus is the bestowal of life and resurrection. From the pierced side of Christ flowed blood and water symbolizing for the Church the life given in the Sacraments. Thus the Holy Father wishes us to realize that it is from the Cross, the source of life, that the "people of life" is born and increases.

"Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (Jn 15:13) In this way Jesus proclaims that life finds its center, its meaning and its fulfillment when it is given up. The Pope concludes by saying that we too are called to give our lives for our brothers and sisters through the power of the Spirit.

Chapter III *You Shall Not Kill*

God's Holy Law

God's commandment is never detached from his love. It is always a gift meant for man's growth and joy. The Gospel of life is both a great gift of God and an exacting task for humanity. In giving life to man, God demands that he love, respect and promote life. Indeed man, as the living image of God, is willed by his Creator to exercise dominion over the world. Yet Man's lordship, even more where life is concerned, is not absolute but ministerial. It is a real reflection of the unique and infinite lordship of God.

God proclaims that he is absolute Lord of the life of man, who is formed in his image and likeness. The Holy Father recalls for us how God shows that he does not delight in the death of the living. "Only Satan," says the Pope, "can delight therein." This murderer from the beginning, this liar and father of lies, by deceiving man leads him to projects of sin and death by making them appear as goals and fruits of life.

While the precept, "You shall not kill," is strongly negative, Pope John Paul says that it encourages a positive attitude of absolute respect for life. Its outgrowth is the great proclamation of Jesus that to love one's neighbor is like to the commandment to love God. While St. Paul says that "You shall not kill" and any other commandment is summed up in the phrase, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

From the beginning the Didache, the most ancient non-biblical Christian writing, repeated the commandment "You shall not kill" at the same time adding that "you shall not put a child to death by abortion nor kill it once it is born." In the Church's tradition from the first centuries, murder was put among the three most serious sins, along with apostasy and adultery.

John Paul says that this should not surprise us since to kill a human being, in whom the image of God is present, is a particularly serious sin. Yet there are situations in which values proposed by God's law seem to involve a genuine paradox. One such is the case of legitimate self-defense. The Pope recalls that the intrinsic value of life and the duty to love oneself no less than others are the basis of a true right to self-defense.

Moreover, he says that legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another's life, the common good of the family or of the State. At times the outcome of resisting an aggressor is fatal, unfortunate as it may be, and attributable to the aggressor himself whose action brings it about.

This is the context in which the Holy Father places the problem of the death penalty. We take up his considerations in this regard in our next installment.

God's Holy Law

The *legitimate defense against an unjust aggressor* is the context within which the Holy Father indicates that we must place the problem of the death penalty. He notes how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* rightly states that the primary purpose of the punishment which society inflicts is "to redress the disorder caused by the offense." The offender undergoes this "redress" in order to once again regain the exercise of his or her freedom. It also has the important purpose of rehabilitation.

In view of the above, John Paul teaches that the nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon. Execution of the offender must be reserved for cases of absolute necessity. In other words, it is only to be imposed when there would be no other way to defend society. He notes that in today's society such cases are very rare, if practically non-existent. Again, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as well teaches that public authority must limit itself to defense against an aggressor by bloodless means because they are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person.

Where the *innocent human person* is concerned, the commandment, "You shall not kill," has absolute value. This absolute inviolability of innocent human life is a moral truth clearly *taught by Sacred Scripture, constantly upheld in the Church's Tradition and consistently proposed by her Magisterium (teaching authority)*. It is confirmed as such by that "*supernatural sense of faith*" inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit protecting the People of God from error. This moral norm applies especially to innocent life at its beginning and at its end about which the Church's Magisterium of recent times has spoken with increasing frequency.

The Holy Father explicitly and directly throws the full weight of his authority behind his pronouncement on the protection of innocent human life: "*Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral.*" It is always morally evil and can never be licit either as an end in itself or as a means to a good end.

Pope John Paul further states that "nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, *whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying.*" Furthermore, no one may ask for this act of killing for himself or another. Where the right to life is concerned every innocent human being is absolutely equal to all others.

The Pope concludes by saying that before the moral norm, which prohibits the direct taking of the life of an innocent human being, *there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone*. Before the demands of morality, *we are all absolutely equal*.

God's Holy Law: *The Unspeakable Crime*

Vatican Council II named abortion such. Pope John Paul II says that popular acceptance of abortion is a "telling sign" of an extremely dangerous crisis in the public sense of morality. We are losing our ability to distinguish between good and evil. We are in dire need of the ability to look the truth in the eye and call things by their proper name. Especially where abortion is concerned there is widespread use of ambiguous terminology (i.e. interruption of pregnancy). So that there be no confusion, the Holy Father defines abortion for us: *procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth.*

He adds that if we recognize that we are dealing here with murder, the severity of its moral gravity cannot be contested because the victim is absolutely innocent, weak, defenseless, and totally dependent upon his mother for protection. Many seemingly sufficient reasons for having an abortion abound. None, however tragic they might seem to be, can justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. The Pope now enumerates various individuals beside the mother who make the decision to abort: especially reprehensible is the father; the wider family and friends exert strong pressure; doctors and nurses often abuse their skills to preserve life. John Paul reserves special mention for legislators who have approved and promoted abortion laws. He also attributes a no less serious responsibility to those who have advocated an attitude of sexual permissiveness and lack of esteem for motherhood in society. There is a network of complicity, which includes international organizations that systematically campaign for the legalization and spread of abortion. We are faced with what the Pontiff calls a “*structure of sin*” that opposes human life not yet born.

The Holy Father refuses to accept the subterfuge of confusion about when initial life is a human person. Modern genetic science offers clear confirmation that “*from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth.*” Given the scientific evidence he asks the question, “How could a human individual not be a human person.” The Pope’s conclusion is direct: “*The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life.*”

Although the Sacred Scriptures do not address abortion as such, they do show great respect for the human being in the mother’s womb and extend the commandment, “You shall not kill,” to the unborn child. Christian tradition from the very beginning understands the grave moral disorder which abortion is. The *Didache*, the first Christian catechism antedating parts of even the New Testament writings themselves, shows a community radically opposed to a Greco-Roman world given to abortion and infanticide. The Holy Father makes the point that throughout the two thousand years of Christian history the same doctrine has constantly been taught by the Fathers of the Church, its Pastors and Doctors. The Pope recalls how the Papal *Magisterium* has vigorously reaffirmed this common doctrine enumerating the encyclicals of such predecessors of his as Pius XI, Pius XII, and John XXIII. The Second Vatican Council as well clearly condemned abortion and infanticide as “unspeakable crimes.” The Canon Law of the Catholic Church has inflicted severe penalties on those guilty of abortion. The Code of 1917 punished abortion with excommunication. The present Code continues the tradition by automatically excommunicating “*latae sententiae*” anyone who knowingly procures an abortion. Even those who are knowingly implicit by helping someone to obtain an abortion are under the same sentence. The Pope at this point reminds us of the two reasons for excommunication. First, excommunication clearly makes known to the individual the gravity of the sin. Second, it is meant to foster a genuine conversion and repentance.

All of what Pope John Paul II has thus far said, is in preparation of what follows. First of all he places himself squarely in line with all the teaching tradition of the Church as regards abortion. He then invokes his authority as successor of Peter and his communion with all the Bishops although dispersed around the world. John Paul then makes a clear, definitive statement:

"I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being."

No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit. He extends this to experimentation on embryos and fetuses, which the Pope calls a crime against their dignity as human beings. Included in this condemnation is *"in vitro fertilization"* for whatever reason. The killing of innocent human creatures, even if carried out to help others, constitutes an absolutely unacceptable act. Careful moral evaluation must be made even where prenatal diagnostic techniques are put into play lest they become the basis for abortion, infanticide and euthanasia as well.

God's Holy Law: *The Tragedy of Euthanasia*

Especially in cultures, advanced in medicine and closed to the transcendent, when life becomes "unbearable" and no longer "open to meaningful experiences," then a "rightful liberation" becomes an option. Additionally, the Pope points out that when the individual denies or neglects his relationship with God he acquires a sense that society should grant him the right to make the decision in his own regard where life is concerned. John Paul recognizes that it is especially in developed countries that individuals act in this way.

Technological advances provide the context within which this sort of temptation flourishes. The attempt to take control of death is notably evident in the face of a growing utilitarian outlook on life. These are symptoms of the "culture of death." The Pope sees them to be advancing above all in prosperous countries. With a growing number of elderly and disabled people, isolated by their families and society, this cultural context no longer recognizes these impaired lives as having value.

At this point the Holy Father interrupts his thought to clearly define euthanasia in the strict sense as *any action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death with the purpose of eliminating all suffering*. This is to be distinguished from the legitimate decision to forego certain "aggressive medical treatments."

When death is, in the Pope's words, "clearly imminent and inevitable," then one need not resort to means that are *disproportionate to expected results* or that *impose an excessive burden* on the patient and the family. This is true so long as normal care due to sick persons in similar cases is not interrupted. Such an approach expresses acceptance of the human condition in the face of death and is not the equivalent to suicide or euthanasia.

Palliative care, that is the use of narcotics to relieve pain, is licit so long as the patient's right to a fully conscious and proper preparation for his *definitive meeting with God* is honored.

As in the case of abortion, the Pope now makes the definitive statement that equally euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person. He grounds the teaching in natural law while linking himself to the teaching of his Predecessors and his communion with Bishops of the Catholic Church.

Suicide, as well as "assisted suicide," is gravely immoral. Both reject God's absolute sovereignty over life and death. The great St. Augustine said on this very point that "it is never licit to kill another: even if he should wish it." Euthanasia, notwithstanding suffering, must be called a *false mercy, a perversion of mercy.*" The Holy Father says that true compassion shares another's pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear. Even more serious is murder under the guise of euthanasia thrust upon someone without his or her consent.

The Holy Father now closes this section on a positive note speaking of how man's natural tendencies while confirming Christian principles abhor and repudiate the absolute ruin and total disappearance of his own person. "Man," he says, "rebels against death because he bears within himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to mere matter." Christian hope in the promised resurrection then casts new light on human suffering and death.

Dying in the Lord (cf. Phil 2:8) means experiencing one's death as the supreme act of obedience to the Father. *Living in the Lord*, on the other hand, means that suffering, while still an evil and a trial in itself, can always become a source of good. Suffering lived in the Lord means being more fully conformed to him. In this way suffering also becomes redemptive; meritorious for salvation. "*I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his Body, the Church.*" (Col 1:24)

God's Holy Law: *Civil Law vs. Moral Law*

In this section Pope John Paul II begins a summary of the inconsistencies in the civil/moral debate. Present day attacks on human life tend to demand legal justification as if they were rights. In the view of proportionalists an unborn child or a seriously disabled person is only a relative good; a sheer calculation weighed against other goods. It is said that law should always express the opinion and will of the majority; therefore a right even to abortion and euthanasia. In the more radical view of our pluralistic society people should have complete freedom to dispose of their own lives as well as the lives of the unborn as they see fit.

Modern democratic society, it is said, should limit itself to accepting only the convictions of the majority since objective truth as shared by all is in fact unattainable anyway. Under such a system norms for social coexistence would be established by the will of the majority. Hence a politician would be required to clearly separate his private conscience from his public conduct.

Curiously we are now confronted with a dichotomy. On the one hand society is demanding that the State refrain from imposing any limitations upon individual freedom. While on the other, in the exercise of

public duty, the individual is required to set aside his own convictions in deference to the perhaps contradictory convictions of others guaranteed them by law. Law would become the criteria for morality. At the root of this morass is moral relativism.

Ethical relativism, more and more the accepted moral guide of present-day culture, is seen as practically the only guarantor of tolerance in a democratic society. Pope John Paul questions this assumption especially when a society by a "majority decision" seeks to declare as legal the killing of the defenseless unborn. In light of such a decision, he asks whether crimes against humanity would still be crimes against humanity if perpetrated by the will of the majority rather than by a tyrannical dictator?

Democracy cannot be idolized to the point of making it a substitute for morality. Democracy is only a system and as such its morality depends upon the morality of its ends and the means it utilizes to arrive at those ends. The value of democracy stands or falls according to the values that it embodies and promotes. The Holy Father makes the argument that the obligatory point of reference for civil law rests in the acknowledgment of an objective moral law such as the "natural law" written in the human heart.

Without an objective moral grounding not even democracy is capable of ensuring a stable peace. Anything to the contrary is illusory. Regulation of interests in a democracy often flows to the advantage of the powerful. They have the means of manipulation and the know-how to use them. "In such a situation," the Pope says, "democracy easily becomes an empty word."

For a sound democracy society must discover those essential and innate human and moral values that flow from the very truth of the human being himself. These values may not be manipulated in any way. They can only be acknowledged, respected and promoted. The Holy Father emphasizes that consequently there is a need to recover a vision of the relationship between civil law and moral law.

In no sphere can civil law take the place of conscience nor can it dictate norms, which are outside its competence. The real purpose of civil law is to guarantee an ordered social coexistence in true justice. In the first instance, civil law must guarantee rights innately belonging to the person. Among these rights is the inviolable right to life. An offense against individuals caused by a disregard of such a fundamental right can never be legitimized as a right of individuals even if they are the majority. Society has a right and a duty to protect itself against abuses that occur in the name of conscience and under the pretext of freedom.

Concluding, John Paul II refers us to John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* where it had already been said that any government that refused to recognize human rights or acted in violation of them, would not only fail in its duty but its decrees would be wholly lacking in binding force as well.

The whole of the tradition of the Church holds fast to the doctrine that civil law necessarily be in conformity with the moral law. St. Thomas Aquinas himself said that human law is law inasmuch as it is in conformity with right reason and thus derives from the eternal law. When a law is contrary to reason, it is necessarily called an unjust law. Again, law opposed to natural law is not really law at all but rather a *corruption of law*.

The first application of this teaching concerns such human law that disregards the fundamental right to life of every individual. Laws that authorize and promote abortion and euthanasia are contrary to the good of the individual as well as the common good. The Church teaches that these laws are completely lacking in authentic juridical validity. Such a law directly leads to the killing of the person whom society exists to serve. It, therefore, ceases to be a morally binding law. The Holy Father tells us that there is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws. In fact, there is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection.

The Church has always recognized the legitimacy of public authority while similarly warning that “we must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29) Laws permitting abortion and euthanasia, intrinsically unjust, are never licit, “to obey them;” to “take part in campaigns favoring them;” or “to vote for them.”

Legitimate questions of conscience arise when elected public officials decide to vote for a more restrictive form of an abortion law in order to limit the resulting harm and lessen the negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality. This is not illicit cooperation but a legitimate and proper attempt to limit the law’s evil aspects.

For the morally upright, *cooperation* presents many a dilemma. We are never allowed to formally cooperate in practices that, even if permitted by civil legislation, are contrary to God’s law. John Paul reminds us that from a moral perspective it is never licit to cooperate formally in evil. Based on this principal we may not participate directly in any action against innocent human life or “share in the immoral intention of the person committing it.” Participation may never be justified by invoking *respect for the freedom of others* or by *appealing to a civil law* that might permit or require it. No one is exempt from this responsibility. Opposition to such injustice is not only a moral duty but also a basic human right.

The negative moral commandments of God are valid always and everywhere without exception. Such choices cannot be redeemed by the goodness of any intention or consequence. The Pope makes clear that the “no” clarifies the absolute limit beneath which free individuals cannot lower themselves. “*Thou shalt not kill*” thus establishes the point of departure for the start of a true freedom to say “yes” to life. The Holy Father reaffirms that it is binding on all to positively respect, love and promote human life.

Chapter IV, *You Did It to Me* For a New Culture of Human Life

The Church has received the Gospel as a proclamation and as a source of joy and salvation. Some years ago Pope Paul VI wrote that *evangelization is the grace and vocation proper to the Church. She exists to evangelize.* In this same vane John Paul II confirms evangelization to be a deeply ecclesial act unbreakably bound up with *preaching, celebration, and the service of charity.*

This Gospel is a Gospel of life through which by God’s love we know ourselves to be a people of life. By means of it we are transformed and saved. We have been sent at the service of life not as a boast but rather a duty. The Pope makes clear that while the Church as whole has been charged with this responsibility, our own individual contribution has neither been lessen nor eliminated.

John Paul proclaims for us that *Jesus is the only Gospel*. We have nothing further to say or any other witness to bear. *To proclaim Jesus is itself to proclaim life*. In him eternal life is made manifest. It is in being destined to life in its fullness, to *eternal life*, that every person's earthly life acquires its full meaning. The Gospel exceeds every human expectation. Early on in the life of the Church, Saint Gregory of Nyssa understood that man, of himself no more than dust, once adopted by the God of the universe as a son becomes part of his family. Saint Gregory continues, saying that in God's grace man surpasses his own nature: mortal, he becomes immortal; perishable he becomes imperishable; human, he becomes divine. Gratitude and joy at the incomparable dignity of man therefore impels us to share this message with everyone penetrating the very heart of society.

The core of this Gospel is the proclamation of a God who calls us to a profound communion with himself. Every human life is a life lived in a unique relationship with Jesus, a gift of God, the fruit and sign of his love. We therefore see in every human face the face of Christ himself. As a result, it is our task to make clear to all the consequences of this Gospel: that human life, as a gift of God, is sacred and inviolable; that as a result procured abortion and euthanasia are absolutely unacceptable.

The Pope lays it down that as a people of life it is our responsibility to propose these truths constantly and courageously. Saint Paul's entreaty to Timothy is also addressed to us: "Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season." (2 Tim 4:2) John Paul notes the special obligation that Bishops have as being the first "untiring preachers of the Gospel of life." Further, those who are specifically charged with catechesis and the formation of consciences, namely theologians, pastors, and other teachers, may never betray their responsibility to authentically explain the Gospel of life "*as faithfully presented and interpreted by the Magisterium.*"

In proclaiming this Gospel we may neither fear hostility nor unpopularity. We must refuse every compromise or ambiguity that might conform us to the world's way of thinking.

For a New Culture of Human Life

For a new culture of life to begin to take hold, the Holy Father says that we ourselves must develop a contemplative outlook toward life. It is one that fosters a view, which meditates on the deeper meaning of life, which grasps its utter gratuity and accepts it as pure gift. Finally, this perspective sees in every person the living image of God.

Our contemplative attitude will encourage us to revere and honor every person. The objective is a joyous thanksgiving for the mystery of everyone's call to share through Christ in the life of grace, in an unending communion with God our Creator and Father. To celebrate the Gospel of Life means that we celebrate the God of Life who gives life. The Pope reminds us of the Psalmist as he praises and blesses God our Father *who knitted us together in our mother's womb, and saw and loved us while we were still without form* (Ps 139:13f). In every child who is born we then see the image of God's glory, the very icon of Jesus Christ.

The liturgical celebrations of the Sacraments make us sharers in the divine life. In them, especially, we are made ever more capable of expressing the full truth about birth, life, suffering, and death. Through the Sacraments we have the capability of participating ever more fully in the Paschal Mystery of the Crucified and Risen Christ.

Acting upon the suggestion of the 1991 Consistory of Cardinals, Pope John Paul proposes that a *Day of Life* should be celebrated each year in every country, as previously already established in some Episcopal Conferences. Its primary purpose is to foster recognition of the meaning and value of human life at every stage and in every condition. This whole effort is to be directed toward individual consciences, in families, in the Church and in civil society.

Above all the Gospel of Life is to be celebrated in daily living, in a self-giving love for others. This giving and sharing is to be expressed in individual acts of heroism, both large and small. Pope John Paul singles out two examples, organ donation performed in an ethically acceptable way and motherhood. Motherhood in particular is lived heroically today when, in the face of media pressure and in the name of progress and modernity, such values as fidelity, chastity, and sacrifice are presented as obsolete. The Holy Father pointedly thanks these heroic mothers for their invincible love, their *intrepid trust* in God, and their willing sacrifice of life.

The Holy Father speaks of the need to take the pro-life mandate from the theoretical realm into the very practical charity/love level of action. We share in Christ's royal mission. The Pope says that in doing so we must be of a mind to care for the other as *a person for whom God has made us responsible*. He quotes Saint John Chrysostom: "*Do you wish to honor the body of Christ? Do not neglect it when you find it naked.*" Our service of charity must be profoundly consistent. We need to *show care for all life and for the life of everyone*.

This service to life in charity requires a continuous promotion of vocations in many areas. At the first stage of life, centers for natural methods of regulating fertility should be promoted as a valuable help to responsible parenthood. In these centers every decision should be guided by an ideal of the sincere gift of self.

Further, marriage and family counseling centers can do much to support the family in its mission as the "sanctuary of life." When mothers, and families, of newborn life encounter hardships these agencies can be of great assistance by instilling reasons for hope and practical possibilities for life. As earthly life draws to a close, charity-in-practice in the first instance finds expression in the indispensable role of the family. However social service agencies can have a role to play as well. Hospitals, clinics, and convalescent homes must be transformed as John Paul says, into *places where suffering, pain, and death are acknowledged and understood in their human and special Christian character*.

A unique responsibility rests upon health-care personnel. Their very professions call on them to be guardians and servants of human life. Absolute respect for human life requires the exercise of conscientious objection in the face of procured abortion and euthanasia. The Holy Father strongly

emphasizes that *“causing death”* can never be considered a form of medical treatment. It flies in the face of what should be the health-care profession’s *impassioned and unflinching* affirmation of life.

Biomedical research as well must always reject experimentation, research or applications that disregard the inviolable dignity of the human being. These agencies may not engage in practices that under the guise of helping people actually harm them.

Pope John Paul continues by enumerating positive suggestions for both social and political commitment. The activity of individuals, families, groups and associations of one sort or another all go to shape society. No one, especially those in the legislative and other decision-making processes, can renounce their responsibility before God. The Pope goes on to say that on the other hand *no single person or group has a monopoly on the defense and promotion of life. These are everyone’s task and responsibility.*

The Church encourages especially Christian, political leaders not to give up. The Holy Father says that it is not enough just to remove unjust laws but to *“ensure proper support for families and motherhood.”* There needs to be a rethinking toward positive policies where the family is involved. It is morally reprehensible to foster, much less impose, the use of such methods as contraception, sterilization and abortion to deal with the issue of population growth. Rather, we should generate the development of a *“true economy of communion and sharing of goods”* in order to ensure *“greater opportunities and a fairer distribution of wealth.”*

In every case the family has a decisive role to play. Parents interpret God’s own love when they transmit and nurture life according to his fatherly plan. The family is truly *“the sanctuary of life”* wherein life can be properly welcomed and protected. Consequently the role of the family in building a culture of life is decisive and irreplaceable. The *“domestic church must have a keener awareness of the meaning of procreation; that human life is a gift received in order then to be given as a gift.”* Pope John Paul reminds us that it is above all in *“raising children that the family fulfills its mission to proclaim the Gospel of life.”*

The family celebrates the Gospel of Life through daily prayer, both individual and family prayer. The prayer and worship of a family is especially given meaning in the family’s actual daily life together when expressed in love and self-giving. This life gives rise to solidarity when it is expressed in a concerned, attentive, and loving care demonstrated in the humble and ordinary events of each day.

A beautiful example of solidarity between families is the willingness to adopt children abandoned by their parents. The Holy Father also suggests *adoption-at-a-distance* where economic reasons are the primary cause of problems. In this manner children can be helped without removing them from a familiar environment.

Once again the Pope recalls that solidarity also is practiced by the family’s active participation in the social and political arena; in advocating family associations that protect and promote the right to life from conception to natural death.

The Holy Father continues with positive solutions by explaining that there exists a “*sort of covenant*” between generations. In their old age parents, in effect, receive from their children the acceptance and solidarity that they themselves gave to their children when they brought them into the world. In their accumulated years of experience parents are a rich source of wisdom while at the same time being strong witnesses to hope and love. John Paul II is adamant that this “*sanctuary of life*,” this first cell of society, this source of love and life needs strong support.

The Pope envisions a “global strategy” in order to build a new culture of life. Deeply rooted in the Gospel from which flows the Church’s mission of evangelization is her duty to transform humanity from within and to make it new. The renewal of a culture of life must begin within Christian communities themselves, within our own backyards. At the same time we must engage the wider community at the level of people’s everyday life.

The first step is the formation of consciences concerning the incomparable inviolability of human life. To do this John Paul says that we must once again re-establish the essential connection between life and freedom. Where one is violated the other also ends up being violated.

No less critical for the Holy Father is the necessary link between freedom and truth. Objective truth forms the basis for the personal rights of the individual. Only when we admit our utter dependence on Almighty God, can we use our freedom to the full while at the same time respecting the life and freedom of the other. Whereas when we live as though God does not exist, experience has shown that the dignity of the human person and the inviolability of life ends up being rejected and compromised.

Formation of conscience is closely connected to the work of education. The young are a particular focus of this effort to inculcate a right order where sexuality and love find their proper place within the whole of life. The Pope observes how trivialization of sexuality is among the principal factors leading to contempt for new life. An authentic education in sexuality and love grounded in a training of chastity as a virtue fosters personal maturity and makes the person capable of respecting the “*spousal meaning of the body*.”

Education in service of life also involves the training of married couples in *responsible* procreation. The moral law requires self-discipline and respect for the biological laws inscribed in the human person. This forms the foundation for the legitimate use of natural methods of regulating fertility.

Finally, John Paul says that education cannot avoid consideration of suffering and death. An essential part of understanding our suffering is learning to unite it with Christ’s work of Redemption. In this light, death becomes anything but an event without hope. Rather it is the door that opens wide on eternity.

Previously we spoke of a “global strategy”(actually my terminology) envisioned by the Pope. In one brief paragraph he enumerates some essentials. He sees as critical the courage to adopt a new life-style based on a correct scale of values: the primacy of being over having, of persons over things, passing from indifference to concern for others, from rejection to acceptance of them. Others are not rivals from

whom we must defend ourselves but are brothers and sisters to be supported in love as we are enriched by their presence.

In this new culture everyone has an important role to play, especially educators, Catholic intellectuals and Universities. In particular John Paul singles out the mass media calling them to *scrupulous concern for factual truth*. Women play a pivotal role for they occupy a unique and decisive place in thought and action. Theirs is the obligation of promoting a *“new feminism”* that rejects *“male domination”* models of feminism. They must bear witness to the meaning of genuine love. Their unique experience of motherhood involves them in a special communion with the mystery of life. The Pope explains that women learn and teach the authenticity of human relations drawing from their special understanding of the dignity that arises from being a person.

The Holy Father does not fail to have a word of consolation for those who have had abortions. He urges them not to give in to discouragement and loss of hope. They must know that God’s mercy is there for them in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Indeed, they eventually will even come to be able to ask forgiveness *from their child who is now living with the Lord*.

John Paul II recognizes the tremendous disparity of resources that exists in favor of the *“culture of death”* in opposition to the *“culture of life and love.”* However, he is not disheartened. He says that a great worldwide prayer for life is needed. Jesus has shown us that some devils are driven out only by prayer and fasting (Mk 9:29). We must therefore discover anew *“the humility and courage to pray and fast”* (my emphasis).

The Gospel of Life is for everyone. The value at stake is one that every human being can grasp by the light of reason and therefore it needs be the concern of all. The Pope points out that it is impossible to further the common good without defending the right to life. In her declaration for the unconditional respect for the right to life of every innocent person from conception to natural end, the Church *“wants simply to promote a human state.”* There can be no true democracy without a recognition of every person’s dignity and without respect for their rights. Nor can there be, in the thought of the Pope, true peace unless life is defended and promoted.

Conclusion

In his brief conclusion to *Evangelium Vitae*, the Holy Father draws a significant comparison between “the woman clothed with the sun” (Rev 12:1) and the Church. Through Mary’s acceptance and loving care for the life of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, human life has been rescued from condemnation to final and eternal death. In this sign the Church recognizes her own mystery; her own motherhood achieved through the pangs and “the labor” of childbirth, that is to say, in the constant struggle with the forces of evil offering resistance to Christ.

Like the Church, Mary too had to live her motherhood amid suffering. Simeon’s word’s spoken to her in the temple came to a frightful culmination on Calvary. The “yes” spoken at the Annunciation burst forth in full maturity *“on the day of the Cross.”*

Satan, “the great red dragon,” (Rev 12:3) that personal power of evil, opposes not only Mary who has to flee to protect the child (in history, into Egypt Mt 2:13-15) but he also opposes the Church. In her own way Mary helps the Church to understand its place at the center of the great struggle between good and evil as this ecclesial mother strives to protect all innocent children with whom Christ has seen fit to unite himself.

In this monumental struggle the Pope reminds us that the “*Do not be afraid, Mary*” of the Annunciation reverberates in the Heart of the Church as well. Mary continues to show us her Son. *The Lamb who was slain* is alive. He alone is master of all the events of history. John Paul says that it is to our Heavenly Mother that we look as to “a sign of sure hope and solace.”

It is at this point that the Holy Father brings to a conclusion this very lengthy encyclical with a beautiful and poetic prayer. In it he entrusts the cause of life to Mary’s motherly care. Those vast numbers of babies not allowed to live, those many, often the poor, who die as victims of brutal violence, those elderly and sick killed out of misguided mercy, all these He places in her maternal concern. He asks that all believers in her Son *may proclaim the Gospel of life*. He prays that Mary obtain the grace for all *to accept that Gospel, to celebrate it with joy, and to bear witness to it*, in order to build a civilization of truth and love to the praise and glory of God, *the Creator and lover of life*.