

The Vatican's Summary of "Evangelium Vitae"

"While realistically countering unprecedented threats to life and the spread of a 'culture of death,'" the primary intention of Pope John Paul II's 11th encyclical, "Evangelium Vitae" (The Gospel of Life), "is to proclaim the good news of the value and dignity of each human life, of its grandeur and worth," says a summary the Vatican released with the encyclical March 30. The summary takes note of the encyclical's "promotion of a 'culture of life' in which human freedom will find its authentic meaning by joining forces with truth, life and love." This culture "needs new lifestyles which will show respect for the dignity of every individual, especially the weakest, which will recognize the value of human sexuality in the development of the person and which will accept the mysterious meaning of suffering and of death." The summary describes this encyclical as a document "presented with great doctrinal authority: It is not only an expression — like every other encyclical — of the ordinary magisterium of the pope, but also of the episcopal collegiality which was manifested first in the extraordinary consistory of cardinals in April 1991 and subsequently in a consultation of all the bishops of the Catholic Church, who unanimously and firmly agree with the teaching imparted in it." The Vatican summary of the encyclical follows.

From its very title, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), the new encyclical of Pope John Paul II demonstrates its highly positive character and its great spiritual thrust. While realistically countering unprecedented threats to life and the spread of a "culture of death," the primary intention of the papal document is to proclaim the good news of the value and dignity of each human life, of its grandeur and worth, also in its temporal phase. The cause of life is in fact at the same time the cause of the Gospel and the cause of man, the cause entrusted to the church.

The encyclical is presented with great doctrinal authority: It is not only an expression — like every other encyclical — of the ordinary magisterium of the pope, but also of the episcopal collegiality which was manifested first in the extraordinary consistory of cardinals in April 1991 and subsequently in a consultation of all the bishops of the Catholic Church, who unanimously and firmly agree with the teaching imparted in it (No. 5). This teaching is in substance "a precise and vigorous

reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability," and also "a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person in the name of God: Respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life! Only in this direction will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness" (No. 5).

1. Present-day Threats to Human Life

The first chapter of the papal document is devoted to an analysis of the lights and the shadows of the present-day situation with regard to human life.

First there is a denunciation of the proliferation and increased intensity of threats to life, especially when life is weak and defenseless at its very beginning and at its end: abortion, immoral experimentation on human embryos, euthanasia. There is a clear description of the unprecedented and specific features of these crimes against life: At the level of public opinion they are claimed to be rights based on individual freedom; there is a trend toward their recognition in law; they are carried out with the help of medical science. This involves a distortion of society's nature and purpose and of the constitutional state itself: Democracy, if detached from its moral foundations and linked to an unlimited ethical relativism, risks becoming the pretext for a war of the stronger against the weaker; the roles of health care personnel tend to be subverted: Instead of respectful service of life, they lend themselves to actions which bring about death.

The causes of this "culture of death" which threatens man and civilization are traced by the Holy Father to a perverse idea of freedom, which is seen as disconnected from any reference to truth and objective good, and which asserts itself in an individualistic way, without the constitutive link of relationships with others. Associated with this is a practical materialism which gives priority to having over being, the satisfaction of personal pleasure over respect for those who are weak, and which ends by considering life worthwhile only to the extent that it is productive and enjoyable; suffering is considered useless, sacrifice for the sake of others unjustified. Underlying all this is a loss of the sense of God. But "when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man" (No. 21).

These threats are interpreted by the pope in the context of that perennial conflict between life and death which

emerged at the very beginning of human history and which sacred Scripture testifies to in the events of Cain, who because of envy "rose up against his brother Abel and killed him" (Gn. 4:8); of the ancient pharaoh who, viewing as a threat the increasing numbers of the children of Israel, ordered that every newborn male of the Hebrew women should be put to death; of Herod who, out of fear for his throne, "sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem" (Mt. 2:16); and finally of the apocalyptic conflict in which "the dragon stood before the woman ... that he might devour her child when she brought it forth" (Rv. 12:4). Human life, especially when weak and defenseless, has always been threatened by the forces of evil.

Although the blood of Abel and of all innocent victims of violence cries out to God, the precious blood of Christ, the sign of his self-gift (Jn. 13:1), "speaks more eloquently" (Heb. 12:24). It reveals the value of human life in the eyes of God, who for the sake of life gave his only Son, "that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). This is the basis of the absolute certainty that, according to God's plan, the victory will belong to life. In fact there are already signs of this victory, signs of hope, sometimes more hidden, less obtrusive, but significant: families which freely accept abandoned children and older people; volunteer work in the service of life; movements and programs of social consciousness raising in support of life; generous and respectful involvement in the medical profession and in scientific research; sensitivity to bioethical questions and ecology; a growing aversion to the death penalty. Above all, the daily gestures of welcome, sacrifice and selfless concern shown to the "little ones" and to the most needy are spreading around the world "the civilization of life and of love."

In this dramatic conflict, which has lasted throughout history and is taking on new characteristics in our time, God's call is heard clearly and powerfully: "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil.... Therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Dt. 30:15, 19).

2. Life as Gift

The second chapter is in the form of a meditation on the Christian message regarding life. In fact, "the Gospel of life is something concrete and personal, for it

consists in the proclamation of the very person of Jesus" (No. 29). As St. Paul says, it was "our Savior Christ Jesus who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel" (2 Tm. 1:10).

The light of revelation, which reaches its fullness in Jesus Christ, confirms and completes all that human reason can grasp concerning the value of human life. Precious and fragile, full of promises and threatened by suffering and death, man's life on earth bears within itself that seed of immortal life planted by the Creator in the human heart (cf. No. 31). That life is the object of God's tender and intense love, especially in the poor, the weak and the defenseless: "Truly great must be the value of human life if the Son of God has taken it up and made it the instrument of the salvation of humanity!" (No. 33).

At this point we come to the decisive question, Why is life a good? Why is it always a good? The answer is simple and clear: because it is a gift from the Creator, who breathed into man the divine breath, thus making the human person the image of God. While sin darkens life by threatening it with death and throwing into doubt its nature as a gift, redemption, achieved in the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, redeems its worth, lifting it up to unheard-of heights in the prospect of the gift of eternal life. Gratuitously the Father calls each individual, in his Son, to partake of the fullness of divine life by becoming "sons and daughters in the Son." The sublime dignity of human life thus shines forth not only in the light of its origin, but even more so in the light of its destiny.

Earthly life, which is at once both relativized and given new value, opens up to the prospect of eternal life. It is not an absolute value in itself: It is entrusted to man as a beginning to be made fruitful for eternity as a first gift which will reach its fullness if, after the example of Christ and with his power, it succeeds in becoming a gift of love of God and of others. This is the truest and most profound meaning of life: The gift is accomplished in self-giving. "For 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). The martyrs freely gave their lives out of love, showing that our earthly existence is not something absolute to which we should cling at all costs. "No one, however, can arbitrarily choose whether to live or die; the absolute master of such a decision is the Creator alone, in whom 'we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28)" (No. 47).

3. Life as Responsibility

As a precious and fragile gift which

is meant to bear fruits of love, life is entrusted to man's responsibility. From its very beginning until its natural end, life is sacred and inviolable: It belongs to the Lord, it is under his special protection and individuals cannot dispose of it at their own whim. "From man in regard to his fellow man (the Lord) will demand an accounting for human life" (Gn. 9:5). This original truth, testified to by all of humanity's great religious and philosophical traditions, this truth which lies in the depths of every individual's conscience like an echo of the voice of the Creator, is also at the center of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. The commandment "you shall not kill," which expresses it in the form of a concise command, is at the heart of the Ten Commandments given at Sinai (cf. Ex. 34:28). In the New Testament, Jesus not only repeated this commandment as the first to be kept in order to enter into life (cf. Mt. 19:16-18), but also showed its positive implications (cf. Mt. 5:21ff), which involve the heart and which extend to everyone, to the point of loving even one's enemies (cf. Mt. 5:44). Thus, "only when people are open to the fullness of the truth about God, man and history will the words 'you shall not kill' shine forth once more as a good for man in himself and in his relations with others" (No. 48).

It is this commandment not to kill, in the light of the Gospel of life, that the third chapter of the encyclical seeks to put forward once more, applying it to the unprecedented situations in which life is being threatened today. The pope wishes to reaffirm the absolute and permanent value of the commandment not to kill which is at the heart of God's covenant with man. He shows that the commandment is not a limit but a gift, which invites freedom to follow the paths of respect, service and love of life. The negative formulation of the moral imperative indicates the outer limit which can never be crossed, but implicitly it encourages a positive and constructive attitude, one of commitment in favor of man.

After recalling certain traditional moral distinctions concerning the legitimacy of self-defense against an unjust aggressor and concerning capital punishment, of which morally justifiable applications today are said to be "very rare, if not practically nonexistent" (No. 56), the papal document proposes certain moral truths in relation to respect for human life.

In the first place it declares "the direct and voluntary taking of all innocent human life" as "always gravely immoral" (No. 57). This principle is then applied to abortion and euthanasia. Regarding procured abortion (defined as "the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a

human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth" [No. 58]), the encyclical affirms that "direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder" (No. 62). This moral judgment is also to be applied to forms of intervention on human embryos which, although carried out for purposes legitimate in themselves, inevitably involve the killing of those embryos, either in experimentation or their use and the use of human fetuses as "biological material" or as providers of organs or tissue for transplants (cf. No. 63). Euthanasia, which is defined as "an act or omission which of itself and by intention causes death with the purpose of eliminating all suffering," and is carefully distinguished from so-called "aggressive medical treatment" and from "methods of palliative care," is called "a grave violation of the law of God" (No. 65).

Here we are speaking of doctrinal affirmations of very high magisterial authority, presented with particular solemnity by the supreme pontiff. Exercising his own magisterial authority as the successor of Peter, in communion with the bishops of the Catholic Church, he "confirms" (or also, in the case of abortion, "declares") a doctrine "based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God," "transmitted by the church's tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium." In this connection, in the case of each of the three doctrinal formulations there is a significant reference in a note to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, which in Paragraph 25 declares that the bishops, "even though dispersed throughout the world, but preserving for all that among themselves and with Peter's successor the bond of communion," when "in their authoritative teaching concerning matters of faith and morals, they are in agreement that a particular teaching is to be held definitively," "proclaim infallibly the doctrine of Christ."

Pope John Paul II does not fail to mention the tragic circumstances and the pressures from the family, the living conditions and social environment which sometimes mark those very serious choices against life and thereby diminish the moral responsibility of the person making them. These choices are sometimes also cloaked with specious justifications and "false mercy," while choices in favor of life sometimes appear not only difficult but even heroic. It is for this reason that the pope is urging a proclamation of the Gospel concerning life, its sacred value and inviolability, the duty to respect and care for it, and its value even in suffering and in the face of death.

The relationship between 729

civil law and the moral law is next examined. Indeed, "one of the characteristics of present-day attacks on human life ... consists in the trend to demand a legal justification for them" (No. 68). The encyclical recognizes that the task of civil law is different and more limited than that of the moral law. Civil law cannot take the place of conscience or dictate moral norms, but it has the specific role of "ensuring the common good of people through the recognition and defense of their fundamental rights, and the promotion of peace and of public morality" (No. 71). Therefore, although it sometimes has to choose not to put a stop to something which, were it prohibited, would cause more serious harm, it can never presume to legitimize, as the right of individuals, the offense inflicted on other persons through the disregarding of so fundamental a right as the right to life. In this sense, while taking different situations into account, civil law must safeguard the moral foundation of justice and of respect for everyone's inviolable and inalienable rights, without which the will of the stronger replaces the import of the rights of each individual. Democracy cannot be defined simply by reference to the formal principle of the majority, but must be characterized by a moral basis of respect for all and especially for the rights of the weakest and the most defenseless, those who have no voice and no vote.

The legal norms legitimizing abortion and euthanasia, which are radically opposed to justice, the common good and the fundamental rights of the individual, lack authentic juridical validity. In the face of these laws, the right to conscientious objection at least must be recognized, this being a serious obligation for the Christian, who cannot formally cooperate in evil. Consequently, there remains the commitment of everyone to promote more just legislation, which will change laws contrary to the right to life and its inviolability.

4. Life as a Task to Be Promoted

But the commandment "you shall not kill" establishes only the point of departure of a journey to true freedom, a journey which must lead to the active promotion of life, the development of attitudes and modes of behavior which serve life. It is to this positive and constructive prospect that the fourth and final chapter of the document of Pope John

Paul II is devoted: "for a new culture of human life."

First of all, the pope points out that the "Gospel of life" is at the heart of the evangelizing mission of the church, which must proclaim Jesus, the "Word of life" (1 Jn. 1:1), the one in whom "the life was made manifest" (1 Jn. 1:2). The church, defined in a new and expressive way as "the people of life," has the task of proclaiming, celebrating and serving life.

Against doubts, skepticism, obscurity and falsehoods, it is a question of proclaiming in its entirety the joyful message of the value of life; the commandment "you shall not kill" is also part of this message. Ever nourished by the word of God, the church has the primary task of ensuring that the Gospel of life reaches the heart of every man and woman, and that it finds its way into the hidden recesses of the whole of society.

She is called also to celebrate the gift of life, considering it with a contemplative and grateful spirit in the light of God's love made manifest in his Son Jesus. The sacraments of the church in an eminent manner, but also the many rituals of various popular and cultural traditions as well as those of everyday life must be means of experiencing joy for this gift, means which help to sustain people in moments of trial and by which their gaze is fixed on the Creator, from whom life comes and to whom it returns.

The mission of the Christian and of the church on behalf of life is fulfilled through the service of charity because charity leads us "to show care for all life and for the life of everyone" (No. 87), with a profound attitude of solidarity in every condition and situation, without prejudice or discrimination. Mention is made of the extraordinary history of charity in the church, which introduced into society a host of organizations at the service of life. The Holy Father exhorts us to strengthen and continue today the numerous projects which have been undertaken in this regard, calling for creative innovation in responding adequately to new challenges. In the area of professional health care, volunteer services, education, social involvement and political commitment and in the face of complex demographic problems, it is a question of fostering mature attitudes and finding solutions which respect life.

In particular, at the center of attention must be the family, the "sanctuary of life," in which life is welcomed, nourished, brought up and supported, and taken care of in sickness. However, the family needs to be helped by a social context which is favorable to these values and by policies which promote its primary and irreplaceable role.

It is a question, the pope affirms, of bringing about a true transformation of culture: the promotion of a "culture of life," in which human freedom will find its authentic meaning by joining forces with truth, life and love. This culture needs new lifestyles which will show respect for the dignity of every individual, especially the weakest, which will recognize the value of human sexuality in the development of the person, and which will accept the mysterious meaning of suffering and of death. A very special task is entrusted to women, who are particularly close to the mystery of life, who are called to be its guardians and to reveal its fruitfulness when that task matures into relationships marked by unselfish giving and willing service. These are the demands of a "new feminism," which, free from individualism, will favor the culture of life. The pope addresses particularly moving words to women who have had abortions. He invites them to be open to repentance, with humility and trust (cf. No. 99). Prayer and fasting, finally, are the great resources which will bring about the purification of all hearts in this great undertaking of proclaiming the Gospel of life on behalf of the whole of human society and for the sake of peace (No. 101).

This important magisterial document of Pope John Paul II closes with a trusting appeal to Mary, the "mother of life." Contemplating the scene in the Book of Revelation of the struggle between the woman who is about to give birth and the dragon which sets a snare for the life of the child, the pope invites us to recognize that throughout history "life is always at the center of a great struggle" (No. 104). But in the mutual relationship between the motherhood of Mary and her own motherhood toward all men and women, the church finds a source of great hope. Mary is the "living word of consolation" on history's difficult journey: To her, with filial confidence, the pope entrusts the cause of life. ❖