

Pope John Paul 11

Encyclical Letter

THE GOSPEL OF LIFE

Evangelium Vitae

THE ROLE OF THE DOCTOR

The Encyclical Letter, “The Gospel of Life” has been addressed by the Supreme Pontiff John Paul 11 to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Men and Women Religious, lay faithful and all people of goodwill, on the value and inviolability of Human Life. There is no doubt that Pope John Paul 11 recognised the incomparable worth of the human person. “His life was made manifest”, and we say it with our gaze fixed on Christ, “The Word of Life.” (1 Jn 1:2)

“The Lord is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation.” God’s glory shines on the face of man: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

It is the Birth of the Saviour which is proclaimed as joyful news: “I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the City of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”

Every threat to human dignity and life must necessarily be felt in the heart of the Church; it cannot but affect her at the core of her faith in the Redemptive Incarnation of the Son of God.

Chapter 5 of *Evangelium Vitae* presents a “Precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability.” Death came into the world as a result of the devil’s envy and the sin of our first parents. God did not make death but death came into the world “as a result of the killing of Abel by his brother Cain” (Gen 3:17-19) The Lord’s question to Cain, “What have you done?” seems almost like an invitation addressed to Cain to go beyond the material dimension of his murderous gesture, in order to recognise in it all the gravity of the *motives* which occasioned it and the *consequences* which resulted from it.

On the occasion of the Eighth World Youth Day in Denver, it was said, “With time, the threats against life have not grown weaker, they are taking on vast proportions; they are not only threats coming from the outside, no, they are ‘scientifically and systematically programmed’ threats.” It cannot be denied that the mass media is often implicated in this conspiracy by lending credit to that culture which presents recourse to contraception, sterilisation, abortion and even euthanasia as a mark of progress and the victory of freedom, while depicting as enemies of freedom and progress, those positions which are reservedly pro-life. Sometimes it is proposed to eliminate malformed babies, the severely handicapped and disabled. There is an extraordinary increase and gravity of threats to the life of individuals and peoples in the present day, especially where life is weak and

defenceless. Poverty, hunger, endemic diseases, violence and war: new threats are emerging on an alarmingly vast scale.

Taking up the words of the Second Vatican Council, thirty years later they can be interpreted thus: “Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful-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 the human dignity and other things is infamous.” The fruit of the cooperation of the Episcopate of every country of the world is therefore meant to be a *precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability.*

There is a climate of widespread moral uncertainty which may in some way be explained by the multiplicity and gravity of today’s social problems. However, we are confronted by an even larger reality which can be expressed as a kind of “conspiracy against life, a structure of sin.” (Chapter 12) To guarantee at least a minimum of morality, the State must recognise the *right* of Physicians, Health-Care personnel and Directors of Hospitals, Clinics and Convalescent Facilities, to *refuse* to take part in the consultation, preparation and execution of these acts against life. Those who have recourse to conscience must be protected not only from legal penalties but also from any negative effects from legal, disciplinary, financial and professional spheres.

It was on Thursday morning 25 March 1995, that Pope John Paul's new Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* was presented to the journalists accredited to the Holy See. During the course of that presentation, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, spoke on the third chapter of the Pope's letter. Some extracts from Cardinal Ratzinger's translation, which was given in Italian, can now be considered. It concerned, first of all, an explanation of the meaning of the fifth commandment, the message of faith as a whole. At this stage of the Encyclical the Pope makes an authoritative statement, "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."

Developments in modern medicine that provide techniques to prolong life can be implemented to the point of absurdity. In the case of abortion, the Pope proposes two types of argument which are closely linked. "From the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life has begun which is neither that of the father or the mother." However, this fact, indisputable today, is countered by many with the statement that the initial embryo does indeed possess genetic but not multi-cellular identity. The document to which the Pope refers in his Encyclical, was written with the awareness of such reasoning. A combination of biological science and philosophy which ignores the unity of the body and soul, opens itself to an arbitrary reasoning between corporeity, individual and personal being.

The human individual must be a human person, but the Encyclical has introduced a second argument with the indisputable observation, "The mere probability that the human person is involved will suffice to justify an absolutely clear prohibition of any

intervention aimed at killing a human embryo. The second case of application of the fifth commandment is made in the authoritative statement, “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.” The Encyclical states that aggressive medical treatment is not a moral obligation at all... To forgo such treatment is not suicide or euthanasia but an “acceptance of the human condition in the face of death.” Euthanasia, abortion and the prolonging of human life unnecessarily by artificial means, are examples of man making himself the Lord of Life and Death.

The Catholic Church always supports good science working for a good ethical foundation and the Archdiocese of Sydney is delighted to collaborate with researchers to make inroads into the vitally important area of stem-cell research. The Sydney Archdiocese announced in July that a grant of \$100,000 was being made available to further research into adult stem cells. It was the second such grant. In 2002, Cardinal Pell had announced that a \$50,000 grant was being made available to a research team at Griffith University led by Professor Alan MacKay-Sim, whose team was conducting research into the development of therapeutics to utilize stem cells extracted from patients’ nasal lining, to replace cells lost to disease.

In AD2000 for 8 September 2005, Pope Benedict XVI recalled Europe’s deeply Christian roots and challenged the continent to return to them. Speaking before the Angelus prayer on 24 July, he reminded his audience that the day’s feast is that of the Apostle James and

recalled the recent feast days of St Brigid of Sweden and St Benedict. He challenged the audience to, “Return to yourself! Be yourself! Discover your origins, revive you roots.”

We are left with two things: A promise that we will have abundant life and the command, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”