

# EVANGELIUM VITÆ: THE GOSPEL OF LIFE

## A STUDY GUIDE

by John Cavanaugh-O'Keefe

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P.O. Box 31  
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[www.PriestsForLifeCanada.com](http://www.PriestsForLifeCanada.com)

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This study guide has been provided online in both Adobe Acrobat (pdf) and Microsoft Word format. The self-study guide is divided into six weekly lessons. Each lesson will take various amounts of time, however, you can re-access the lesson online at any time or download it and work at your own pace. As each lesson is added (on a weekly bases) from Tuesday, October 6, 2009 to November 10, 2009, the previous lessons will remain online for the foreseeable future.

In this section, Part 1 of 6, of the Evangelium Vitae Study Guide, the introduction of the document will be covered. This will consist of:

1. The Index of the Study Guide
2. The Introduction to the Study Guide and Evangelium Vitae

The study guide has been designed so that you can work through the document on your own or within a group, however, should you have particular questions that are not answered, please send them to:

[ev@priestsforlifecanada.com](mailto:ev@priestsforlifecanada.com)

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# WEEK ONE

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# WEEK ONE

## Introduction to the Study Guide for *The Gospel of Life*

*The Gospel of Life, or Evangelium Vitae*, is a breathtakingly ambitious letter. Pope John Paul II, who helped to topple two dictatorships and one empire, has embarked on a new venture, working to lay the foundations of a new civilization. The last time someone in the West set out to do that was twelve or fifteen centuries ago.

It is appropriate that he be ambitious, since the threats to life in our time are unprecedented, in both the magnitude of the destruction and the bewildering array of new forms of assault. Since the publication of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, when the Church refused to cooperate with the sexual revolution, approximately 1.5 billion preborn children have been killed by surgical abortion, and as many or even more have been killed by abortifacients. Every major political power today is working to promote population control, expanding the culture of death globally. The medical profession, wounded to the core by its involvement in killing babies, is now preparing to kill the elderly. Scientists throughout the developed world have begun using human beings in the first weeks of life as guinea pigs.

This encyclical analyzes the problems, and outlines a response. Life is always good news; God made us in His image and invites us to live with Him forever. When we understand what God has done for us, it is good news, regardless of the troubles we face. In response to the Lord's gift, the Church proclaims, celebrates and serves this *Gospel of Life*.

*The Gospel of Life* is tightly linked to the preceding encyclical, *The Splendor of Truth*, which re-establishes firm foundations for moral theology.

**This study guide** is designed to help individuals or groups understand this great letter from the pope to all people of good will. The entire text of the encyclical is here, with all the notes. Each of the 105 sections of the encyclical is followed by questions.

The first questions, "understanding the text," are answered within the text on the same page (or in some cases, the immediately preceding page). Then there are "background" questions, designed to guide a serious student to more material, either in Church teaching or in history. There are brief answers provided for these questions in the "Answer Key."

The first two levels of questions are appropriate for study by an individual or by a study group. There is a third set of questions, "discussion" questions, for groups. These are designed to encourage readers to search their own experience and insight, and to consider old questions in a new light.

A patient and intelligent reader can read the pope's letter without help. It is written to "all people of good will." However, there is so much in it, packed so densely, that many people who want to read it will be grateful for a little help along the way.

John Cavanaugh-O'Keefe  
American Life League, Inc., March 1, 1996

# ***Evangelium Vitae* — Introduction**

**Encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* addressed by the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II to the bishops, priests and deacons, men and women religious, lay faithful, and all people of good will, on the value and inviolability of human life.**

**1. THE GOSPEL OF LIFE** is at the heart of Jesus' message. Lovingly received day after day by the Church, it is to be preached with dauntless fidelity as "good news" to the people of every age and culture.

At the dawn of salvation, it is the Birth of a Child which is proclaimed as joyful news: "I bring you good news of a 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" (*Lk 2* © 2008 American Life League, Inc. 2:10-11). The source of this "great joy" is the Birth of the Saviour; but Christmas also reveals the full meaning of every human birth, and the joy which accompanies the Birth of the Messiah is thus seen to be the foundation and fulfillment of joy at every child born into the world (cf. *Jn 16:21*).

When he presents the heart of his redemptive mission, Jesus says: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (*Jn 10:10*). In truth, he is referring to that "new" and "eternal" life which consists in communion with the Father, to which every person is freely called in the Son by the power of the Sanctifying Spirit. It is precisely in this "life" that all the aspects and stages of human life achieve their full significance.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

### ***Understanding the text***

- a. What does *Gospel* mean?
- b. Why does the Pope say that the *Gospel of life* is "at the heart of Jesus' message"?
- c. When Jesus spoke of *life*, did He mean life on earth or eternal life, or both, or something else?

### ***Background***

- d. Does the pope claim he is writing a fifth Gospel? Besides the four Gospels, what else is called *Gospel*?

### ***Discussion***

- Is every birth good news? Is every conception good news?
- When the Church speaks about life, does it sound like good news?

## *The incomparable worth of the human person*

2. Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the *greatness* and the *inestimable value* of human life even in its temporal phase. Life in time, in fact, is the fundamental condition, the initial stage and an integral part of the entire unified process of human existence. It is a process which, unexpectedly and undeservedly, is enlightened by the promise and renewed by the gift of divine life, which will reach its full realization in eternity (cf. 1 *Jn* 3:1-2). At the same time, it is precisely this supernatural calling which highlights the *relative character* of each individual's earthly life. After all, life on earth is not an "ultimate" but a "penultimate" reality; even so, it remains a *sacred reality* entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters.

The Church knows that this *Gospel of life*, which she has received from her Lord,<sup>1</sup> has a profound and persuasive echo in the heart of every person — believer and non-believer alike — because it marvelously fulfils all the heart's expectations while infinitely surpassing them. Even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize in the natural law written in the heart (cf. *Rom* 2:14-15) the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and can affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree. Upon the recognition of this right, every human community and the political community itself are founded.

In a special way, believers in Christ must defend and promote this right, aware as they are of the wonderful truth recalled by the Second Vatican Council: "By his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human being."<sup>2</sup> This saving event reveals to humanity not only the boundless love of God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (*Jn* 3:16), but also the *incomparable value of every human person*.

The Church, faithfully contemplating the mystery of the Redemption, acknowledges this value with ever new wonder.<sup>3</sup> She feels called to proclaim to the people of all times this "Gospel", the source of invincible hope and true joy for every period of history. *The Gospel of God's love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the Gospel of life are a single and indivisible Gospel*.

For this reason, man — living man — represents the primary and fundamental way for the Church.<sup>4</sup>

### **NOTES:**

1. The expression "Gospel of life" is not found as such in Sacred Scripture. But it does correspond to an essential dimension of the biblical message.
2. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

3. Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979), 10: AAS 71 (1979), 275.
4. Cf. *ibid.*, 14: loc. cit., 285.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What is the *fullness of life*?
- b. What does the Incarnation (Christ's becoming a human being) reveal about the value of every human person?

### *Background*

- c. What is the *natural law*? (Cf. *The Splendor of Truth*.)
- d. What is the "Gospel of the dignity of the person"?

### *Discussion*

- If you set aside any awareness of eternal life, what are the differences between human life and animal life? Are there any important differences?
- The pope says that man "represents the primary and fundamental way for the Church." Is this humanism?

### *New threats to human life [sections 3–4]*

**3.** Every individual, precisely by reason of the mystery of the Word of God who was made flesh (cf. *Jn* 1:14), is entrusted to the maternal care of the Church. Therefore every threat to human dignity and life must necessarily be felt in the Church's very heart; it cannot but affect her at the core of her faith in the Redemptive Incarnation of the Son of God, and engage her in her mission of proclaiming the *Gospel of life* in all the world and to every creature (cf. *Mk* 16:15).

Today this proclamation is especially pressing because of the extraordinary increase and gravity of threats to the life of individuals and peoples, especially where life is weak and defenseless. In addition to the ancient scourges of poverty, hunger, endemic diseases, violence and war, new threats are emerging on an alarmingly vast scale.

The Second Vatican Council, in a passage which retains all its relevance today, forcefully condemned a number of crimes and attacks against human life. Thirty years later, taking up the words of the Council and with the same forcefulness I repeat that condemnation in the name of the whole Church, certain that I am interpreting the genuine sentiment of every upright conscience: "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”.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

5 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 27.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Which people are of concern to the Church? Is it just Catholics, just Christians?
- b. List some of the grave threats to human life in this century.
- c. Is this concern about threats to life new in the Church, or has the Church expressed concern before?

### *Background*

- d. What was the Second Vatican Council?

### *Discussion*

- Attacks on life “do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury.” These are strong words. Given a choice, would you rather be murdered, or be a murderer? Would you rather be enslaved, or enslave others? Would you rather be the victim of genocide or the perpetrator?

**4.** 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. At the same time a new cultural climate is developing and taking hold, which gives crimes against life a *new and — if possible — even more sinister character*, giving rise to further grave concern: broad sectors of public opinion justify certain crimes against life in the name of the rights of individual freedom, and on this basis they claim not only exemption from punishment but even authorization by the State, so that these things can be done with total freedom and indeed with the free assistance of healthcare systems.

All this is causing a profound change in the way in which life and relationships between people are considered. The fact that legislation in many countries, perhaps even departing from basic principles of their Constitutions, has determined not to punish these practices against life, and even to make them altogether legal, is both a disturbing symptom and a significant cause of grave moral decline. Choices once unanimously considered criminal and rejected by the common moral sense are gradually becoming socially acceptable. Even certain sectors of the medical profession, which by its calling is directed to the defense and care of human life, are increasingly willing to carry out these acts against the person. In this way the very nature of the medical profession is distorted and contradicted, and the dignity of those who practice it is degraded. In such a cultural and legislative situation, the serious demographic, social and family problems which weigh upon many of the world's peoples and which require responsible and effective attention from national and international bodies, are left open to false and deceptive solutions, opposed to the truth and the good of persons and nations.

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, but 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.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

### ***Understanding the text***

- a. What is qualitatively new (in kind, not just in size) about attacks on life in our time?
- b. What major changes have occurred in law and in the medical profession in this century?
- c. Can the conscience be darkened?

### ***Background***

- d. What is the conscience? (Cf. *The Splendor of Truth*.)
- e. The "demographic, social and family problems" that weigh on people are "open to false and deceptive solutions." What groups or organizations are offering false solutions?

### ***Discussion***

- Can a crime become acceptable? To whom?
- When crimes become acceptable, and the law does not protect people from crime, what is law?

*In communion with all the Bishops of the world [sections 5–6]*

**5.** The *Extraordinary Consistory* of Cardinals held in Rome on 4–7 April 1991 was devoted to the problem of the threats to human life in our day. After a thorough and detailed discussion of the problem and of the challenges it poses to the entire human family and in particular to the Christian community, the Cardinals unanimously asked me to reaffirm with the authority of the Successor of Peter the value of human life and its inviolability, in the light of present circumstances and attacks threatening it today.

In response to this request, at Pentecost in 1991 I wrote a *personal letter* to each of my Brother Bishops asking them, in the spirit of Episcopal collegiality, to offer me their cooperation in drawing up a specific document.<sup>6</sup> I am deeply grateful to all the Bishops who replied and provided me with valuable facts, suggestions and proposals. In so doing they bore witness to their unanimous desire to share in the doctrinal and pastoral mission of the Church with regard to the *Gospel of life*.

In that same letter, written shortly after the celebration of the centenary of the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, I drew everyone's attention to this striking analogy: "Just as a century ago it was the working classes which were oppressed in their fundamental rights, and the Church very courageously came to their defense by proclaiming the sacrosanct rights of the worker as a person, so now, when another category of persons is being oppressed in the fundamental right to life, the Church feels in duty bound to speak out with the same courage on behalf of those who have no voice. Hers is always the evangelical cry in defence of the world's poor, those who are threatened and despised and whose human rights are violated."<sup>7</sup>

Today there exists a great multitude of weak and defenseless human beings, unborn children in particular, whose fundamental right to life is being trampled upon. If, at the end of the last century, the Church could not be silent about the injustices of those times, still less can she be silent today, when the social injustices of the past, unfortunately not yet overcome, are being compounded in many regions of the world by still more grievous forms of injustice and oppression, even if these are being presented as elements of progress in view of a new world order.

The present Encyclical, 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*, and at the same time a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person, in the name of God: *respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life!* Only in this direction will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness!

May these words reach all the sons and daughters of the Church! May they reach all people of good will who are concerned for the good of every man and woman and for the destiny of the whole of society!

**NOTES**

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Letter to all my Brothers in the Episcopate regarding the "Gospel of Life" (19 May 1991): *Insegnamenti* XIV, 1 (1991), 1293-1296.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*, p. 1294.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Who is responsible for writing this encyclical?
- b. When has the Church spoken out against injustice in the past?
- c. What was the great threat to human dignity 100 years ago? What is the great threat today?
- d. To whom is this encyclical addressed?
- e. Is this encyclical a reflection on the problems of the day or a call to action?

### *Background*

- f. What is the “authority of the Successor of Peter”?

### *Discussion*

- Have the people who profess Christianity been united in their defense of life? Is it possible to achieve such unity?

**6.** In profound communion with all my brothers and sisters in the faith, and inspired by genuine friendship towards all, I wish to *meditate upon once more and proclaim the Gospel of life*, the splendour of truth which enlightens consciences, the clear light which corrects the darkened gaze, and the unfailing source of faithfulness and steadfastness in facing the ever new challenges which we meet along our path.

As I recall the powerful experience of the Year of the Family, as if to complete the *Letter* which I wrote “to every particular family in every part of the world”,<sup>8</sup> I look with renewed confidence to every household and I pray that at every level a general commitment to support the family will reappear and be strengthened, so that today too—even amid so many difficulties and serious threats—the family will always remain, in accordance with God’s plan, the “sanctuary of life”.<sup>9</sup> 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.

## NOTES

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Families *Gratissimam sane* (2 February 1994), 4: AAS 86 (1994) 871.

<sup>9</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), 39 AAS 83 (1991), 842.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What appeal does the pope make?

### **Background**

- b. The pope says he is proclaiming “the Gospel of life, the splendour of truth which enlightens consciences . . .” What does this suggest about the relationship between the present encyclical and the previous encyclical? (Cf. *The Splendor of Truth*.)
- c. What is solidarity? (Cf. *On Social Concerns*.)
- d. What is the “sanctuary of life”? (Cf. *Centesimus Annus*.)

### **Discussion**

- What is a “culture of life”? What is a “civilization of truth and love”? How long does it take to build a civilization? Is this a serious proposal?

End of Lesson One: Introduction

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