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## *EVANGELIUM VITAE* AND THE NEW CULTURE FOR LIFE

*Cain's indignant challenge, "Am I my brother's keeper?" is with us still. Evangelium Vitae proposes that the answer to the Cains of our day must be "Yes". In doing so, the Pope's latest encyclical stands as one of the great moral testaments of our time.*

Five years ago, in his great encyclical on the mission of the Church, *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II looked to the future and assured us that God is preparing "a great springtime for the Gospel." This year, with the publication of *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope reminds us that the Gospel proclaimed by the Church is "the Gospel of Life."

John Paul II has long been concerned about the global culture of violence and death that is emerging in our societies; a development which he rightly judges to be an "anti-culture" and "a conspiracy against human life." His solution is to call for a return to basic moral truths – truths which Europeans and Americans have long embraced but which now seem increasingly to be slipping away.

As a member of the United States Commission on Civil Rights I have had occasion to listen to hundreds of witnesses giving thousands of hours of testimony regarding the racial and ethnic tensions straining the fabric of American communities. Some of the most dramatic statements were given to the Commission within days of the 1992 riots in South Central Los Angeles in which more than fifty people were killed, and more than one billion dollars in property was destroyed. In one way or another, these witnesses echoed what a young Hispanic woman I met during that tour of Los Angeles told me: "Why can't we stop hating and just see each other as human beings?"

With the publication of his latest encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, "the Gospel of Life", Pope John Paul II has pointed the way out of the dilemma which government has been unable to answer. *Evangelium Vitae* urges us a return to three of the most fundamental of these moral truths. First, John Paul insists upon the recognition of the unsurpassed dignity of every human being, regardless of age, condition of dependency, and race. This especially is the case with regard to the weak and defenseless. Second, he maintains that it is always a violation of our human dignity to treat another person like an instrument or

as a means to an end. Every person must be seen as good in himself and never as an object for manipulation. Third, the Pope urges us to understand that the killing of an innocent human being can never be regarded as an answer whatever the circumstances.

The prescription proposed by *Evangelium Vitae* goes right to the foundation of our culture's moral and social illness. Today, the overriding question for both Europe and America is the search for a common moral ground in our society. Without such a basic moral consensus we cannot hope to find stability in the numerous communities in which we live: family and neighbourhood as well as nation. Politics no longer seems an adequate forum in which this moral meaning can be discovered. *Evangelium Vitae* proposes nothing less than a call to action for Catholics at all levels of our society to fill this moral void.

John Paul II begins his analysis at the beginning, with the *Book of Genesis*. He finds the root of our contemporary problem to be as old as the story of Cain and Abel. The Pope reminds us that human society, whether that of the modern industrial state or of a nomadic tribal family, remains vulnerable to a distorted concept of human freedom that can poison our most basic relationships. Cain's indignant challenge, "Am I my brother's keeper?" is with us still. *Evangelium Vitae* proposes that the answer to the Cains of our day must be "Yes". In doing so, the Pope's latest encyclical stands as one of the great moral testaments of our time. And yet John Paul insists that the Church's answer must be more than simply "yes". The Good News of the Gospel may never be reduced to merely a moral code or "system" for it is, above all, an encounter with the risen and living Lord.

John Paul II turns from the *Book of Genesis* to the *Gospel of John* and its theme, "I have come that they may have life." The Pope presents in *Evangelium Vitae* what may be seen as a moral commentary on St. John's Gospel. He writes that ultimately it is in the "glory" of the Lord suffering and crucified that the meaning of the communion of persons and brotherhood is revealed. This revelation from the Cross calls the Church to affirm always the goodness of human life and its immeasurable dignity. It calls on the Church to stand up always and insist that the lives of innocent human beings may never be directly taken. Further, it calls on all persons who share in God's "dominion" over His created world to exercise their "dominion" in a way consistent with the "dominion" exercised by Jesus on Calvary. In *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope presents a moral way of life which finds in the suffering of Jesus the ultimate meaning of community, brotherhood, and the dignity of the person.

In *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II wrote that "the cross has definitively restored his dignity to man and given back meaning to his life in the world" (No. 10). In his latest encyclical, John Paul II maintains that the example of Jesus obliges Christians to stand up always and insist that innocent persons may never be directly and intentionally killed and their dignity must be respected.

Christians take on the responsibility of making truly present to society the meaning of human dignity within the context of the mystery of the Redemption. This responsibility of the Christian witness to the dignity and sanctity of human life sets it apart from what may normally be expected within the customary discourse of the political community.

Not everyone in our pluralistic societies may agree with John Paul II when he applies this vision of human dignity to argue for the prohibition of abortion, euthanasia and suicide. But it would be short-sighted to reduce his vision to just one more argument in the present abortion controversy, or to dismiss it as mere idealism. Instead, John Paul has offered the context for a new dialogue on these questions which places a priority upon human dignity, community, service to others, and the sanctity of all human life.

Indeed, some may think it contradictory to consider *Evangelium Vitae* as offering any hope in building social consensus. After all, abortion has proven to be one of the most divisive issues in the life of many nations. Nonetheless, it will have to be resolved if an authentic sense of community is to be regained. In this regard, it is well to reflect upon how so many of our societies have arrived at the point where millions of unborn children are killed each year by abortion.

Twenty-five years ago, “California Medicine”, the journal of the California Medical Association, editorialized on the issue of morality and abortion. It stated that our traditional ethic of reverence for and recognition of the “intrinsic worth and equal value of every human life, regardless of its stage and condition..., is being eroded at its core and may eventually even be abandoned.” In its place was emerging a new “quality of life” ethic which rejected the absolute value of human life and which was willing to accept and even propose the killing of some human beings. The editorial went on to predict that this “quality of life” ethic would govern not only “birth control and birth selection” questions but would be “extended inevitably to death selection and death control.” But perhaps most importantly the editorial recognized that “this shift in public attitude has affected the churches... rather than the reverse.” *Evangelium Vitae’s* greatest accomplishment may be in meeting this challenge and re-evangelizing Catholics and other Christians on the question of the sanctity of all human life.

The challenge confronting Christianity within the increasingly postmodern culture of Europe and America is to escape the social pressures to reduce Christianity to a form of “meta-narrative” of the human experience, that is, as merely another way of proposing an ethical system constrictive of human liberty and self-development. Particularly in Europe, where recent historical developments have witnessed an unprecedented sacrificing of concrete and particular in human experience in the desire to achieve in various forms an artificially constructed universal ideology, Christianity must constantly distinguish itself as absolutely distinct. As such, Christianity provides the opportunity for the indi-

vidual human person to realize his own self-determination without sacrificing his own particularity in the face of absolute universality. Indeed, it is only in this way that the person may truly find and affirm his unique, unrepeatable individuality. At the same time, the Gospel of life offers society the authentic alternative from the radical individualism which has become the secular response to the extreme ideologies of the recent past. While unique, the human person is created *in* and *for* personal communion and can only realize his destiny and self-determination through communion with others.

The responsibility of the Church as an avenue to overcome this fundamental dilemma confronting the identity of the human person in contemporary culture was taken up by John Paul II in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*. There, quoting from *Gaudium et Spes* (No. 76) he wrote that the Church must be “a sign and a safeguard of the transcendence of the human person” and that this means a defence of the human person “in all his truth”, that is, not “the «abstract» man, but the real, «concrete,», «historical,» man” (*Redemptor Hominis*, No. 13). The Church must be willing to respond to each person because “each one is included in the mystery of the Redemption and with each one Christ has united himself for ever” (No. 13).

Since *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II has returned repeatedly to this theme of the mystery of the Incarnation as the reconciliation of the particular with the universal. For example, in *Redemptoris Missio* he wrote, “The Kingdom of God is not a concept, a doctrine, or a programme subject to interpretation, but it is before all else *a person* with the name Jesus of Nazareth” (No. 18). It is, of course, with the implications of this truth that *Veritatis Splendor* is concerned, and the structure of the encyclical itself becomes a kind of exposition of this central reality, beginning as it does with the encounter of Jesus with the rich young man. The first chapter of the encyclical focuses on the calling of the Christian as *sequela Christi* in which the call to discipleship “is not a matter only of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment. More radically, it involves *holding fast to the very person of Jesus*, partaking of his life and his dignity” (No. 19).

By selecting the dialogue of Jesus with the rich young man, John Paul II focuses *Veritatis Splendor* precisely on a central point of encounter between Christianity and contemporary culture, that is, Christianity’s ability to overcome our present cultural inability to deal adequately with the relationship between the particular and the universal. Should the Christian way of life have found that the young man’s obedience to the moral law was entirely sufficient, then it might appropriately be asked, as does John Paul II himself ask later in the encyclical, “how can obedience to universal and unchanging moral norms respect the uniqueness and individuality of the person and not represent a threat to his freedom and dignity?” (No. 85). As John Paul II maintains in *Veritatis Splendor*, Christianity’s answer to that question cannot be separated from the

reality that “Jesus himself is the living «fulfillment» of the law... He himself becomes a living and personal law, who invites people to follow him” (No. 15).

Chapter Two of *Veritatis Splendor* provides that this calling of the individual person by Jesus Christ is inseparable from the moral norm which itself resonates within the inner being of the human person. In this sense the very presence of Jesus Christ in the saving encounter with each person is “conditioned” by the moral norm which provides the “directive” for this encounter, and it is because of this that the human person is able to find both authentic self-possession and self-determination only with the *sequela Christi*. Thus, it is clear that analysis of *Veritatis Splendor* is in many ways a precondition to the promulgation of *Evangelium Vitae*. The moral context of the encounter between Jesus Christ and the person uncovers the brightness of personhood which directs itself toward a sacrificial service to others which participates in that mysterious sacrificial service of the Incarnation.

*Evangelium Vitae* opens with a recitation of the threats to human dignity which concerned the Second Vatican Council and were recorded in *Gaudium et Spes* as, among others, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, subhuman living conditions, torture and violations of conscience (No. 27). Reflecting on this passage, John Paul II observes that this global situation far from decreasing is, to the contrary, expanding in two ways: first, through new scientific and technological developments which threaten human dignity, and second, “a new cultural climate is developing and taking hold, which gives crimes against life a new and – if possible – even more sinister character” (No. 4). This situation writes the Pope, requires the reassertion of the immeasurable dignity of the human person and the inviolability of every human life proposed by the *Gospel of Life*. Yet the response by the Church to this widening crisis, asserted by *Evangelium Vitae*, must be one which is consistent with that proposed by the Council itself (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 22) as well as John Paul’s earlier encyclicals. In *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul writes:

Faced with the countless grave threats to life present in the modern world, one could feel overwhelmed by sheer powerlessness: good can never be powerful enough to triumph over evil! At such times the People of God, and this includes every believer, are called to profess with humility and courage their faith in Jesus Christ, “the Word of Life”. The *Gospel of Life* is not simply a reflection, however new and profound, on human life. Nor is it merely a commandment aimed at raising awareness and bringing about significant changes in society. Still less is it an illusory promise of a better future. The *Gospel of Life* is something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of *the very person of Jesus* (No. 29).

In their 1989 resolution on abortion the American bishops declared that “at this particular time, abortion has become the fundamental human rights issue for all men and women of good will.” *Evangelium Vitae*, in its entirety, can be seen as an exposition as to why it is that “abortion” has become the fundamental human rights issue of our time. John Paul II writes:

*The Gospel of Life* is for the whole of human society. To be actively pro-life is to contribute to the *renewal of society* through the promotion of common good. It is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop (No. 101).

How the Church fulfills its mission to safeguard the fundamental dignity and rights of the person was addressed by John Paul II in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*. There, in 1979, the Pope wrote that the Church safeguards human dignity by sharing more fully in the three-fold office of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King. Thus, by making Jesus Christ “newly present” within society the Church is “a sign and a safeguard of the transcendence of the human person.”

While Catholics in the United States remain a religious minority, the Catholic Church provides through its hospitals and health care facilities the largest network of non-governmental, not-for-profit health care system in America. At the same time, Catholic Charities USA is the largest non-governmental provider of social services to Americans – both Catholics and non-Catholics. Other Catholic volunteer organizations, such as the Knights of Columbus, during the past decade have provided over one billion dollars in direct contributions and services to thousands of charitable causes, including those which educate the public on the evils of abortion and care for women suffering the physical and emotion trauma which follows abortion.

In *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II returns to this theme and calls upon all Christians to participate in the ministry of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King by proclaiming, celebrating, and serving life. In this way, the People of God, as a “people of life and for life” may approach the Third Millennium as a beacon pointing toward the dignity and value of the person and the realization of the civilization of love.

It is clear that the evangelization of culture must proceed by way of the cooperative effort of many “cultures” of evangelization. Thus, public statements in favour of the right to life of the unborn, the elderly, and the ill and handicapped, must be accompanied by an experiential witness. There must exist, for example, centres of medical practice in which the Christian vision of the sanctity and dignity of human life is the foundation and animating principle of health care. There must be centres in which the experience of the truth of the human person exposes the falsehood of abortion and euthanasia. Thus, there must

continue an evangelization of the Catholic medical profession and Catholic health care institutions as foundational not only for a “new” evangelization, but also as the very practical precondition of “a culture of life and for life.” In *Evangelium Vitae* John Paul writes, “We need to begin with the renewal of a culture of life within Christian communities themselves” (No. 95).

*Evangelium Vitae* concludes with an affirmation of that most fundamental of human communities – the family. John Paul II has repeatedly said that the Church’s pastoral care of the family is at the centre of the new evangelization. In proclaiming the “Gospel of Life” the family has a specific and unique role as the “sanctuary of life.” It is in the family – through its unique communion of persons – that each person’s own understanding of human dignity and respect for life is developed. When the family is properly the “sanctuary” of life it becomes also the “sanctuary” of the *moral* life. Thus, John Paul writes in *Evangelium Vitae* that “the role of the family in building a culture of life is *decisive and irreplaceable*” (No. 92). Since the family as a “domestic church” participates in the three-fold ministry of Christ, it, too, “is summoned to proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life” (No. 92).

John Paul II concludes *Evangelium Vitae* with an “urgent call” for “a general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort” to build “a new culture of life” (No. 95). Early in the last decade we also heard a similar call from this Pope for a new “solidarity of consciences” with the result that the face of Europe was changed. That experience should give us both humility and courage to insist that the “culture of death”, no matter in what institutional form it is manifested, shall not prevail against the Gospel of Life.