

The Gospel of Life

Evangelium Vitae ('The Gospel of Life') raises some of the hottest moral questions of our times. These issues of life and death—abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, IVF and others—touch the core of human existence.

They are not things happening 'out there' in distant lands. They are fast becoming features of our own neighbourhoods. They affect our friends and families, our local doctors and members of parliament.

Evangelium Vitae poses a timely question: Are we building a culture of life or a culture of death? Are we a society that solves its social problems by destroying life? Or are we a society seeking solutions that uphold and protect human life?

Today's human family finds itself in the midst of a dramatic struggle of values.

Now is the time to 'choose life!'

Crossroads

Last year Tom was head-hunted by a company which offered a job for double the salary of his present teaching position. He turned it down. "Tom's a bit of a father figure at school," his wife explains. "Kids confide in him about their personal hassles. We estimate he saves at least one teenager from suicide and one baby from being aborted each year. Double the salary just isn't worth it."

How priceless the value of human life! How precious we are to God. How tragic when we lose sight of the sacredness of this gift.

John Paul II's encyclical (letter) *Evangelium Vitae* (March 1995) awakens us to these basic truths. Let's not deceive ourselves, it says. Killing can never be a truly human solution to a social problem. We must never:

- Cause the death of an unborn child;
- Assist a person to suicide;
- Bring about the untimely death of a sick or elderly person through euthanasia;
- Reduce human embryos to mere disposable biological material.

Human life, as a gift from God, is sacred and unviolable. Human problems call for lifegiving solutions. Day by day we are called to be 'life-affirming.'

Choose life

Evangelium Vitae is not a doomsday document full of No's. It is, above all, a resounding 'YES' to life! In a world of cynicism and isolation, it dares to speak an arresting message of hope: Yes, life is good! Yes, each of us is loved unconditionally by our God. Yes, we

Christians are a people of life—a life that is ours now and eternally! We are called to celebrate, love, preserve and defend the gift of life.

It is only within the context of this great 'YES' to life that we can fully appreciate the reasons for the Church's repeated opposition to those actions which adopt death as a solution.

Life is about hope

Evangelium Vitae acknowledges the many difficult situations which can lead people to despair. For instance, many women resort to abortion under social and economic pressures. But what should be society's loving and respectful response to such pressures? Does sanctioning death solutions 'solve' anything? Is it better to assist a despairing person to suicide rather than to address the loneliness that fuels despair? Do we sterilize women in developing countries rather than address the economic issues which keep them entrapped by poverty?

In the short term such solutions appear to rid us of a problem. But in the long term they only rob us of hope. The human capacity for growth and transformation, even in the face of great suffering, is part of the dignity of humankind. When we embrace the gift of life—with all its joys and sorrows—we open ourselves to the infinite mystery of love. Each time we destroy life, we destroy a little bit of that potential in ourselves. The attempt to eradicate suffering *at all costs*—even if it involves killing—is a denial of life's possibilities. It is a loss of hope.

A culture of death?

A crisis of culture

How has this cultural acceptance of killing come about? Chapter 1 of *Evangelium Vitae* points to a 'crisis of culture' that has led us to lose sight of the deeper meaning of human existence. An attitude is growing whereby 'things' are valued over people, 'having' and 'doing' over being. Persons are esteemed for their usefulness or their efficiency rather than simply for the fact that they are members of the human family. Our idea of freedom has been reduced to our own personal wants and the dictates of shifting public opinion. Our sense of freedom has lost its connection with truth, with God and our responsibility to look after each other.

Materialist attitudes have gradually led to the anti-life climate in the world today; a growing 'culture of death' which can be seen in the violence of war, the arms trade, economic poverty, reckless tampering with the world's ecological balance, the promotion of drugs, promiscuity and abortion.

Particularly alarming is that some attacks against life are becoming part of the political and legal fabric

of society. They are being presented as 'rights,' legally and medically sanctioned by the very powers which are designed to protect life.

In the face of this anti-life climate, a sobering question is put to humanity. It is the same question asked of Cain after killing his brother, Abel: "What have you done?!" (Gen. 4:10). It is a question that cries out to humanity: "Wake up! Look at what you are doing!" *Evangelium Vitae* is a call to affirm and defend the dignity and worth of every human life, weak or strong, old or young, born or unborn.

Dare to celebrate the Gospel of life!

Faced with such grave issues, one could feel overwhelmed by sheer powerlessness. But it is precisely at times like this that we Christians are called to make a daring proclamation: We believe in Jesus Christ, the Gospel of life! And this Gospel of life is not a fanciful idea about a better future. The Gospel of life is tangible and personal, for it proclaims the very person of Jesus Christ whose spirit dwells within us.

The risen Jesus brings us life to the full and shows us the beauty of who

we really are: God's children. Chapter 2 of *Evangelium Vitae* explores this graced vision of humanity. In creating us, God has breathed into each of us the divine breath of love and life. In the uniqueness of each man, woman and child we see the indelible imprint of God's presence. This divine spark draws us to God and to one another. It opens us to the wonder of all creation, revealing our lives to be more than material existence; our lives are a 'meeting place' for God and humanity.

Pressure

"Working in an aggressive profit-driven environment I know easy it is to get sucked into anti-family values. It's easy to forget that I started out working this job as a means to support my family. Gradually things start to change until one day you realize that the family is working around the job." (Tony)

A light in the darkness

"At times the world just seems to be one big mess. On TV I watch people murdering each other. Every newspaper heralds the latest case of corruption. I think, 'What's the point of having these Christian ideals?' I want to burrow down, look after my own little nest and survive! Even my closest friends seem to lose heart and I feel very alone in my beliefs. But there is this little light that keeps flickering... I sense a choice: to fan its flames or let it go out." (Anna)

Take time

When the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose sight of the dignity of human persons. At stake here is the integrity of moral conscience. How easily we can become slaves to our jobs, our consumer lust, our desperate cravings to fill the void of loneliness. But when we stop to listen—really listen—to our heart and the hearts of others, we begin to hear a new voice gently probing our deepest needs and longings. It is the voice of God's own heart, a voice of love that leads us to ask, "What's really important in life? How am I being called to live?" Perhaps we are afraid to follow that voice. Perhaps our pride, our guilt, our fear create all sorts of defences. We prefer to listen to talk-back radio, the media headlines, or the words of the latest pop song. But our conscience doesn't go away. The spirit of Christ is always echoing there in our depths. Are we willing to listen?

Or a culture of **Life?**

Life is about giving

Christians look upon Jesus, executed upon a cross, and see the essence of life most clearly revealed. Greatness is not about material gain. It is about giving our lives for our brothers and sisters. The fact that selfless love can reach extraordinary heights in the most painful and senseless moments of human existence is the great paradox of the Christian message. Unless we discover that living is about giving, says *Evangelium Vitae*, we will only ever be half-alive.

We are ‘a people of life’

Pope John Paul II’s encyclical points out the connection between the big issues of life and death and the little steps that take us there. The commandment “You shall not kill” outlines the extreme boundary which must not be crossed. It is the great law that protects life.

But there are many more ‘little’ words of life which go hand in hand with this moral law. People need to be able to look at our homes, our relationships, our work practices and be impressed by the love and respect that they find there. Let them see us rejoicing in our

children, revering our elderly, assisting families in their responsibilities and working for life-affirming policies. Let them see us opening our homes and hearts to the distressed and lonely, putting others before our own self-interests.

When the Gospel of life permeates all our social interactions, the Church’s teachings are more easily understood.

What I have seen...

“Having worked as a pastoral carer at a hospice for the dying and witnessed over two hundred deaths, I have heard many painful cries, both physical and spiritual. Where I have known patients to take their lives rather than suffer (and with modern drugs it is usually not physical suffering), I have seen more pain, anger and unresolved guilt than relief. I have witnessed a shocking sense of futility. Yet every time I was present during a long and powerless wait for death, I have witnessed a most blessed change of heart and spirit. I have seen that suffering can yield possibilities beyond our immediate vision.” (Julie)

Signs of a ‘culture of life’

- **Married couples who open themselves generously to the gift of children.**
- **Families who care for abandoned children, teenagers in crisis, people with disabilities, the elderly and the lonely.**
- **Centres supporting mothers in difficulty.**
- **Voluntary groups offering hospitality to distressed persons without a family.**
- **Medical staff dedicated to the service of life.**
- **Prolife movements.**
- **Daily acts of openness, self-sacrifice and unselfish care in families, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly.**
- **Promoters of natural fertility methods; educators in sexual and parental responsibility.**
- **Growing attention to the quality of life and to ecology.**
- **Dialogue about bioethics between believers and non-believers.**

Are you involved in any of these activities? Do you share these attitudes? If so, Evangelium Vitae says thank you! Your efforts are needed more than ever.

Our laws must protect life

Chapter 3 contains an important section concerning the relationship between the civil law and the moral law. The central purpose of the law is to protect the life and dignity of persons. But, as *Evangelium Vitae* points out, it is possible to abuse our legislative system. If we idolize democracy to the point where the majority opinion overrides the fundamental right to life, then the law becomes an act of violence instead of protection. To refuse to cooperate with such acts which do violence to human life—even if those acts are ‘legal’—is not only a moral duty, it is a basic human right.

Discuss: How can I, as a citizen of this nation, take a stance in defence of life?

Short words that go a long way

Life’s a drag
 Poor me
 It’s not fair
 I’m powerless

OR

Life’s a gift
 Thank you, God
 What a challenge
 How can I help?

The **Choice** is ours

Build a 'culture of life'

Christians are a people with a mission. Our mission is to LIVE the Gospel of life and to PROCLAIM this Gospel wherever we find ourselves in the world today. This is a team effort. Every man, woman and child has a part to play.

We cannot allow ourselves to accept whatever views are dished up in the media. For a culture of life to take root, we must sharpen our awareness and learn to recognize the difference between values based on a deep concern for human persons and those based on a superficial ethic.

Chapter 4 of *Evangelium Vitae* calls for a mobilization of consciences. It is a summons to action. Together we can build a new 'culture of life.' With courage we can adopt a new lifestyle—practical choices that put our hearts, our gifts, our skills at the service of others.

Evangelium Vitae has a message for:

Health care professionals: You are called to be guardians and servants of human life. 'Causing death' is not medical treatment. Refuse to take part in abortions and euthanasia. (See n.89)

Civil leaders: Make courageous choices in support of life. *"I urgently appeal to all political leaders not to pass laws which, by disregarding the dignity of the human person, undermine the very fabric of society"* (n.90).

Married couples: Through your intimate love you have a special closeness to the gift of life. Proclaim that gift. (See n.90)

The family: You are the 'sanctuary of life.' Each day, love one another, pray together, reach out to those in need, take your civic responsibility seriously. Restore a 'covenant' between generations. (See n.92-94)

Women: Promote a 'new feminism' that reconciles people with life. (See n.99)

Media professionals: Present positive messages about life, sexuality and human love. Do not cheapen human dignity. (See n.99)

Catholic intellectuals: Nourish your talents with the living force of the Gospel. (See n.99)

Educators: There is a special need for education to highlight the value of life from its origins. Emphasize the connectedness between sexuality, responsible loving, procreation and the whole of life. (See n.97)

"A great prayer for life is urgently needed. A prayer which will rise up throughout the world."

A special word for women who have had an abortion

"The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed... But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly..."

Without denying what has happened, John Paul II offers a heartfelt invitation to women who have undergone an abortion to receive the peace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. "You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost..." There is no suggestion here of viewing such women as wayward sinners. Rather, he looks to them as powerful witnesses to the truth. "With the friendly and expert help of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life." (n.99)

Discuss: How can I share the gospel message of truth and love with someone who has been hurt by abortion? Talk over the practicalities of doing this. What people/agencies can assist?

