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[Dioceses](#)

Pro-Life Activities

Search [GO](#)

THE GOSPEL OF LIFE AND ITS GREAT EXEMPLAR

By Helen M. Alvaré, Esq.

In the year of the 10th anniversary of the great encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, *The Gospel of Life*, its author, John Paul II, died. While no one, not even a pope, could alter the contents of the Gospel of Life, it can be said with all sincerity that this particular pope was capable of infusing this gospel with particular meaning, to the last moment of his papacy.

In the days surrounding the death of John Paul II, each of us saw the power of this Gospel with its good news: If we, like Christ, lay down our lives in service to others, there will burst forth love, joy and real freedom. A life lived this way – as gift – opens up as nothing else the full meaning of human life. People the world over could sense this, even if they could not articulate what it was that drew them to Rome – 3 million strong – or to their television sets at ridiculous hours of the early morning and late evening, to be with John Paul II as he died.

Not only by his life, but even in his dying, John Paul II proved that he was right when he said that this Gospel of Life, this good news about life lived in service to others, “has a profound and persuasive echo in the heart of every person,” Christians and non-Christians alike. So the 10th anniversary of *Evangelium Vitae*, and the death of one of its true exemplars, offers the people of God an excellent opportunity to stop and reflect. We should reflect on the power of a document that has inspired not only theologians and philosophers, but also journalists, politicians, and others to begin facing more honestly the “culture of death” and the possibilities for a “culture of life.”

This brief reflection will consider four aspects of *Evangelium Vitae*. First, the occasion for its appearance. Second, its central teachings on the relationship between the growth of a “culture of death” and the acceptance of destructive notions of human freedom. Third, the evidence from both faith and reason regarding the need to reject decisively the culture of death. And fourth, why we can and must continue to hope for and to build a culture of life.

THE OCCASION FOR *EVANGELIUM VITAE*

I will never forget my first brush with the text of *Evangelium Vitae*. It was given to me in New York by a representative of the Holy See, in advance of its U.S. publication, with the intention of allowing me to prepare to explain it to the American press. When I first read through it, and read its characterization of the modern conditions which had provoked its drafting, I felt as if John Paul II was speaking directly and even exclusively to the situation in the U.S. Of course he was

not, but the picture he painted of the degree and kinds of disrespect for life, and the rhetoric that accompany them, was uncannily descriptive of our own country. It was as if he knew every objection I had ever heard to a pro-life position from every corner of America. He knew how the opponents of life avoid talk of the morality of abortion and euthanasia, and talk instead about “democratic” process and legal “choices.” He described how human sexuality is increasingly understood in terms that are hedonistic, individualistic and fearful of procreation. And he did not spare us dramatic assessments of our situation: words like “tyranny,” “selfishness,” and “arbitrariness,” appear throughout *Evangelium Vitae* with some frequency. Furthermore, in a document of 105 paragraphs, only two – paragraphs 26 and 27 – specifically note positive signs of the times, such as increasing resistance to war and to the death penalty.

John Paul II summed up the disturbing confluence of factors provoking this encyclical in these words:

Here though we shall concentrate particular attention on another category of attacks, affecting life in its earliest and its final stages. ... It is not only that in generalized opinion these attacks tend no longer to be considered as ‘crimes’; paradoxically they assume the nature of ‘rights’. ... such attacks strike human life at the time of its greatest frailty, when it lacks any means of self-defence. Even more serious is the fact that...those attacks are carried out in the very heart of ... the family ...” (no. 11).

John Paul II also noted the additional credibility given to these attacks on life when they are approved democratically.

It was this confluence of outrages that led to the dramatic and comprehensive teaching on life that is *Evangelium Vitae*. One of its most important components was its dissection of the ideas about freedom that allow arguments against life to succeed in a society, even to the point where killing could become a “fundamental right” at law. This is the next aspect of *Evangelium Vitae* we take up.

REAL FREEDOM

No one who has ever encountered U.S. abortion and euthanasia debates could fail to notice that they revolve around the meaning of “freedom” and “rights.” Abortion proponents, in fact, have staked their whole argument on the phrases “freedom to choose” and the “right to choose.” Proponents of euthanasia and assisted suicide speak of a “right to die,” and the founder of the Hemlock Society (an organization now named “End of Life Choices”) titled one of his books *Freedom to Die*. But what could such freedoms mean?

In some of the most accessible philosophy ever written by a pope, John Paul II explains in *Evangelium Vitae* the characteristics of true freedom, and contrasts these with the marks of false freedom. He shows how proponents of killing innocent human life rely on notions of freedom which are ultimately barren, alienating and even destructive. In sum, they say that freedom is subjectively known, individually lived, and indifferent to God. John Paul II, on the other hand, writes that freedom must have reference to objective truth, must be lived in solidarity with others, and needs God. He says further that these marks of true freedom have application not only to Christians, but to all human persons, simply by virtue of how we are made.

If freedom “loses its essential link with the truth,” he wrote, a human being can end up taking “as the sole and indisputable point of reference for his own choices ... only his subjective and changeable opinion, or indeed, his selfish interest and whim” (no. 19) Achieving authentic freedom requires respecting the truth about human life – including the inherent illegitimacy of killing – and the right of every person to the means of meeting his or her basic human needs.

If freedom is lived without solidarity, without an “inherently relational dimension,” he wrote, it ends up “becoming the freedom of the ‘strong’ against the weak, who have no choice but to submit.” Every other human person becomes at least a stranger, possibly even an “enemy,” and life becomes a struggle to make one’s own interests alone prevail.

Finally, when freedom is without God, the “sense of man” ends up “threatened and poisoned.” Without God, human persons are unable to see themselves as “mysteriously different.” They are more inclined to regard themselves “merely as one more living being,” even a “thing.” They tend to regard life as their own property which can and must be brought under their control. In this context, suffering loses meaning, procreation and death lose their meaning, and people become inclined toward “practical materialism,” sexual exploitation and rampant consumerism. Ultimately, they can lose their ability to distinguish between good and evil, a development intimately related to their embrace of a culture of death.

If this version of freedom prevails in a nation like the United States, where it is claimed that laws are developed through democratic processes, supporters of abortion and euthanasia take all the more comfort that “freedom” has been served. But John Paul II assails this comfort with some of the strongest language in the encyclical: “Really, what we have here is only the tragic caricature of legality; the democratic ideal, which is only truly such when it acknowledges and safeguards the dignity of every human person, *is betrayed in its very foundations*”(no. 20, italics in original).

REASON, ENLIGHTENED BY FAITH

For many centuries, the Church has said that it relies upon both reason and revelation to address contemporary problems, and that these sources complement rather than contradict one another. *Evangelium Vitae* is a modern demonstration of this ancient insight. It makes a powerful case against destroying human life, even while recognizing that the Scriptures cannot be expected precisely to address every modern dilemma we presently face.

Regarding abortion, it reviews the genetic and other evidence for the value of even embryonic human life. It embraces the scientific details, and concludes with a tone of wonder: “How could anyone think that even a single moment of this marvelous process of the unfolding of life could be separated from the wise and loving work of the Creator, and left prey to human caprice?” (no. 44). It adds to this scientific evidence the many references in Scripture to the great gift of children and childbearing, and to God’s tremendous and loving concern for life in the womb.

Regarding euthanasia, *Evangelium Vitae* accurately describes the ethical questions raised by modern medical technology. It walks us through the distinctions between euthanasia and foregoing extraordinary medical care. It defines necessary palliative care. It describes the

temptations to hasten the death of the elderly and disabled in the name of efficiency, scarce resources, and the avoidance of suffering. But it reminds us never to lose sight of the human person who is the subject of medical interventions. And it puts before us what we also know to be true – that the meaning of true compassion is to “suffer with,” not to kill. It adds to this the evidence from Scripture on the dignity and reverence that ought to surround old age, and the concern that God has for both our souls and our bodies.

OUR TASK

The threats to life described in *Evangelium Vitae* are as potent today as they were ten years ago, possibly more so in some states and countries. The tasks set for us by this encyclical, however, are as powerful as the threats. For the many tasks are really one task – to live as a People of Life, for life. To conform our own lives to Jesus Christ so that the quintessential “man for others” becomes our way of life.

In a sentence that should by all rights stop readers in their tracks, John Paul II states in *Evangelium Vitae* that the “meaning of life” lies in “being a gift which is fully realized in the giving of self. This is the splendid message about the value of life which comes to us from the figure of the Servant of the Lord....” (no. 49, italics in original). We are, of course, to abide by the ancient commandment which instructs us “thou shalt not kill.” But we are to go much farther, as indicated in the New Testament extension of this commandment: to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. How we are to do this is the subject of the last section of *Evangelium Vitae*.

While of course the task of each person will differ according to his or her station in life, all are charged with some basic, crucial responsibilities. These include prayer and personal conversion to the good news about the sacredness of human life. Fasting and prayer, in fact, are called “the first and most effective weapons against the forces of evil” (no. 100). We are further called to maintain hope in the face of the enormous resources available to proponents of a culture of death. We are called to adopt a life-style which clearly communicates the primacy of “being” over “having” – one that makes room for the embrace of those who need us, not merely those we choose. Thereafter, whether we are women or men, intellectuals, citizens, physicians, teachers or women who’ve suffered from an abortion, we have specific contributions to make.

These practical assignments in the final portion of *Evangelium Vitae* ought not to be read as mere “add ons” to an otherwise lofty text. The pro-life movement in the United States should, among all movements, be acutely aware of how we owe our continued survival to the actions of one mother, one doctor, one active citizen at a time, a legacy of personal commitment that spans decades and defies all the predictions of our imminent demise.

CONCLUSION

The death of Pope John Paul II, or rather the celebration of his life we have now witnessed, is a call to continued conversion and action for the pro-life cause. In the very modern documents of this very modern pope – particularly in *Evangelium Vitae* – we came to understand, as never before, the high stakes of the current struggle between life and death. We also came to

understand, perhaps as never before, how to explain what we are fighting for. *Evangelium Vitae* has made philosophers, theologians, and aspiring saints out of ordinary citizens who struggle against the killing of vulnerable human beings. Its effects on us, and on our culture, will be felt for generations.

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PROGRAM MODELS

The Respect Life Office of the Archdiocese of New York, headed by Sr. Marie Regina of the Sisters of Life, has organized suggestions for parish/ school pro-life activities according to the four areas addressed in the USCCB's Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities. These have been adapted slightly for a national audience.

Education

Promote High School Leadership Day and other youth Respect Life retreats.

Initiate the Spiritual Adoption Program in your parish, youth group. For more information, visit <http://www.archnyc.org/flrl/SpiritualAdoption.htm>.

Borrow a Respect Life Video from the Family Life / Respect Life office for use at a parish function or for your school.

Donate Respect Life material/books to your school library.

Have a Respect Life speaker or panel discussion on one or more life issues.

Keep yourself informed by reading periodicals and Church documents, and pass them along to others.

Increase awareness of local crisis pregnancy centers and other organizations that respect life. Your diocesan Respect Life/Family Life office will be able to provide you with such a list.

Wear a pro-life symbol such as a rose or precious feet pin.

Set up a literature table or bulletin board near an entrance to your parish containing literature on life issues.

Publish bulletin announcements with Respect Life facts.

Hold a Mother's Day Rose/Flower sale.

Help organize and promote Family and Marriage Enrichment Programs and retreats.

Insert flyers in your parish bulletin.

Dedicate a memorial or shrine to the unborn in your parish. A sample dedication service can be found here <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/liturgy/monument.htm>.

Include Respect Life materials in materials for new parishioners.

Co-host an essay contest with your parish school.

Sponsor a child development display at parish events.

Pastoral Assistance

Familiarize yourself and your parish with post-abortion grief, Project Rachel, and the Entering Canaan Post-Abortion Healing Program, and promote these healing retreats. Visit www.hopeafterabortion.org for more information.

Sponsor an Advent Tree/Giving Tree, and collect gifts for a local pregnancy center or for persons in assisted living situations.

Host a Baby Shower - At any time, you may wrap presents for unborn babies and donate these gifts to a crisis pregnancy center or other agency.

Have a Respect Life Christmas card sale.

Volunteer at a Food Pantry or hold Food Collections for the needy.

Provide transportation for persons with special needs and/or companionship to those who are homebound.

Recruit volunteers for a local crisis pregnancy center.

Host a flea market, breakfast or spaghetti dinner to benefit a respect life cause.

Co-host a walk/run for life to support a local crisis pregnancy center or assisted living home.

Assist or donate to a shelter for persons living with AIDS.

Host an awareness day for persons with disabilities.

Public Policy Advocacy

Promote and sign up to receive news updates and action alerts from www.nchla.org which uses the internet and email to mobilize the faithful on crucial national issues.

Conduct letter writing campaigns or petition drives in response to public policy issues.

Have a list of e-mail addresses and phone numbers of persons who are interested in participating in advocacy efforts.

Sponsor a voter registration drive in the parish, school or community.

Encourage everyone 18 years of age to become informed about Respect Life issues and to vote.

Write letters to the editors of local newspapers on pro-life issues.

Participate in the Annual March for Life in Washington, D.C. or in the march at your state capital.

For more information about public policy advocacy, visit www.usccb.org/prolife and contact your state Catholic Conference, if any.

Prayer and Worship

Host a Holy Hour for Life (visit www.usccb.org/prolife/liturgy/holyhour.htm for a guide from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Participate in the Perpetual Rosary for Life

Host the National Night of Prayer on December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Sample flyers and a suggested schedule can be found on the website of the Archdiocese of New York: <http://www.archny.org/flrl/RespectLife.htm>

Dedicate a memorial or shrine to the unborn in your parish. A sample dedication service can be found at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/liturgy/monument.htm>

Participate in prayer vigils in front abortion clinics and side-walk counseling

Initiate a Spiritual Adoption Program (see <http://www.archny.org/flrl/SpiritualAdoption.htm>) for your parish, youth group or school.

Use pro-life prayers, intercessions and homilies at Mass, and include pro-life information in your Sunday bulletin (visit www.usccb.org/prolife/liturgy/wolarchive.htm for resources from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, updated monthly).

Coordinate Liturgy/Healing service for those who have lost a child.

Host Respect Life Mass with other parishes.

Host a Blessing of expectant mothers.

Host a Respect Life ecumenical prayer service.

RESOURCES

Teaching Documents

The Gospel of Life, Pope John Paul II, 1995. Encyclical letter on the inherent dignity and inviolability of human life, and describes how various people – e.g., priests, teachers, parents, legislators – can help build a culture of life. From: USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. No. 9540 (Eng.), No. 9541 (Span.), \$7.95. Available at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/tdocs/evangel/evangeli.htm>.

Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility, USCCB Administrative Committee. A variety of resources, including a video, are available at <http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/introduction.html>.

Faithful for Life: A Moral Reflection, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995. From: USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. No. 9550 (Eng.), No. 9551 (Span.), \$3.95. Available at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/tdocs/faithful.htm>.

Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics, NCCB, 1998. From: USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. No. 9825 (Eng. and Span.), \$2.95. Available at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/gospel.htm>.

Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2001. Comprehensive four-prong program on behalf of human life. From: USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, No. 0111 (Eng.), No. 0112 (Span.) \$1.95. Available at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/pastoralplan.htm>.

The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World. Pope John Paul II, 1989. Washington, D.C.: USCCB (\$8.95); also available from Pauline Books & Media. Available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html

Print

Choose Life: Workshops on the Encyclical Evangelium Vitae. Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998. Offers a four-session series of workshops plus a one full-day format. (\$14.95 Can.; approx. \$11 U.S.).

A Guide for the Study of Evangelium Vitae: What the Church Teaches. William F. Maestri. Boston: Pauline Books & Media (\$2.95).

Life Insight. Newsletter on abortion and related issues; 6 times a year; free, but donations are gratefully accepted. From: USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. Available at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/publicat/lifeinsight/index.htm>.

A People of Life, USCCB Committee for Pro-Life Activities, 2001. Attractive 8-panel color brochure on how to get involved in building a culture of life. From: USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, No. 0113 (Eng.), No. 0114 (Span.), \$10.00/package of 50.

A Prayer for Life (prayer card). From: USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. No. 0115 (Eng.), No. 0116 (Span.), \$10.00 / package of 100.

Second Look Project posters. Two separate, very attractive posters; can be viewed and downloaded at www.secondlookproject.org/posters. 11" x 17", English only. Cost: \$.75 each. Ideal for college campuses. Quantity discounts.

Study guide to *Evangelium Vitae* by Russell Shaw, available at <http://www.kofc.org/about/activities/culture/encyclicals/studyGuide.cfm>.

Audiovisual

Celebrating Life 1972-2002. CD-ROM with all Respect Life Program articles from 1972–2002. Indexed for easy reference. From: USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. No. 0212, \$9.95. Available Fall 2002.

Internet

Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops:
www.usccb.org/prolife.

National Committee for a Human Life Amendment (public policy and grassroots mobilization experts): www.nchla.org and www.endroe.org

The Holy See: www.vatican.va.

Zenit International News Agency: www.zenit.org/english . Daily e-mail news and statements from the Holy See.

Abortion Aftermath – supports the Church’s outreach to women and men suffering from an abortion, contact information for Project Rachel offices nationwide, professional articles on abortion aftermath, and women’s personal stories: www.hopeafterabortion.org.

Human cloning – Cuts past euphemisms to expose the facts about what some call “therapeutic cloning.” From Americans to Ban Cloning: www.cloninginformation.org.

RU-486 – factual medical and other information about the abortion drug: www.ru486facts.org.

Stem Cell Research – “Do No Harm” The Coalition of Americans for Research Ethics, provides up-to-date articles, testimony, news and research on stem cells: www.stemcellresearch.org

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