



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
AT THE COMMEMORATION OF THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE ENCYCLICAL "EVANGELIUM VITAE"**

Monday, 14 February 2000

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I would first like to thank the Pontifical Council for the Family, the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers and the Pontifical Academy for Life for having planned and organized this day commemorating the fifth anniversary of the publication of the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*. It is taking place within the framework of the Jubilee Year celebrations and is meant to be in prayerful harmony with the pilgrimage I will make to the Holy Land next month to venerate the places where "the Word became flesh" (*Jn* 1: 14).

I greet Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo and thank him for the sentiments he expressed to me in his address. I also greet all of you, participants in this reflection on a document which I consider central to the whole Magisterium of my Pontificate and in thematic continuity with the Encyclical *Humanae vitae* of Pope Paul VI of venerable memory.

2. In the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, whose publication was preceded by an Extraordinary Consistory and a consultation of Bishops, I started from a vision of hope for humanity's future. I wrote: "To all the members of the Church, the people of life and for life, I make this most urgent appeal, that together we may offer this world of ours new signs of hope, and work to ensure that justice and solidarity will increase and that a new culture of human life will be affirmed, for the building of an authentic civilization of truth and love" (n. 6).

Life, truth, love: words full of stimulating suggestions for human efforts in the world. They are rooted in the message of Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, but they are also impressed upon the hearts and yearnings of every man and woman.

What we have experienced within society, to which the Church has brought her message with renewed zeal in the past five years, enables us to point out two facts: on the one hand, the persistent difficulty which this message encounters in a world marked by serious signs of violence and decadence; on the other, the unchanging validity of this message and also the possibility of its being accepted in a society where the community of believers, with the concerned involvement of people of good will, courageously and unitedly expresses its commitment.

3. The evidence shows with increasing clarity how policies and laws opposed to life *are causing societies to decline*, not only morally but demographically and economically. The Encyclical's message can therefore be presented not only as true and authentic guidelines for moral rebirth, but also as a *reference-point for civil salvation*.

Thus, there is no reason for that type of defeatist mentality which claims that laws opposed to the right to life - those which legalize abortion, euthanasia, sterilization and methods of family planning opposed to life and the dignity of marriage - are inevitable and now almost a social necessity. On the contrary, they are a seed of corruption for society and its foundations.

The civil and moral conscience cannot accept this false inevitability, any more than the idea that war or interethnic extermination is inevitable.

4. The chapters of the Encyclical that address the relationship between the *civil and moral law* deserve great attention because of the growing importance they are destined to have in the restoration of social life. Pastors, the faithful and people of good will, especially if they are lawmakers, are asked for a renewed and united commitment to change unjust laws that legitimize or tolerate such violence.

No effort should be spared to eliminate legalized crime or at least to limit the damage caused by these laws, but with the vivid awareness of the radical duty to respect every human being's right to life from conception until natural death, including the life of the lowliest and the least gifted.

5. However, another extensive area of endeavour in the defence of life is open to the initiative of the believing community: this is the pastoral and educational field which the fourth part of the Encyclical discusses, offering particular guidelines for *building a new culture of life*. In the past five years, Dioceses and parishes have started many projects, but much remains to be done.

An authentic apostolate of life cannot be simply delegated to specific movements, however praiseworthy, that work in the sociopolitical field. It must always be an *integral part of the Church's*

pastoral ministry, whose task is to proclaim the "Gospel of life". For this to be effective, it is important to set up educational programmes, as well as services and special structures for guidance and support.

This requires first that pastoral workers be prepared in seminaries and theological institutes; it also calls for the correct and consistent teaching of morals in the various forms of catechesis and of conscience formation; lastly, it should be given practical expression by offering services that will enable anyone in trouble to find the necessary help.

Through joint educational activity in families and schools, efforts should be made so that these services become a "sign" and a message. Just as the community needs places of worship, it should sense the need to organize, especially at the diocesan level, educational and operational services to support human life, services that will be the fruit of charity and a sign of vitality.

6. The changing of laws must be preceded and accompanied by the *changing of mentalities and morals* on a vast scale, in an extensive and visible way. In this area the Church will spare no effort nor can she accept negligence or guilty silence.

I turn in particular to those young people who are sensitive to the values of our bodily nature and above all to the value of newly conceived life: may they be the first agents and beneficiaries of the work that will be done in the context of the apostolate of life.

I renew the appeal that I made in the Encyclical to the whole Church: to scientists and doctors, to teachers and families, as well as to those who work in the media, and especially to jurists and lawmakers. It will be through everyone's commitment that the right to life will be concretely applied in this world, which does not lack the necessary goods, if they are properly distributed. Only in this way will we overcome that sort of silent, cruel selection by which the weakest are unjustly eliminated.

May every person of good will feel called to play an active part in this great cause. May he be sustained by the conviction that every step taken in defending the right to life and in its concrete advancement is a step towards peace and civilization.

As I trust that this commemoration will stir new and zealous efforts to defend human life and to spread the culture of life, I invoke upon you all and upon those who work with you in this sensitive area the intercession of Mary "Dawn of the new world, Mother of the living" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 105), and cordially give you my Apostolic Blessing.

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