

EVANGELIUM VITAE:

THE GOSPEL OF LIFE FOR TODAY

A Pastoral Letter from Bishop John O. Barres
to the People of God of the Diocese of Rockville Centre
September 8, 2020 – the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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PART I: A MEDITATION ON THE ANNUNCIATION

Fiat Mihi!

“Let it be done!” On the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, we ponder these humble words of the Blessed Virgin Mary that changed the course of humanity. When the Archangel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to conceive a child, his words were perplexing to this young, betrothed woman of modest means: “How can this be?”¹ (Lk 1:34) But, full of grace, she responded, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” (Lk 1:38). Her “Yes!” was more than a complete surrender to, but a prayerful wish for, God’s will² – and not merely to the uncertainty of the pregnancy, but to all she was foretold in the Angel’s message and later punctuated in Simeon’s prophecy that a sword would pierce her heart (Lk 2:35). That consent to *God’s will* brought Salvation to mankind.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). With Mary’s unrestricted consent to God’s will, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity became Man – like us in every way but sin – to redeem us and conquer eternal

death. Although a King, the Son of God came not in royal vestments, or with celebrity fanfare. Rather, through the Incarnation, He took on His human nature as a most hidden single cell that multiplied in a beautiful orchestration of folding, fusing and forming³ – He was knit in the womb! Then at the Nativity, nine months later, He entered the world as we do – as a vulnerable, helpless infant depending completely on His most holy Mother and foster father, St. Joseph. And He would grow in wisdom and stature (see Lk 2:52).

In the beginning, “God created man in His image” (Gen 1:27) which conferred upon Man a special dignity with dominion over other creations (Gen 1:28) and a destiny of eternal life with God (Gen 3:22 ff.). In this, we realize the incomparable dignity of every human life and the incontrovertible reason that the sacredness of human life is inviolable – for no other creature was made like Him or destined to share eternity in communion with Him. But through disobedience, Man lost the life of grace, closing the gate to Heaven.⁴

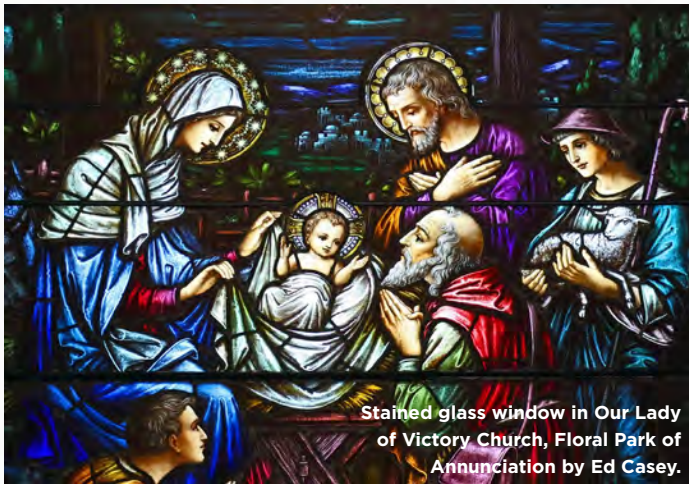
Despite human beings continually turning away from God, He “so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). To redeem us, God sent His only Son, and through the Incarnation, He took on human flesh (Jn 1:14). Consider how *He took on our physical likeness* and, marvelously ennobling our human nature,⁵ sanctified once again that which had been lost in sin. In this most profound act, He revealed unmistakably His infinite love for us, the special dignity and sacredness that human life holds. We belong to God; our destiny is to share wholly in His Eternal Life. With this, we are distinctly reminded of the immeasurable value of every human being and the inviolability of every innocent human life.

It is well noted that our redemption was granted *not in* the Incarnation itself, but by the suffering on the Cross of the Son of God, *through* His Incarnation, through his Human Flesh.⁶ The greatest lesson on human dignity is to know and ponder the Cross of Christ, through which we learn the value of suffering and how to live in the life of grace God intended for us. “For power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). No human life, not even that of the Savior or His most holy Mother, is without suffering. Therefore, every moment of our existence can have unfathomable meaning and purpose, even our suffering, when experienced through the perspective of the apostle Paul who wrote, “I fill up in my own flesh what is lacking in the suffering of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church” (Col. 1:24). Thus, even in the most pitiable state of frailty, illness or dying, when we accept the grace to endure, we are experiencing the power of redemption – so that every moment of our existence can have unfathomable meaning and purpose. And so it is true that “... the person who does not know how to suffer does not know how to live.”⁷

Twenty-five years ago, on March 25, 1995, Pope St. John Paul II published his eleventh Encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*



Statue of Blessed Mother at Our Lady of Fatima Church, Port Washington by Ed Casey.



Stained glass window in Our Lady of Victory Church, Floral Park of Annunciation by Ed Casey.

or *The Gospel of Life*.⁸ It is no coincidence that the Holy Father chose the Feast of the Annunciation, which in itself points to the full essence of the dignity of every human life, for the date of publication.

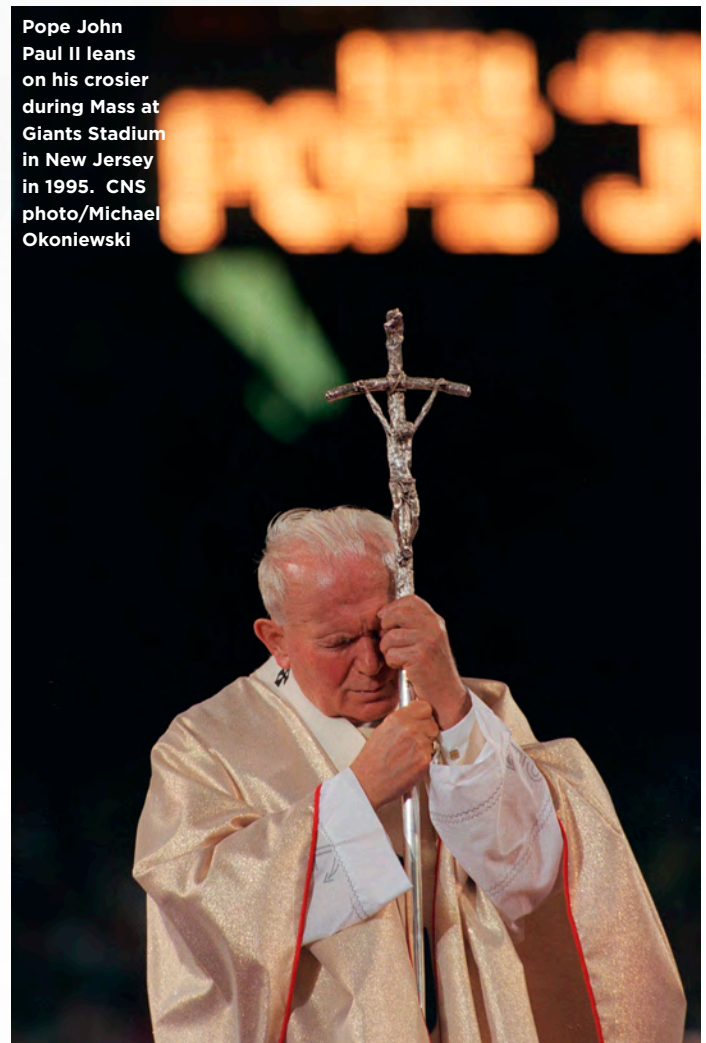
Today, in the midst of this global pandemic of COVID-19, we look at this encyclical now through a new lens. The entire world has been focused since the outbreak on this new danger to human life, especially for the elderly and those with medical vulnerabilities. We have seen an unprecedented shutdown of society on a global scale, in an attempt to safeguard against this viral threat to human life. If this pandemic has made us more aware of the dignity of human life at all stages, and our individual responsibility to do whatever we can (including voluntary self-sacrifice) in order to build up a culture of life, then this becomes the perfect time to re-examine this important document from the pen of one who is both a pope and a saint.

The encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* is prophetic in its warning about the threats to human life (in particular abortion and euthanasia), and the “structure of sin” in our institutions, laws and culture that reinforce these grave and systematic attacks on humanity. It is not only an instruction on the dignity and inviolability of all innocent human life, but also a vision for building a culture of life. Central to this beautiful exposition is the most pure Virgin Mary who is the perfect model of natural motherhood and also the paragon of spiritual motherhood for the Church, but foremost through her simple “Yes,” a “sure sign of hope and solace” for all of humanity (*EV*105).

PART II EVANGELIUM VITAE: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The 1990s were the era of Whitney Houston, “Seinfeld,” grunge, and public smoking bans. On a more somber level it was also the era of the Gulf War, Dolly the cloned sheep, and Dr. Jack Kevorkian’s “self-execution machine.” Almost a quarter century earlier, Pope St. Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* had presaged that the ubiquitous acceptance and practice of contraception would usher in innumerable offenses against

life and, despite his condemnation, indeed it did.⁹ In 1974, one year after the United States Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade* declared abortion to be a constitutional right, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) issued a *Declaration on Procured Abortion*.¹⁰ This document taught that abortion is gravely sinful because human life, subordinate only to God, is sacred, and that the right to life of every innocent human being from the moment of conception to its natural end is inviolable. This document emphasized that society has a duty to uphold this most fundamental right. In 1980, the CDF released a *Declaration on Euthanasia* in response to contemporary questions regarding an “easy death”.¹¹ In this concise document, the value of all human life is emphasized once again; euthanasia is unequivocally condemned; the moral liceity of the use of pain medications and the value of redemptive suffering are addressed; and the concept of proportionate and disproportionate treatments explained. In 1987, the CDF issued *Donum Vitae*,¹² a detailed instruction on interval advances in the biomedical sciences that could violate the dignity of the human embryo and the sanctity of procreation within marriage (e.g. forms of *in vitro* fertilization). Practices were clearly defined as not morally licit when they destroyed human life for the service of science



Pope John Paul II leans on his crosier during Mass at Giants Stadium in New Jersey in 1995. CNS photo/Michael Okoniewski

or when they interfered with the transmission of life and relegated either embryos or parents to objects of purpose rather than persons whose lives have divine meaning. These documents notwithstanding, by the 1980s and 1990s one in two marriages were ending in divorce,¹³ nearly two-thirds of women of child-bearing age were using contraception (most commonly sterilization),¹⁴ and upwards of 1.3 million abortions per year were recorded in the U.S. alone.¹⁵ At the same time, we were approaching the peak of the AIDS epidemic;¹⁶ there were 50 million abortions annually worldwide in the early 1990s¹⁷ and Swiss and Dutch residents had unabashed access to assisted suicide¹⁸ and euthanasia,¹⁹ respectively. The “culture of death” was advancing unremittingly, if not stealthily.

Amidst concern for these mounting threats against life, an Extraordinary Consistory of Cardinals was convoked on this subject in 1991.²⁰ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, then Prefect of the CDF, prepared the concluding report which identified the prevalence in society of blunted moral consciences as the cause of this “war on life” that targeted the weakest among us: the unborn, the disabled and the “useless.” He enumerated the various means of these attacks on human life that included abortion, abortifacient contraceptives, *in vitro* fertilization and its consequences (surplus embryos, experimentation, selective abortions, etc.), infanticide, and euthanasia. But, he noted, the “ultimate root” of this anti-life culture is a separation from God experienced by so many people around the world. Pope Saint John Paul II responded to the world’s bishops in a letter acknowledging the need for the Church to both reaffirm the right to life and to devote herself to the defense and promotion of it²¹ – and from this, the papal encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, was born.

PART III AN EXPLANATION OF EVANGELIUM VITAE

In this 25th anniversary year of this most important papal document, it is worthwhile to re-examine it and to introduce it to an audience that may not be familiar with it. With the luxury of hindsight, we can see how truly prophetic Pope St. John Paul II was in recognizing the dangers of the “culture of death” waging war on the “culture of life”. Unfortunately, in the year 2020, we see much more clearly how the truths of *Evangelium Vitae* were not heeded, and therefore have produced the troubled society in which we now live.

A. INTRODUCTION

Evangelium Vitae begins with an introduction, followed by four chapters covering contemporary threats to human life,



Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, greets St. John Paul II in 2004. CNS file photo

the Christian message on life, God’s Holy Law (the moral law), and finally a vision on building a culture of life. Pope Saint John Paul II pronounces with the authority of the Successor of Peter that his purpose is the “precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability” in light of current circumstances and threats and “at the same time a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person, in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life!” (EV 5)

In the Introduction, Pope Saint John Paul II first establishes the eternal context of our human existence. Made in God’s image and likeness, Man is called to the fullness of life in eternal communion with the Father, a calling that reveals the greatness and inestimable value of every human life in its temporal phase. This earthly life, though, is a transient but sacred reality that is preserved by a “sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters” (EV 2). He broadly describes the supreme dishonor committed against the Creator by whatever opposes life itself (e.g. abortion, euthanasia), violates the integrity of the person (e.g. mutilation), or insults human dignity (e.g. prostitution).

These offenses are often brought on by the great gifts of science and technology when they attack the dignity of the human person and deviate from God’s order – i.e. when they *use* rather than *serve* man. They are facilitated by a “structure of sin:” public opinion that upholds individual freedoms detached from objective truth, state authorization of these acts via immoral laws, and formal assistance (mechanized by health care systems) that distorts and degrades the healing profession. He laments the destruction of so many lives and the darkening of consciences in which so many are unable to distinguish between good and evil regarding the basic value of human life (EV 4).

B. CHAPTER I — THE VOICE OF YOUR BROTHER’S BLOOD CRIES TO ME FROM THE GROUND: PRESENT DAY THREATS TO HUMAN LIFE

In Chapter I of *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope Saint John Paul II examines the contemporary threats to human life. He begins

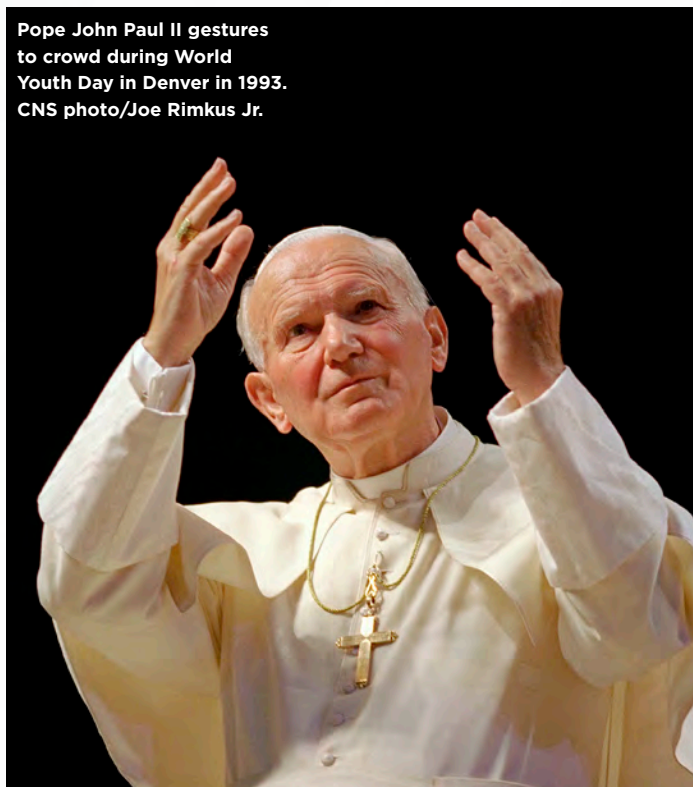
with the Book of Genesis, and the story of Cain killing his brother Abel. This story is a sad witness that the root of violence against life is an enduring problem and one that is based on a tendency to reject responsibility for others, especially the most vulnerable of our society (EV 8). At the same time, the Pope draws a contrast with the “paradoxical mystery of the merciful justice of God” – that not even a murderer loses his indisputable and irrevocable personal dignity (EV 9).

Acknowledging a broad catalog of threats to human life (e.g. war, drugs), Pope Saint John Paul II specifically focuses on those affecting both the beginning and final stages of life because these raise the most acute and extraordinary dangers. **Contraception** rejects the procreative, life giving aspect of the marital embrace because fertility is deemed an obstacle to personal happiness; in that limited construct, the full truth of the sexual act is wholly contradicted (i.e. the giving of oneself and receiving of the other to beget life in a most beautiful cooperation with God is rejected). Although fruit of the same tree as contraception, **abortion** is an even more grave evil because it opposes the virtue of justice (depriving one of the right to life) and unambiguously violates God’s commandment, “thou shall not kill.” Like contraception, **artificial reproduction**, such as *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) and cloning, also separates the procreative and unitive aspects of the conjugal act, but with the opposite intent of creating life outside of the loving embrace of marriage which is God’s plan for begetting life. As in abortion, that nascent life is often relegated to the notion of being merely disposable, biological material whose destruction is not even an afterthought. (EV 13). **Prenatal diagnostics**, when not employed for the purpose of treatment or preparing a family for a less than ideal outcome of a pregnancy, become an exercise in **eugenics**, such that only some lives are determined worthy of existence; therefore, other lives are arbitrarily deemed less worthy and may be extinguished by abortion (EV 14). Finally, **euthanasia**, hastening death to end all suffering of the frail and incurably ill, is an increasing temptation rationalized on an erroneous sense of compassion and utilitarianism (in which one is valued for his productivity, rather than the inherent dignity of being created in God’s image). It produces a culture that, deprived of hope, sees no supernatural meaning or value in suffering (EV 15).

These serious affronts to life are compounded by a deeper layer of systematic threats to life that enshrine these evils as so-called “rights:” unjust laws, health care systems that freely offer these services, international agencies that condition humanitarian aid on acceptance of anti-birth policies and a mass media that vilifies pro-life positions (EV 17). That these acts are performed “in the very heart of and with the complicity of the family” which “by its nature is called to be the ‘sanctuary of life’” (EV 11) illustrates how deep this crisis is. Conscience is at the heart of the battle, but the Pope concedes that many are deceived by innocuous medical

terminology disguising the truth of these matters, poorly formed knowledge of ethics, and unfortunate experiential realities. Hence, it can be difficult, if not counter-cultural, and even frankly heroic, to defend and promote life (EV 11). In this it is recognized that the subjective responsibility and associated culpability of tragic decisions made on the individual level may be mitigated by those circumstances of duress (e.g. a woman pressured to have an abortion by her boyfriend). However, the reinforcement of those decisions on cultural, social and political levels (e.g. a politician who sponsors a bill to ease abortion restrictions) are far more egregious and indefensible because they are systematic, gross violations of the primary objective of a society which is to protect all human rights, most especially those rights at the very beginning and end of life (EV 18).

A perverse idea of freedom is at the foundation of these threats comprising a “structure of sin.” First, personal dignity is equated with the ability of expression, so that the unborn or very debilitated who have no voice are stripped of recognition for influence or defense. Therefore, when rights are determined by majority opinion, rather than the basis of the inviolable dignity of the person, the voiceless always lose their rights. Second, the concept of absolute autonomy exalts the individual and rejects the notion that we are entrusted by God to one another and are therefore meant to exist and serve in the context of community. Within this perverse paradigm, the so-called right of one may oppress the right of others who legitimately disagree (or are unable to express a view) even with regards to the right to life. It is God’s plan, however, that the individual exists within a family which exists within a broader community both in



Pope John Paul II gestures to crowd during World Youth Day in Denver in 1993. CNS photo/Joe Rimkus Jr.

support and in service of each other through the gift of self and openness to others and ordered to an objective truth. Alone we are weak. The family and the community are social constructs intended to strengthen us so that we may forge the heroic path of defending life. Indeed, the family itself is a divinely instituted social construct, and part of God's original plan for human beings. Anything else is a despicable corruption of the social order that leads to exploitation and selfish disregard of others (EV 19).

Pope Saint John Paul II traces this distorted notion of freedom to the lost sense of God in our modern world. "When the sense of God is lost, the sense of man is also threatened and poisoned ..." When Man loses sight of his special place in the hierarchy of God's creation, he focuses on his transitive nature and on productivity and possessions, dictated by pleasure and efficiency. Finally, and most detrimentally, he loses hope in God's mercy (EV 26).

The first chapter closes with welcome signs of a renewed respect for life, including married couples accepting children as the supreme gift of marriage, rapid humanitarian responses in times of war and natural disasters, as well as hospitals, orphanages and homes for the elderly. These are all signs that, indeed, we can build a "civilization of love and life" (EV 27).

C. CHAPTER II – I CAME THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE: THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

Chapter II examines the meaning and value of human life as revealed through the words, actions and person of Jesus Christ, the "Word of Life" (1 Jn 1:1) (EV 29). Jesus Christ is the Gospel of Life, truly the "Good News", because it is exclusively through His Incarnation and death on the cross, that our earthly life achieves its fulfillment, that is, a share in God's eternal life. Perfecting what has already been revealed to every conscience, it is through the very person of Jesus that we come to know and accomplish the complete truth of the value of human life: the responsibility to love, serve, defend and promote human life (EV 29) so that we may achieve our ultimate end which is eternal life with God (EV 30).

Pope Saint John Paul II then introduces a framework to understand the value of suffering and the unsurpassed dignity of human life. He explains the Exodus as a "foundational experience and a model" – Israel learns that, in tribulation, it need only *turn to God* for unfailing help: "I formed you, you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me. Turn back to me" (Is 44:21-22). The Book of Job reinforces the universal model that suffering challenges faith to respond with unencumbered *trust*: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). In Nazareth, Jesus, the Word of Life Himself, preaches the same message of Good News: so they might *believe*, He shows them through physical miracles, that the lives of even

the lame and the lepers, those diminished in some way, are "a gift carefully guarded in the hands of the Father" (see Mt 6:25-34) (EV 32).

Life is good because it "is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory" (see Gen 1:26-27; Ps 8:6). Man is made in God's image and reflects His glory. He is the most perfect of all God's creation, and in this, he has a special primacy in the hierarchy of created things. Everything in creation is ordered to Man and made subject to him and his responsible care; he cannot be made subject to others nor reduced to the level of an object (EV 34). It is this dominion²² coupled with the unique spiritual faculties (reason, discernment between good and evil, free will) that sets humanity apart from all other creatures and allows us to love and know the Creator so that our existence has a fullness that is achieved not in this finite realm, but in eternity with God. "The dignity of this life is linked not only to its beginning, to the fact that it comes from God, but also to its final end, to its destiny of fellowship with God in knowledge and love of him" (EV 38).

Human life therefore has a sublime dignity, but it belongs to God. "It is I who bring both death and life" (Dt 32:39). In the sacred magnificence of this gift, God requires a distinct reverence for life. He demands a response of Cain after he slew Abel, "What have you done?" (Gen 4:10), and He warns Noah after the Flood: "... in regard to his fellow man I will demand an accounting for human life" (Gen 9:5). From the beginning then, it is clear that innocent human life, this reflection of God's glory, is *inviolable*. This is set forth in the Commandment "You shall not kill" (Ex 20:13), which protected and defended the weak and vulnerable as a bare-minimum obligation. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, enriched the law with positive requirements that expanded our responsibility to care of the stranger, even obliging us to love our enemies. This demonstrates not only the special dignity of Man and the sacredness of life, but also the radical solidarity God desires for humanity borne of His providential love. "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; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt 5:44-45; see Lk 6:28, 35).

Man lives in the world. He is given dominion over the earth, but this is not a power for abuse or recklessness. After all, these created things are there for the service of Man's personal dignity – to destroy them would negate their purpose. This stewardship imparts a special responsibility of humanity for all created life and the environment to preserve as far as possible their purpose²³ (the ends of which is the service of Mankind) for this and for future generations (EV 42). However, it must be emphasized that these things are entrusted to our responsible care, but they are all merely instruments ordered to our ultimate fulfillment which is attainment of eternal life in God. Humanity can never be

subservient to the physical world or to other creatures, and, most of all, the dignity of human life can never be compromised by efforts to protect the created world which is intended to serve him (EV 34).

Man shares in God's lordship in a very special and transcendent way in the participation of the begetting of new life, the continuation of Creation. In the joining of husband and wife, open to the gift of fertility, God makes Himself present. When a new life is begotten, it is bestowed with an immortal soul that transmits the image and likeness of God. Pope Saint John Paul II quotes Bishop Amphilochius referring to: "holy matrimony, chosen and elevated above all other earthly gifts" as "the begetter of humanity, the creator of images of God" (EV 43).

Life is a good, but bodily life is not an absolute good. Faithfulness—even to the point of forsaking one's own life – is more pleasing to God. "Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it" (Mk 8:35). Only God has the authority and right to give and take life (EV 47). While the Fifth Commandment is a strict prohibition against killing, human life is guarded equally by the entire Law of God which reveals the righteousness in which life finds its ultimate fulfillment. "I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God ... the Lord your God will bless you ..." (Dt 30:15-16) (EV 48). It is not possible for life to achieve its fullness separated from doing, living and being good; likewise, it is not possible for that good to be divorced from the Law of God. Life can only attain its fullness in doing that for which it was made to do and that by which it flourishes, that is, life is made for and by the good as God commands it.

While the prophets spoke of a "new heart" that would restore Man's relationship with God and others and that would fully embrace the Gospel of Life, it is in Jesus' body and spirit that the Law is finally fulfilled. He embodies the truest meaning of life: the gift of self in love for others (EV 49). "This is the law of freedom, joy and blessedness" (EV 49). This is order restored.

Finally, in concluding this chapter, Pope Saint John Paul II brings us to Calvary. When darkness swept over the land and the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, the combat between good and evil, life and death, was made manifest. Two millennia later, this is where the culture perdures. As shockingly discouraging as that may seem, the glory of the Cross was not overcome by darkness then and it is not in the shadows now. It was in the moment of His most profound

weakness that Jesus' unsurpassed glory was revealed. The salvation He accomplished for us is eternal life and resurrection in the Lord – the full, authentic meaning of human life that gives us our irrevocable dignity (EV 50).

At the same time, Pope Saint John Paul II draws attention to another salvation, that of the "mundane" forgiveness of sins. Jesus models this on the Cross when He asks forgiveness for those who have persecuted Him. Less dramatically so, He did likewise during His earthly ministry through the miracles that not only cured the physically sick but also forgave sin, the greatest infirmity of mankind. The Holy Father calls us to praise and thanksgiving and urges us to follow this divine example of obedience, generosity of heart, and unremitting reverence for life (EV 50).

D. CHAPTER III – YOU SHALL NOT KILL: GOD'S HOLY LAW

Chapter III begins with a recapitulation of the basic premises of human dignity established in the preceding chapter and then proceeds to review present-day practices that offend God's Holy Law. The Gospel of Life is a great gift intended for man's good, but it is an equally great responsibility. The gift of life from God entails His command to love life, and so following the command becomes a gift in itself to life (EV 52). We are reminded that man has been given dominion over the world and himself, but this power is ministerial, not absolute, and must be conducted in obedience to God's holy law. There will be an accounting of the life entrusted to each of us (EV 52). The sacredness and inviolability of human life is derived from the creative action of God as the sole Creator of life. He made us in His image and likeness and for eternal communion with Him (EV 53). The entirety of God's law falls



Fr. Thomas Fusco, pastor, Parish of Our Lady of Victory, Floral Park renews the wedding vows of long-time parishioners Al and Anne Vetter on their 60th wedding anniversary. Ed Casey photo

on the commandments to love God and to love one's neighbor, or simply, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom 13:9, see Gal 5:14) (EV 54).

Church tradition has always held that murder is among the three most grave sins along with apostasy and adultery (EV 54). Before addressing unequivocal violations against life, Pope Saint John Paul II examines two areas in which there is often perceived conflict with God's law, but in which there is actually no contradiction when certain criteria exist: self-defense and the death penalty.

One has the legitimate right to self-defense, i.e. to protect one's own life when an unjust aggressor threatens it. The basis of this is a duty to love life and oneself no less than others which can justify an act to protect and defend one's own safety even if that might lead to harm of the aggressor. There may be foreseen harm done to the other, but this cannot be undertaken with the intention of causing injury for the sake of hurting the other. Rather, the injury is an act of incapacitating the aggressor from doing harm to oneself. In this, legitimate defense must entail only the minimal amount of damage necessary to stop the aggressor. On the other hand, out of heroic love, one may legitimately choose not to stop the unjust aggressor (i.e. forgoing self-defense to avoid any harm to the other), but this must be conducted purely as a self-offering that emanates from love for the other, rather than an act of self-annihilation or lack of love for self. "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." If the aggressor's life is taken because no other means available was effective to subdue him, then the fatal outcome is attributed to him—although his moral culpability may be mitigated by other factors such as mental illness (EV 55).

Pope Saint John Paul II heroically advances the Culture of Life throughout *Evangelium Vitae* and does so in a particularly vivid fashion in his treatment of the death penalty. In fact, *Evangelium Vitae's* treatment of the death penalty is a resounding instance of the reverberating unity of the magisterium of Pope St. Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

In *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope Saint John Paul II continuously emphasizes that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26-27) and God Himself is the master of human life. From these essential coordinates of creation flows the divine commandment, "You shall not kill" (Ex. 20:13; Dt 5:17 cf. Gen 9:5-6; EV 53ff). These essential truths further



Pope Francis, St. John Paul II and the retired Pope Benedict XVI in a composite photo. CNS photo/Paul Haring/Joe Rimkus Jr.

undergird the sacred and inviolable character of human life which is "[t]aken up and brought to fulfillment in the New Law" (EV 54). On this basis, Pope Saint John Paul II echoes the constant teaching of the Church that the direct taking of innocent human life is a grave sin (EV 55). Pope Saint John Paul II likewise echoes the teaching that there exists the right and even the duty to engage in legitimate defense in the face of a direct and immediate threat to innocent human life. As Pope Saint John Paul II notes, "Unfortunately, it happens that the need to render the aggressor incapable of causing harm sometimes involves taking his life" (EV 55). The defense of innocent life by directly taking the life of the unjust aggressor should always be a last resort used only after all other means of rightful defense or genuine deterrence of the proximate unjust aggression have been exhausted.

Following on his treatment of the individual's right to legitimate self-defense, Pope Saint John Paul II takes up what has been understood as the State's right to self-defense. Here he posits an essential and existential distinction between the individual's legitimate right to self-defense as described above and the exercise of the death penalty as a category of the State's right to self-defense. Specifically, contemporary governments that employ the death penalty almost universally fail to apply it as a mode of immediate, last resort self-defense of the State itself. Rather, contemporary consideration of the death penalty now arises in a completely separate context, one in which the taking of the life of the aggressor is not carried out as a direct defensive response to the immediate, present and continuous action of an unjust aggressor. Instead, the death penalty is today considered almost exclusively as a merely juridical attempt at "remedy" to a past unjust action. While the unjust aggressor's dire action in the past may cause enduring emotional pain and dreadful suffering, the moment of threat to human life is completely curtailed by non-lethal societal protection which prevents further active aggression.

It is in this context that, Pope Saint John Paul II emphasizes that "there is a growing tendency, both in the Church and in civil society, to demand that it be applied in a very limited way

or even that it [the death penalty] be abolished completely” (EV 56). It is clear that Pope Saint John Paul II entered deeply into the moral truth reflected in this growing tendency and advanced it considerably in his magisterial appeal that those responsible for public order and protection remedy any violation of rights not with “the extreme” (EV 56) of the death penalty but with a different, but still adequate, punishment. Pope Saint John Paul II observed that it is well within a civilized society’s means to defend itself adequately against unjust aggressors by their permanent detention in civil custody. This effectively removes their ability to further threaten human life. Indeed, Pope Saint John Paul II clearly points out that, “Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases [that require the death penalty] are very rare, if not practically non-existent” (EV 56).

The original depth of the teaching of *Evangelium Vitae* is fully reflected in the magisterium of Pope Benedict XVI who summoned “the attention of society’s leaders to the need to make every effort to eliminate the death penalty.”²⁴ Pope Benedict further expressed strong support for the promotion of initiatives across the world to “eliminate the death penalty and to continue the substantive progress made in conforming penal law both to the human dignity of prisoners and the effective maintenance of public order.”²⁵

The enduring fruit of the truth of the teaching on the death penalty as taught in *Evangelium Vitae* blossoms ever more beautifully when His Holiness Pope Francis affirms, “It must be clearly stated that the death penalty is an inhumane measure that, regardless of how it is carried out, abases human dignity. It is per se contrary to the Gospel, because it entails the willful suppression of a human life that never ceases to be sacred in the eyes of its Creator...”²⁶ The compelling force of *Evangelium Vitae* finds distinct expression in these words of our Holy Father: “It is necessary, therefore, to reaffirm that no matter how serious the crime that has been committed, the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability of the person.”²⁷ Pope Francis proclaimed this truth in his address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress in the course of his 2015 Apostolic Visit to the United States when the Holy Father called for “the global abolition of the death penalty.” Accordingly, the advancement of the teaching of the Culture of Life on the inadmissibility of the death penalty articulated with urgency in *Evangelium Vitae* resounded in a new way in May 2018 as Pope Francis approved the revision of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to read:

Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good.

Today, however, there is an increasing awareness

that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.

Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that ‘the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person’, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide.²⁸

In June 2019 the *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops* voted overwhelmingly to update the United States Catholic Catechism for Adults to reflect the teaching of the universal Catechism as they proclaimed the brilliance of life to yet a new generation.

Pope Saint John Paul II then makes the first of three statements with doctrinal authority: **“the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral.”** Taking these words directly from the *Declaration on Euthanasia* he reiterates:

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 is permitted to ask for this act of killing, either for himself or herself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly. Nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action.²⁹

In this teaching, every innocent human being has equal standing, there are no exceptions or compromises based on age, development, functional capacity, etc.

The second doctrinal statement declares **“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”** (EV 62). Procured abortion is an “unspeakable crime” that constitutes murder of the most innocent and defenseless human being – one not even having the “poignant power of a newborn baby’s cries and tears” to stir the conscience. It is the deliberate and direct killing of a human being in the initial phase of existence. Pope Saint John Paul II urges the use of precise language to convey the serious moral nature of the act; ambiguous terminology wrongly eases the conscience: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Is 5:20) (EV 58).

The tragic irony of abortion is that the unborn child is entrusted to the protection of the mother who could even consider making the decision “no” to life. The rationale behind the decision may even appear unselfish (e.g. wanting a better life for other family members, avoid suffering to



the child), but no legitimate grounds can ever justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being (EV 58). The influence of other parties complicit in the evil of abortion include: fathers who directly pressure the mother to abort their child or indirectly pressure this decision by abandoning the mother and child (a demonstration of outright contempt for the family and its natural call to be the “sanctuary of life”); family and friends who encourage an abortion; and doctors and nurses who use their life-saving skills to terminate the most innocent life.

The social dimension of the scourge of abortion is further delineated by enumerating other parties culpable in this “structure of sin”: legislators who promote and approve abortion laws; administrators of health care facilities that perform abortions; those who propagate a culture of sexual permissiveness, disdain the esteemed vocation of motherhood, and fail to work towards social policies that support families; and international institutions, foundations and associations that systematically promote abortion across the world. He refers to his *Letter to Families*: “we are facing an immense threat to life: not only to the life of individuals but also to that of civilization itself” (EV 59).

Although he does not address it in relation to linguistic phenomenon that attenuate the perceived moral seriousness of abortion, Pope Saint John Paul II does acknowledge that the life of a new human being has begun from the time the ovum is fertilized even though some claim a personal human life has not begun until days later.³⁰ He makes the simple but profound point that, “It would never be made human if it

were not human already” (EV 60). Moral prudence demands that the mere probability that a human person is present in the embryo justifies an absolute prohibition aimed at killing it. From *Donum Vitae*: “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.”³¹

Pope Saint John Paul II does address the 1917 Code of Canon Law which imposed automatic ex-communication on those procuring an abortion and extending to all material accomplices who have knowledge of the attached penalty. Pope St. Paul VI declared this tradition “unchanged and unchangeable” (EV 62). He explains that the purpose of such a severe sanction is not punitive, but rather, in authentic charity, is a sincere attempt to bring attention to the tremendous gravity of a particular sin and to prompt genuine conversion and repentance (EV 62).³² Later in the following chapter, he offers hope and encouragement by imploring post-abortive women to seek the healing forgiveness and peace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (EV 99).

In addition to direct abortion, he condemns the grave abuses against the earliest human life as committed through experimentation, harvesting for transplants, etc. Even if performed with the intention to help others, exploitation of these innocent human beings, used as “biological material” is wholly unacceptable. He reiterates that prenatal diagnostic techniques are morally licit only when used for therapeutic benefit to the unborn child or to allow a family to prepare for the future needs of a child; however, eugenic intentions are “shameful and utterly reprehensible” (EV 63) in and of themselves, but also because they advance the legitimization of infanticide and euthanasia. Nevertheless, he applauds the hope and courage demonstrated by those giving authentic witness to life: those living with disabilities, those families lovingly accepting these hardships and those adopting children abandoned due to these imperfections (EV 63).

Finally, Pope Saint John Paul II provides the third and last doctrinal statement of the encyclical: “... **euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person**” (EV 65). It is unsurprising that a world not open to life when its full potential lies ahead, will likewise hold no value in a life burdened with suffering or impaired function. Even the mere fear of pain and suffering can lead one separated from God to a false belief that life loses its meaning when there is no pleasure. Consequently (but just as wrongly), one may conclude there exists a right to be freed from such a life, what some might call a “rightful liberation.” Similarly, a perverse preoccupation with productivity and efficiency deems advanced age or disability as an intolerable burden, from which *society* has a right to be relieved. That sense of control and authority over life, this culture of death, is ironically most apparent in prosperous societies where the



Catholic high school students attend March for Life in Washington, DC. Long Island Catholic file photo.

a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted” (EV 65).

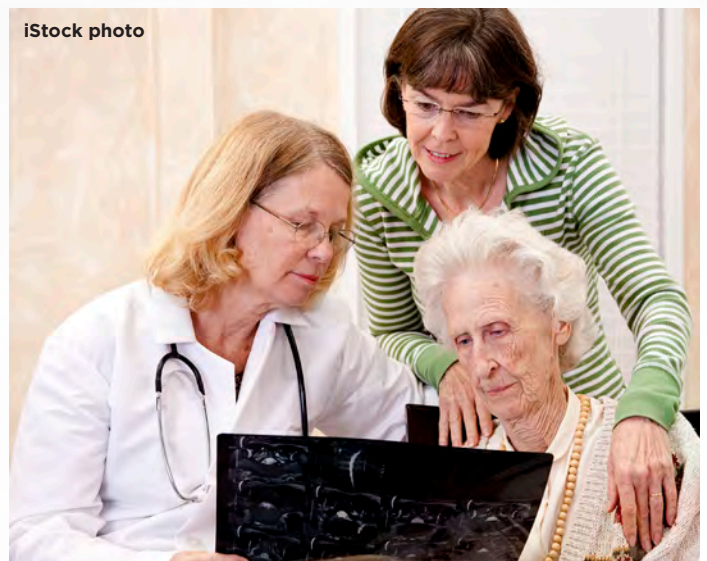
“Methods of palliative care” involving opioid (narcotic) medications that could potentially hasten death may be morally licit at the end of life for management of serious symptoms. First, the point is made that one may forego pain-killers with the intention to remain conscious and share in the Lord’s Passion, but the Holy Father readily concedes that not all are called to this “heroic” act. In this, it is morally legitimate to receive opioid medications to relieve severe pain (a serious reason) even if the foreseen but unintended consequence is decreased consciousness or a shortened life. It should be emphasized that there must be no other reasonable alternatives and, if in the rare case permanent sedation is needed for control of symptoms, all religious and moral duties should be addressed beforehand and all other normal care must continue (EV 65).

He ends this section on euthanasia by addressing **suicide** which contradicts the instinctive nature to preserve one’s own life. It rejects love of self, the human obligation towards neighbor, family and society, and most of all, God’s supreme authority over life and death. Objectively it is a gravely evil act, but given the “psychological, cultural and social conditioning” usually involved, the subjective moral responsibility may be more or less reduced. A greater evil is presented in **assisted suicide** which entails the situation in which another person cooperates in a person’s planned suicide. It is never morally justifiable and constitutes a perversion of human dignity and mercy, magnified by the fact that it is facilitated by those whose legitimate roles are to love and take care of these persons, i.e. family members, doctors, etc. (and now, when legalized, the State). The height of injustice is reached when involuntary euthanasia occurs, that is, when others (doctors and legislators) “decide who ought to live and who ought to die” (EV 66).

Those confronting suffering and death need and deserve

availability of sophisticated medical advances allows the successful management of previously untreatable conditions (EV 64).

Subsequently, Pope Saint John Paul II makes a critical distinction between *euthanasia* and the foregoing of “extraordinary” medical treatment. Euthanasia is defined as “an action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death, with the purpose of eliminating all suffering” (EV 65). Whatever the method, *the intended outcome is the death of the patient*. It can never be morally licit. In stark contrast, when a medical treatment is no longer working or imposes an excessive burden outweighing any benefit to the patient, it has become **disproportionate treatment** and may be legitimately withdrawn or withheld. In this case, *the intended outcome is relief of the burden of the treatment to the patient*. The intended outcome is most certainly *not* death—even though death is accepted as a possible, even inevitable, consequence. Other normal care must continue. So, *euthanasia brings on death to end all suffering. In distinct contrast foregoing disproportionate treatment ends suffering specifically caused by the treatment which may (and often will) unintentionally bring on death*. To be clear, it is morally licit to “refuse forms of treatment that would only secure



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companionship, sympathy and support. Requests for death are a clear sign that these needs are not being met, but the answer is *compassion, not euthanasia*. One can also look to the Christian Faith which brings to fulfillment the hope of immortality in the victory of the Risen Christ. In this, it brings redemptive meaning to the mystery of suffering and death. "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24) (EV 67).

Pope Saint John Paul II bemoans the legalization of these evils which elevates abortion and euthanasia to a position as though they were legitimate rights. The basis for such atrocious civil laws are false claims that: 1) life is a *relative* good that should be weighed against other goods without deference to an objective moral truth (i.e. proportionalism); 2) not all citizens share a high moral standard on the value of life and so the law should operate based on the majority will; and 3) the law cannot distinguish between different moral opinions, so people should be able to dispose of life (their own or the unborn) if they wish. A false sense of autonomy thereby ensues, one that presents an obvious contradiction: on the one hand "freedom of choice" means an individual should be unhindered by moral laws from pursuing what he or she wants to do even if that is a moral evil; on the other hand, a professional with convictions grounded in moral law is expected to forego his "freedom of choice" in order to appease the demands of those who insist he commit evil. The flawed civil law on which this paradox develops is oblivious to an objective moral truth that comes from God.

A democracy is a political system, not an automatic fix to a broken culture (EV 70). First and foremost a democracy must promote and protect the dignity of the person. It cannot be established on an ethical relativism that is subject to the opinions of the majority, especially when that is just a reflection of the imbalance of power, the strong over the weak and defenseless. From this, it is evident that civil law must ensure certain fundamental rights, the first of which is the right to life, and it is that right from which all other rights flow. Nevertheless, laws which contradict this are regularly passed, and more regularly and extensively than they were twenty-five years ago. St. Thomas Aquinas instructs us: "Every law made by man can be called a law insofar as it derives from the natural law. But if it is somehow opposed to the natural law, then it is not really a law but rather a corruption of the law" (EV 72). Pope Saint John Paul II makes the point that a civil law that authorizes abortion or euthanasia cannot be a morally binding civil law because it "leads to the killing of the person whom society exists to serve" which contradicts the main purpose of achieving the common good (EV 72).

With this understanding then, there is no obligation to obey such a civil law and, in fact, there is "a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection" (EV 73). Moreover, one must neither lobby for such a law nor vote for it. The issue of legislators' responsibility is

made very clear: it is morally licit to support proposed laws that aim to reduce the harm done by more egregious laws already in place *only* when it is not possible to completely overturn the current law *and* when the legislator has made public his personal opposition (and presumably his displeasure with an "intermediate" law) (EV 73).

Christians are also reminded that they are under a grave obligation not to cooperate formally in evil, even if it is permissible by civil law. This means one cannot participate directly in an act that takes an innocent human life nor can he share in the immoral intention of the person committing the evil. In this, the moral duty to **conscientious objection** (refusing to participate in evil based on one's moral convictions) is recognized as a basic human right which should be guaranteed, particularly for physicians and those in clinical and administrative positions in the health care fields. Nevertheless, he concedes that exercising one's conscience may result in the sacrifice of desirable career opportunities and advancement. This is a moral duty that carries with it a high price, but every Christian knows that he will be judged on his actions (see Rom 2:6, 14:12) (EV 74).

In closing the third chapter, Pope Saint John Paul II reviews the Church's teaching that God's commandments orders one's life to Him. The "No!" of "You shall not kill" sets the lower limit of behavior beneath which one cannot act. But in the Son of God, the Law of limits is transformed into a new positive Law without upper limits, one that obliges us to action, to "Yes!" In this, we are called to respect, love and promote all human life, for in the example of Jesus Christ: "He laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 Jn 3:16) (EV 77).

E. CHAPTER IV – YOU DID IT TO ME: FOR A NEW CULTURE OF HUMAN LIFE

This final chapter of *Evangelium Vitae* begins with an exhortation to evangelization and proceeds to outline a vision for celebrating the Gospel of Life. We have received the gift of the Gospel from Jesus Christ Himself, Who is the "Author of Life" (Acts 3:15) and Who redeemed us with His most Precious Blood (see 1 Cor 6:20, 7:23, 1 Pet 1:19) (EV 79). By the waters of Baptism we can share in His eternal life through which the full meaning of our earthly lives and the incomparable dignity of the human person is realized. This is a source of great joy and gratitude (EV 80).

The Gospel of Life proclaims that God calls us to a most intimate relationship and share in His eternal life, which is a gift of His boundless love for all human life. The inseparable connection of spirit and body and communion with God, enables us to see Christ in every human face, and accordingly, to respond with the "sincere gift of self" to others as a reflection of the Gospel of Life, Jesus Christ Himself. The

Pope John Paul II blesses a baby in the Sistine Chapel on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord in 2002. CNS photo/Catholic Press Photo



man a dignity which is near to divine” (Ps 8:5-6). He emphasizes that it is through the Sacraments that we share divine life and acquire the spiritual strength to experience suffering and death in its fullest meaning (EV 84). To celebrate the gift of life, Pope Saint John Paul II suggests an annual “Day of Life” in every country to recognize the meaning and value of every life. However, he stresses that we must celebrate life *through our everyday lives* if we are to build up an authentic culture of life. In particular, he underscores the heroic sacrifice of motherhood (EV 85).

With this foundation, Pope Saint John Paul II proposes several initiatives as ways to witness to the call to be our “brother’s keeper.” Faith works through love (see Gal 5:6). He reminds us that “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40), so we must all bear each other’s burdens. He envisions centers where women can make decisions about

consequences of this Gospel are that:

- 1) All human life is a gift from God – it is sacred and inviolable. Therefore, abortion and euthanasia are never justifiable.
- 2) Love imbues life with its most profound meaning. It is in giving and receiving love that we understand the true significance of human sexuality and procreation as well as the meaning of suffering and death.
- 3) Society has a duty to respect, defend and protect life at all times. In this, science and technology serve man to achieve this end.

“Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching” (2 Tim 4:2). Pope Saint John Paul II appeals to his fellow Bishops to be persistent, faithful and uncompromising preachers of the Gospel of Life. He begs the same of theologians, pastors and teachers in presenting the Christian message of the meaning of man’s being and existence (EV 82).

To celebrate truly the beauty and grandeur of the precious gift of life, we need to adopt a “contemplative outlook”. He explains this perspective as one that sees human life as a wonderful gift of the Creator, a living image of Him Who made him (see Gen 1:27, Ps 8:5). It accepts life as a gift rather than something that is taken and then readily discarded. In this, one finds meaning in suffering and death, a call to accompaniment with others through “encounter, dialogue and solidarity,” and the source of joy, praise and thanksgiving for the intimate sharing in eternal communion with God the Father to which all are invited (EV 83). In celebrating the God of life we must rejoice and give praise that He is the source of all life, the Principle of life, but most importantly, that He calls us back to Himself with a promise of perfect life and immortality through grace, “for God has granted to

fertility that honor the gift of self, where marriage and family counseling efforts support and rebuild the family as the “sanctuary of life,” and where new life is welcomed no matter the circumstances or need. He proposes programs and havens that assist those facing other challenges: addictions, mental illness, disabilities, terminal illness, etc. He notes the indispensable role of families and calls on social welfare agencies and other clinical facilities to support them with pragmatic solutions founded on a Christian hope and understanding of suffering and death (EV 88).

In this, he re-asserts the responsibilities of particular groups: *health care personnel* must be guardians and servants of life – they must resist the increasing temptation to become manipulators of life or agents of death. “Causing death” can never be considered a form of medical treatment” even when requested by the patient (EV 89). Also, he echoes the mandate that biomedical research can never violate the dignity of the human being, for then it abuses those whom it is meant to serve (EV 89). *Volunteers* make a critical contribution in giving selflessly of their professional talents. *Civil leaders* must not renounce their responsibility to conscience because every individual will answer to God.³³ For emphasis, he repeats from Chapter III that “a law which violates an innocent person’s natural right to life is unjust and, as such, is not valid as a law.” He encourages these political leaders to work to promote and to defend human life not only by eliminating unjust laws, but also by creating programs that address issues that undermine the family. Indeed, he advocates that the family be central to all social policy development (EV 90). Government agencies also play a role in fostering the Gospel of Life, even where demographic patterns suggest a strain on the environment which could harm other human life. Nevertheless, international agencies or governments should never encourage, much less impose,



contraception, sterilization or abortion as conditions for, or disguised as, humanitarian assistance. Because we all have responsibility in defending and promoting life, he invokes an ecumenical approach to “prevent a setback of unforeseeable consequences for civilization” (EV 91).

Throughout *Evangelium Vitae*, the family is referred to as the “sanctuary of life.” Pope Saint John Paul II expounds on this theme here. Built upon the institution of marriage, the family has the most fundamental purpose to “guard, reveal and communicate love.”³⁴ It begins with husband and wife, completely giving of self and receiving of the other. They cooperate with God in the creation of new life and reveal how life is a gift received so that it can be given as a gift. In raising their children, parents are responsible for instilling faith, teaching truths and behaviors that reflect the Gospel of Life, and helping them to understand the true meaning of suffering and death (EV 93). Crucial elements for building a culture of life within the family include a deep prayer life shared with the children, living a humble and holy example of love and self-giving in ordinary activities, demonstrating a willingness to help other children through adoption and similar programs, and participating as a family in associations that engage social and political commitments to protect and to promote life. Indeed, the role of aged family members cannot be dismissed as they are a link between generations.³⁵ They are “sources of wisdom and witnesses of hope and love” (EV 94). Adult children can reciprocate the loving care they received from their parents and simultaneously provide an example to their own children on how to love, serve and give the gift of self so that they may carry on this gift of self through the generations.

This transformation of the culture is grounded in the

Church’s mission of evangelization. It must unite both believers and non-believers to seek objective truth. Ultimately, this requires a commitment to life that begins with the forming of moral conscience. One cannot separate life and freedom which are bound by love and predicated on Truth, which is God Himself. There is no rationale for personal rights when freedom is dissociated from objective truth. “Where God is denied ... the dignity of the human person and inviolability of human life also end up being rejected or compromised” (EV 96).

Pope Saint John Paul II emphasizes that education must address the value of life and the true meaning of genuine love and sexuality which begets life through cooperation with God the Creator. This includes teaching chastity as a virtue, the importance of responsible procreation that is open to life and to serving it, and the meaning and value of redemptive suffering (EV 97). To accomplish this the Holy Father established the Pontifical Academy for Life (EV 98). He lays special responsibility on the family, teachers and Catholic intellectuals to serve life. The media, too, has a duty to communicate factual truth and support the culture of life. (EV 98) Women, through their “true genius,” are recognized for their most special and indispensable role in achieving this change in culture.³⁶ They must promote a “new feminism” that embraces genuine love in the spousal relationship, models respect for human life in all interpersonal relations, and that bears witness to the beauty of life through the noble vocation of motherhood. In this, he also makes a pastoral plea to post-abortive women to confront the cause of the wound in their hearts, to seek forgiveness and peace through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and to become staunch defenders of life (EV 99).

Despite the sizable resources behind the culture of death, we must not be discouraged. Prayer and fasting are the most effective weapons against evil; and, with special initiatives, we can renew a civilization of life and love (EV 100). He makes the further point that defending life is imperative to advance the common good for all of society: freedoms, rights, democracy and peace cannot be found where the dignity of human life is not upheld (EV 101).

F. CONCLUSION OF THE ENCYCLICAL

As the Pope concludes his encyclical, he returns to ‘the beginning’, where we contemplate the Lord Jesus, “the Child born for us” and the Virgin Mary, “the mother of the Life by which everyone lives” (EV 102). Mary’s “Yes” is “the ‘seed and beginning’ of the Kingdom of God” (EV 103, *Lumen Gentium*) by which God’s plan for the



redemption of all humanity was perfectly fulfilled (EV103). Our human dignity and the inviolability of human life finds its origin here. Mary's "Yes" is also the flawless model for the Church's spiritual motherhood. That "Yes" was fulfilled only through the cross of suffering, prefigured in the words of Simeon (Luke 2:34-5), and culminating on Calvary. This is the archetype of redemptive suffering to which we should aspire. But the suffering she endured in living out that "Yes" is also emblematic of the unrelenting "struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness" – and life, most especially eternal life, is at the center of this battle. The Son of God, by His Incarnation, is intimately united with every person, and He taught us that all we do to the "least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 18:5), and that any rejection of human life is also a rejection of Him (EV104). Therefore, we must be a people of life, fortified by the example of the Mother of God and the Church's assurance that death has already been conquered through the saving love of the Son she bore. As the Archangel Gabriel declared, "With God nothing will be impossible" (Lk 1:30, 37).



A banner depicting St. John Paul II hangs from the façade of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. CNS photo/Paul Haring.

PART IV EVANGELIUM VITAE: A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

So, in this *tour de force*, 25 years ago Pope Saint John Paul II outlined the then current-day threats to life; expounded on the source of our human dignity and the inviolability of human life through our creation and destiny for eternal life; made three doctrinal statements to condemn all killing of innocent life, abortion and euthanasia, and finally proposed numerous ways to build a true culture of life. No one is without a role, no one is without a responsibility.

Evangelium Vitae was well-received at the time with hopes that it would be the catalyst for a renewed Culture of Life. There was promise for a world in which the sanctity of life was universally appreciated; the inseparable relationship of objective truth, freedom and rights more fully understood; and social and legislative activities ordered towards God "the Creator and lover of life." But where are we today?

In this post 9/11 era of the internet, the iPhone, and artificial intelligence, there are many life-affirming advancements in science and medicine to cheer. Real cures have been advanced with *adult* stem cells and immunology-based treatments.³⁷ Once hopeless cancers are now curable.³⁸ *In utero* surgery to correct congenital malformations is changing lives regularly.³⁹ Scientifically-based programs are available to assist in reproductive and fertility issues for women that conform to Catholic moral teaching.⁴⁰ HIV infection, once a veritable death sentence, has been transformed into a chronic disease.⁴¹ And these are just a few advancements in the quarter century since Pope Saint John Paul II wrote his encyclical. We have the Pontifical Academy for Life and many Catholic-based organizations and media outlets that promote Catholic moral teaching and help believers and non-believers not only to understand the dignity of human life but also teach how to live these principles. At this very time, with the global COVID-19 pandemic, there is an exemplary, inspiring response of human compassion, self-sacrifice and cooperation from the bedside to the international level that offers a vivid manifestation of the Gospel of Life teaching.

But still, 25 years later, we see how prophetic the encyclical was at the time, and how far we have strayed as a society and as a culture from its teaching. The message of *Evangelium Vitae* is more relevant and more needed now, than ever. Our world, in an ignorant, but also often defiant, blindness to the Truth, now suffers a profound spiritual anguish perhaps greater than any physical misery. Too many, whether individuals, civic leaders or governmental bodies, are more distanced from the Source of all life and are oblivious to the ramifications: "Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). And so we label as "progress," unambiguous, wholesale attacks on life and the family (many of which are reinforced by depraved legislation): the biological enslavement



Parishioners attend Mass at the Parish of Our Lady of Loretto, Hempstead. FFV photo by Caesar Gonzalez

of embryos in embryonic stem cell research, therapeutic cloning, and the production of countless pharmaceuticals derived from embryonic sources; infanticide (as an example, New York's recent *Reproductive Health Act*⁴²); the bodily mutilation of gender dysphoria; the disruption of the maternal bond and family unit through surrogacy (especially paid surrogacy); widespread assisted suicide and euthanasia (as of this writing assisted suicide is legal in eight U.S. states, Washington D.C. and in numerous countries around the world); an epidemic of suicide and drug addiction leaving almost no family unaffected; the violation of the sanctity of marriage through codification of same-sex "marriage"; infringement of parental rights in morally sensitive areas with mandated vaccines and sex education; and the list seems now to be endless.



Parishioners attend Mass during COVID-19 pandemic at the Parish of Our Lady of Loretto, Hempstead. FFV photo by Caesar Gonzalez

In addition, we see the failure to heed the warnings of Pope Saint John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* regarding the dignity of the human person in the recent acts of racial violence and tension in our nation. As the United States Conference of Bishops wrote in their 2018 Pastoral Letter against racism:

Racism occurs because a person ignores the fundamental truth that, because all humans share a common origin, they are all brothers and sisters, all equally made in the image of God. When this truth is ignored, the consequence is prejudice and fear of the other, and — all too often — hatred.⁴³

It is not difficult to see that, as Pope Saint John Paul II elucidated, all the above are the fruits of a fiercely radical autonomy, unformed or malformed consciences, and a moral relativism which has eroded not only any sense of the inherent dignity of the human person or fundamental equality of all persons but also, and most importantly, our intimate relationship with God. At the same time, however, as Pope Saint John Paul II foresaw, there are unequivocal signs of hope:

"... where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more" (Rom 5:20). Many advocacy and educational groups have surfaced to bring truth and justice to the unborn, the debilitated, and to those uninformed so they will no longer be unwitting perpetrators of and cooperators in this carnage, but rather advocates, promoters and disciples of life, seeking, above all, heavenly eternity with the Creator.

Finally, we turn one more time to the Blessed Virgin, the quintessential model of humility, obedience, and redemptive suffering. *Fiat mihi*, the Blessed Mother's "Yes", **is** the answer. It was Mary's response to the angel, but it is also her example and solution for all of us. If we are to live the Gospel of life faithfully, we too must say "Yes!" We must know God and trust in His will. We must be open to life, both its joys and its inescapable suffering. We must nurture our own families and realize that as a member of one human family we have a solemn responsibility to help our brothers and sisters build their own "sanctuaries of life," all ordered to God's Plan. Finally, we must realize that death to this world is the beginning of new life, the one for which we were ultimately created: eternal life with God.

In a concrete step to reinvigorate the call to build a "civilization of love and life," the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has introduced a new initiative, "Walking with Moms in Need", to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Evangelium Vitae*. It is hoped that this program will help dioceses identify, coordinate and promote resources available to help mothers struggling with challenging pregnancies. In this way, each and every woman bearing new life in her womb will have the means to access everything necessary to help her



Painting of the Blessed Mother and Jesus located in the Parish of Saint Mary, Roslyn by Ed Casey

say “Yes!” to God’s will, like the Blessed Virgin Mary did. We need a new beginning and there is no better time than now.

PART V CONCLUSION

As we revisit *Evangelium Vitae* on its twenty-fifth anniversary, we see that it is now more timely than ever. ⁴⁴There are newer, more egregious assaults on life every day, compounded by an ever more militant defense of personal freedoms and a rejection of God in all realms of society. The Pope who wrote this prophetic document has since been canonized. As he once called to us to be zealous promoters and defenders of the Gospel of Life from the Chair of St. Peter in Rome, he continues to make that call to us today from his place in heaven. We could look at the defeats of the last 25 years and allow ourselves to become discouraged, or even see the situation as hopeless. But we must remember that we are not called to success, but rather to faithfulness, and that “nothing will be impossible for God” (Lk 1:37).

In the last quarter century since *Evangelium Vitae* was issued, the Diocese of Rockville Centre has been on the forefront of building a Culture of Life.

In 2016, we opened the first Gianna Center for Women’s

Health and Fertility on Long Island through Catholic Health Services. We now have affiliates in Babylon, Rockville Centre and Manhattan where women can access high-quality, scientifically-based reproductive healthcare that is authentically Catholic in respecting a woman’s dignity and the sanctity of life. Through Pre-Cana and clinical outreach, engaged and married couples have received training in fertility awareness methods that are safe, effective, morally sound and actually strengthen marriages.

We have always been mindful of the special needs of women facing challenging pregnancies. Over the years we have developed a collaboration between our Office of Human Life, Family and Bioethics (formerly the Respect Life Office), Catholic Health Services of Long Island hospitals, Catholic Charities and community-based resources to provide the necessary help for mothers in need. In recognizing the new challenges of a changing landscape of abortion services, we have already taken initial steps to establish a more streamlined approach to comprehensive life-affirming pregnancy care services.

Countless women and men have been healed through Project Rachel, our post-abortion healing ministry offered through the Office of Human Life, Family and Bioethics.

We are blessed, too, with a vibrant corps of Respect Life leaders, youth ministers, teachers and clergy who

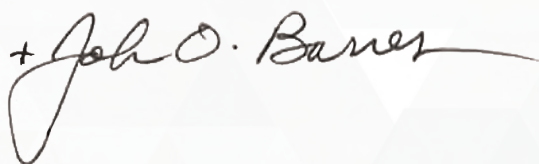
witness to life at the annual March for Life. Parishes and schools across the diocese make the pilgrimage to Washington, D.C., to let our legislative representatives and the world know that there are no exceptions: *every human life matters*. A natural corollary to the annual march in January is “40 Days for Life,” an international campaign of prayerful witness to end abortion, which is now an integral part of the programs we support.

While these are the more prominent programs we have here in the Diocese, there are many more ways we celebrate the gift of life. We invite you to join us as we continue our efforts of the last 25 years, and embark on a new phase of growth into the next 25 years of the Gospel of Life.

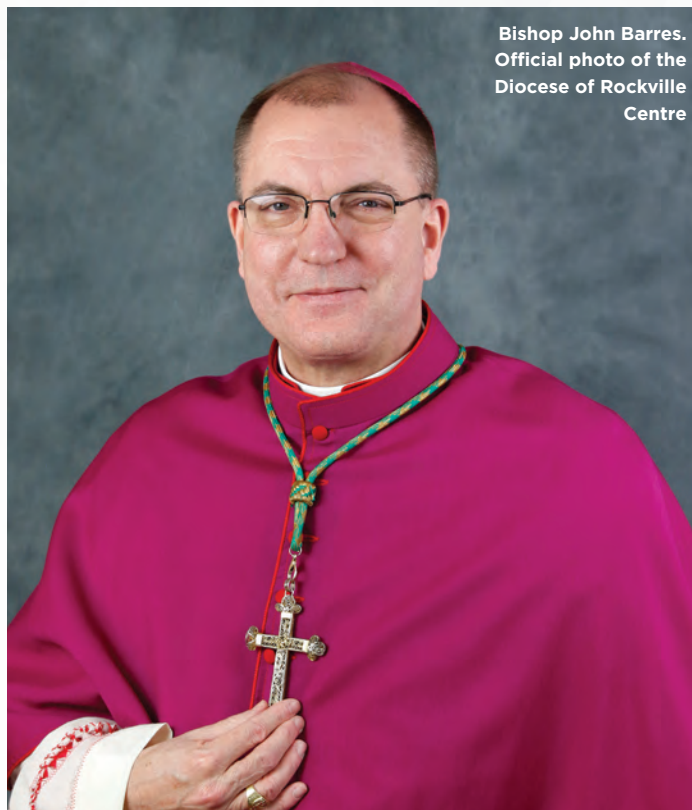
Renewed by the knowledge that the Truth has been given to us to be shared with the world as an antidote to the falsehoods of these modern times, we again hear the urgent words of Pope Saint John Paul II as he exhorts us to action: “Respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life!” (EV 5).

Are you ready to say “Yes!”?

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend John O. Barres
Bishop of Rockville Centre



Bishop John Barres.
Official photo of the
Diocese of Rockville
Centre

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