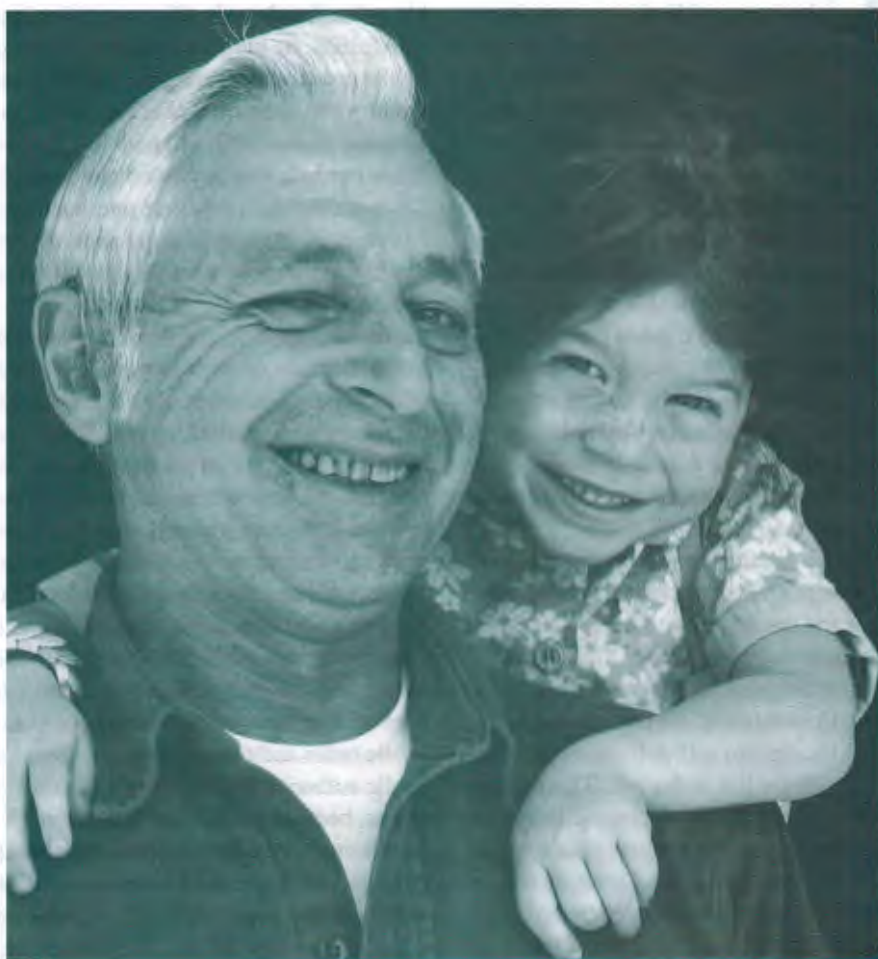


An abbreviated version of

The Gospel of Life

Pope John Paul II's Pro-life Encyclical



JEAN-CLAUDE LEJEUNE

today, forcefully condemned a number of crimes and attacks against human life:

“Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed.

“They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator.”

Unfortunately, this disturbing state of affairs, far from decreasing, is expanding. With the new prospects opened up by scientific and technological progress there arise new forms of attacks on the dignity of the human being.

The end result of this is tragic. Not only is the fact of the destruction of so many human lives, still to be born or in their final stage, extremely grave and disturbing. No less grave and disturbing is the fact that conscience itself, darkened as it were by such widespread conditioning, is finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish between good and evil in what concerns the basic value of human life.

Recognize positive signs

Many initiatives of help and support for people who are weak and defenseless have sprung up and continue to spring up in the Christian community and in civil society.

THE GOSPEL OF LIFE is at the heart of Jesus' message. Lovingly received by the Church, it is to be preached as “good news” to the people of every age and culture.

This encyclical is meant to be a

pressing appeal addressed to each and every person, in the name of God: *Respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life!*

The Second Vatican Council, in a passage which retains all its relevance

There are still many *married couples* who, with a generous sense of responsibility, are ready to accept children as “the supreme gift of marriage.” Nor is there a lack of *families* which, over and above their everyday service to life, are willing to accept abandoned children, boys and girls and teenagers in difficulty, handicapped persons, elderly men and women who have been left alone.

Medical science...continues to discover ever more effective remedies.... Physicians are being organized to bring quick relief to peoples affected by natural disasters, epidemics or wars.

Movements and initiatives to raise social awareness in defense of life have sprung up in many parts of the world. When such movements act resolutely, but without resorting to violence, they promote a wider and more profound consciousness of the value of life.



JIM WHITMER

The Bible: ‘Life is sacred’

Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves “the creative action of God.” “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer 1:5): *The life of every individual, from its very beginning, is part of God’s plan.* Expressions of awe and wonder at God’s intervention in the life of a child in its mother’s womb occur again and again in the Psalms (for example, Ps 22:10-11; 71:6; 139:13-14).

How can anyone think that even a single moment of this marvelous process of the unfolding of life could be separat-

ed from the wise and loving work of the Creator, and left prey to human caprice?

The wisdom and experience of the elderly are recognized as a unique source of enrichment for family and society.

In old age, how should one face the inevitable decline of life? *How should one act in the face of death? The believer knows that his life is in the hands of God:* “You, O Lord, hold my lot” (see Ps 16:5). Man is not the master of life, nor is he the master of death. In life and in death, he has to entrust himself completely to the “good pleasure of the Most High” (Sir 41:3-4), to his loving plan.

Killing in self-defense

To kill a human being, in whom the image of God is present, is a particularly serious sin. *Only God is the master of life!* Yet from the beginning, Christian reflection has sought a fuller and deeper understanding of God’s commandment.

There are in fact situations in which values proposed by God’s Law seem to involve a genuine paradox. This happens for example in the case of *legitimate defense*, in which the right to protect one’s own life and the duty not to harm someone else’s life are difficult to reconcile in practice. Certainly, the intrinsic value of life and the duty to love oneself no less than others are the basis of a *true right to self-defense*.

The demanding commandment of love of neighbor, set forth in the Old Testament and confirmed by Jesus, itself presupposes love of oneself: “You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*” (Mk 12:31). Consequently, no one can renounce the right to self-defense out of lack of love for life or for self. This can only be done in virtue of a heroic love which deepens and transfigures the love of self into a radical self-offering, in the spirit of the Gospel Beatitudes (see Mt 5:38-40). The sublime example of this self-offering is the Lord Jesus himself.

Moreover, “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.” Unfortunately it happens that the need to render the aggressor incapable of causing harm sometimes involves taking his life. This is the context in which to place the problem of the *death penalty*.

The death penalty question

There is a growing tendency, in Church and society, to demand that the death penalty be applied in a very limited way or even that it be abolished completely. The problem must be viewed in the context of a system of penal justice ever more in line with human dignity and thus, in the end, with God’s plan for man and society. The primary purpose of the punishment which society inflicts is “to redress the disorder caused by the offense.”

Public authority must redress the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender an adequate punishment for the crime, as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom. In this way authority also fulfills the purpose of defending public order and ensuring people’s safety, while at the same time offering the offender an incentive and help to change his or her behavior and be rehabilitated.

It is clear that, for these purposes to be achieved, *the nature and extent of the punishment* must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today, however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.

In any event, the principle set forth in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* remains valid: “If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person.”

The serious sin of abortion

Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable. The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an “unspeakable crime.”

But today, in many people’s con-

sciences, the perception of its gravity has become progressively obscured. The acceptance of abortion in the popular mind, in behavior and even in law itself, is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil.

Given such a grave situation, we need now more than ever to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to *call things by their proper name*. Procured abortion is *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 one more absolutely *innocent* could be imagined. In no way could this human being ever be considered an aggressor, much less an unjust aggressor! He or she is *weak*, defenseless, even to the point of lacking that minimal form of defense consisting in the poignant power of a newborn baby's cries and tears. The unborn child is *totally entrusted* to the protection and care of the woman carrying him or her in the womb.

It is true that the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as the decision to rid herself of the fruit of conception is not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family.

Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place. Nevertheless, these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, *can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being*.

The father of the child may be to blame, not only when he directly pressures the woman to have an abortion, but also when he indirectly encourages such a decision on her part by leaving her alone to face the problems of pregnancy.

"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."

I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means,

always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.

Euthanasia's tragedy

At the other end of life's spectrum, men and women find themselves facing the mystery of death.

When the prevailing tendency is to value life only to the extent that it brings pleasure and well-being, suffering seems like an unbearable setback, something from which one must be freed at all costs. Death is considered "senseless" if it suddenly interrupts a life still open to a future of new and interesting experiences.

By using highly sophisticated systems and equipment, science and medical practice today are able not only to attend to cases formerly considered untreatable and to reduce or eliminate pain, but also to sustain and prolong life even in situations of extreme frailty.

In this context the temptation grows to have recourse to *euthanasia*, that is, *to take control of death and bring it about before its time*, "gently" ending one's own life or the life of others. In reality, what might seem logical and humane, when looked at more closely, is seen to be *senseless and inhumane*.

Here we are faced with one of the more alarming symptoms of the "culture of death," which is advancing above all in prosperous societies, marked by an attitude of excessive preoccupation with efficiency and which sees the growing number of elderly and disabled people as intolerable and too burdensome. These people are very often isolated by their families and by society, which are organized almost exclusively on the basis of criteria of productive efficiency, according to which a hopelessly impaired life no longer has any value.

Euthanasia must be distinguished from the decision to forgo so-called "aggressive medical treatment," in other words, medical procedures which no longer correspond to the real situation of the patient, either because they are by now disproportionate to any expected results or because they impose an excessive burden on the patient and his family.

In such situations, when death is clearly imminent and inevitable, one can in conscience "refuse forms of treatment

AFTER ABORTION



Is There Forgiveness?

I would like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly.

If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord.

With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.

— POPE JOHN PAUL II
Gospel of Life, #99

that would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted"....To forgo extraordinary or disproportionate means is not the equivalent of suicide or euthanasia; it expresses acceptance of the human condition in the face of death.

Among the questions which arise is the use of various types of painkillers and sedatives for relieving the patient's pain when this involves the risk of shortening life....Pius XII affirmed that it is licit to relieve pain by narcotics, even when the result is decreased consciousness and a shortening of life, "if no other means exist, and if, in the given circumstances, this does not prevent the carrying out of other religious and moral duties."

In such a case, death is not willed or sought, even though for reasonable motives one runs the risk of it: There is simply a desire to ease pain effectively by using the analgesics which medicine provides. All the same, "it is not right to deprive the dying person of consciousness without a serious reason."

I confirm that euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person.

Physician-assisted suicide

To concur with the intention of another person to commit suicide and to help in carrying it out through so-called "assisted suicide" means to cooperate in, and at times to be the actual perpetrator of, an injustice which can never be excused, even if it is requested. In a remarkably relevant passage St. Augustine writes that "it is never licit to kill another: even if he should wish it, indeed if he request it, hanging between life and death...nor is it licit even when a sick person is no longer able to live."

Even when not motivated by a selfish refusal to be burdened with the life of someone who is suffering, euthanasia must be called a *false mercy*, and indeed a disturbing perversion of mercy. True compassion leads to sharing another's pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear. Moreover, the act of euthanasia appears all the more perverse if it is carried out by those, like

relatives, who are supposed to treat a family member with patience and love, or by those, such as doctors, who by virtue of their specific profession are supposed to care for the sick person even in the most painful terminal stages.

The choice of euthanasia becomes more serious when it takes the form of a *murder* committed by others on a person who has in no way requested it and who has never consented to it. The height of arbitrariness and injustice is reached when certain people, such as physicians or legislators, arrogate to themselves the power to decide who ought to live and who ought to die....The life of the person who is weak is put into the hands of the one who is strong; in society the sense of justice is lost, and mutual trust, the basis of every authentic interpersonal relationship, is undermined at its root.

The request which arises from the human heart in the supreme confrontation with suffering and death, especially when faced with the temptation to give up in utter desperation, is above all a request for companionship, sympathy and support in the time of trial.

Responding to unjust abortion and euthanasia laws

The value of democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes....The basis of these values cannot be provisional and changeable majority opinions, but only the acknowledgment of an objective moral law, the natural law written in the human heart....Even in participatory systems of government, the regulation of interests often occurs to the advantage of the most powerful, since they are the ones most capable of maneuvering not only the levers of power but also the formation of consensus. Democracy easily becomes an empty word.

Laws which legitimize the direct killing of innocent human beings through abortion or euthanasia are in complete opposition to the inviolable right to life proper to every individual; they thus deny the equality of everyone before the law.

Laws which authorize and promote abortion and euthanasia are therefore radically opposed not only to the good of the individual but also to the common good; as such they are completely lack-

ing in authentic juridical validity.

Abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a *grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection*. From the very beginnings of the Church, the apostolic preaching reminded Christians of their duty to obey legitimately constituted public authorities (see Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pt 2:13-14), but at the same time it firmly warned that "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Build a 'new culture of life'

On the eve of the Third Millennium, the challenge facing us is an arduous one: Only the concerted efforts of all those who believe in the value of life can prevent a setback of unforeseeable consequences for civilization.

What is urgently called for is a *general mobilization of consciences* and a *united ethical effort* to activate a *great campaign in support of life*. *All together, we must build a new culture of life*: new, because it will be able to confront and solve today's unprecedented problems affecting human life; new, because it will be adopted with deeper and more dynamic conviction by all Christians; new, because it will be capable of bringing about a serious and courageous cultural dialogue among all parties. ■

Editors' note: *This highly condensed version of the pope's 1995 encyclical The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae) by Catholic Update is not intended as a substitute for reading the complete document but as an overview of major points. We encourage readers to study the entire document, which can be obtained at many bookstores.*

Next: The Sacrament of Confirmation
(by Carol Luebering)

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