

## Evangelium Vitae – Self Study Guide

# WEEK THREE

### Chapter Two

#### I Came That They May Have Life — The Christian Message Concerning Life

*“The life was made manifest and we saw it” (1 Jn 1:2): with our gaze fixed on Christ,  
“the Word of life”  
[Sections 29–30]*

**29.** 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, is called to profess with humility and courage its faith in Jesus Christ, “the Word of life” (1 Jn 1:1). 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*. Jesus made himself known to the Apostle Thomas, and in him to every person, with the words: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). This is also how he spoke of himself to Martha, the sister of Lazarus: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn 11:25-26). Jesus is the Son who from all eternity receives life from the Father (cf. Jn 5:26), and who has come among men to make them sharers in this gift: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

Through the words, the actions and the very person of Jesus, man is given the possibility of “knowing” the *complete truth* concerning the value of human life. From this “source” he receives, in particular, the capacity to “accomplish” this truth perfectly (cf. Jn 3:21), that is, to accept and fulfil completely the responsibility of loving and serving, of defending and promoting human life. In Christ, the *Gospel of life* is definitively proclaimed and fully given. This is the Gospel which, already present in the Revelation of the Old Testament, and indeed written in the heart of every man and woman, has echoed in every conscience “from the beginning”, from the time of creation itself, in such a way that, despite the negative consequences of sin, *it can also be known in its essential traits by human reason*. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, Christ

“perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making himself present and manifesting himself; through his words and deeds, his signs and wonders, but especially through his death and glorious Resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth. Moreover, he confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed: that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal”.<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

22 Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, 4.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. The *Gospel of life* is more than a reflection, a commandment or a promise. What is it?
- b. List some of the places in Scripture in which Jesus is identified as “life.”
- c. How can we know the truth about the value of human life?
- d. In a world that has experienced sin and is subject to death, what does Jesus offer?

### *Background*

- e. Can the *Gospel of life* be known to people who do not know Jesus? How?

### *Discussion*

- Is good powerful enough to triumph over all the violence of this century?

**30.** Hence, with our attention fixed on the Lord Jesus, we wish to hear from him once again “the words of God” (*Jn* 3:34) and meditate anew on the *Gospel of life*. The deepest and most original meaning of this meditation on what revelation tells us about human life was taken up by the Apostle John in the opening words of his First Letter: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us” (1:1-3).

In Jesus, the “Word of life”, God’s eternal life is thus proclaimed and given. Thanks to this proclamation and gift, our physical and spiritual life, also in its earthly phase, acquires its full value and meaning, for God’s eternal life is in fact the end to which our living in this world is directed and called. In this way the *Gospel of life* includes

everything that human experience and reason tell us about the value of human life, accepting it, purifying it, exalting it and bringing it to fulfilment.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Who speaks the “words of God” that constitute the *Gospel of life*?
- b. What does the revelation of the Incarnation tell us about human life?

### *Background*

- c. What was John trying to do in his “First Letter of John”?

### *Discussion*

- What gives our life its full value and meaning?

***“The Lord is my strength and my song and he has become my salvation” (Ex 15:2): life is always a good***

**31.** The fullness of the Gospel message about life was prepared for in the Old Testament. Especially in the events of the Exodus, the centre of the Old Testament faith experience, Israel discovered the preciousness of its life in the eyes of God. When it seemed doomed to extermination because of the threat of death hanging over all its newborn males (cf. *Ex* 1:15-22), the Lord revealed himself to Israel as its Saviour, with the power to ensure a future to those without hope. Israel thus comes to know clearly that *its existence* is not at the mercy of a Pharaoh who can exploit it at his despotic whim. On the contrary, Israel’s life is *the object of God’s gentle and intense love*.

Freedom from slavery meant the gift of an identity, the recognition of an indestructible dignity and *the beginning of a new history*, in which the discovery of God and discovery of self go hand in hand. The Exodus was a foundational experience and a model for the future. Through it, Israel comes to learn that whenever its existence is threatened it need only turn to God with renewed trust in order to find in him effective help: “I formed you, you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me” (*Is* 44:21).

Thus, in coming to know the value of its own existence as a people, Israel also grows in its *perception of the meaning and value of life itself*. This reflection is developed more specifically in the Wisdom Literature, on the basis of daily experience of the precariousness of life and awareness of the threats which assail it. Faced with the contradictions of life, faith is challenged to respond.

More than anything else, it is the problem of suffering which challenges faith and puts it to the test. How can we fail to appreciate the universal anguish of man when we meditate

on the Book of Job? The innocent man overwhelmed by suffering is understandably led to wonder: “Why is light given to him that is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hid treasures?” (3:20-21). But even when the darkness is deepest, faith points to a trusting and adoring acknowledgment of the “mystery”: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (*Job* 42:2).

Revelation progressively allows the first notion of immortal life planted by the Creator in the human heart to be grasped with ever greater clarity: “He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man’s mind” (*Ec* 3:11). This *first notion of totality and fullness* is waiting to be manifested in love and brought to perfection, by God’s free gift, through sharing in his eternal life.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. In Exodus (1:15-22), the Lord revealed himself to Israel as its Savior. What attitude toward life is revealed?
- b. In Exodus, what is the meaning of *freedom*?
- c. In Isaiah (44:21), the Lord revealed the identity and indestructible dignity of His people. What is the source of our life and identity?
- d. What is the great challenge to faith, and the universal anguish of man?
- e. The Book of Job is a reflection on suffering. What is Job’s response to suffering?

### *Background*

- b. The pope asserts that life is always a good, and finds support for this assertion in the Law, the Prophets, and in Wisdom Literature. Could he have found more supporting passages? Why did he stop with these?

### *Discussion*

- In Ecclesiastes (3:11), the beauty of all things is linked with eternity. Why?
- If you want to say that life is good, do you have to talk about suffering? Why (or why not)?

***“The name of Jesus . . . has made this man strong” (Acts 3:16): in the uncertainties of human life, Jesus brings life’s meaning to fulfillment [sections 32–33]***

**32.** The experience of the people of the Covenant is renewed in the experience of all the “poor” who meet Jesus of Nazareth. Just as God who “loves the living” (cf. *Wis* 11:26)

had reassured Israel in the midst of danger, so now the Son of God proclaims to all who feel threatened and hindered that their lives too are a good to which the Father's love gives meaning and value.

“The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them” (*Lk 7:22*). With these words of the Prophet Isaiah (35:5-6, 61:1), Jesus sets forth the meaning of his own mission: all who suffer because their lives are in some way “diminished” thus hear from him the “good news” of God's concern for them, and they know for certain that their lives too are a gift carefully guarded in the hands of the Father (cf. *Mt 6:25-34*).

It is above all the “poor” to whom Jesus speaks in his preaching and actions. The crowds of the sick and the outcasts who follow him and seek him out (cf. *Mt 4:23-25*) find in his words and actions a revelation of the great value of their lives and of how their hope of salvation is well-founded.

The same thing has taken place in the Church's mission from the beginning. When the Church proclaims Christ as the one who “went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (*Acts 10:38*), she is conscious of being the bearer of a message of salvation which resounds in all its newness precisely amid the hardships and poverty of human life. Peter cured the cripple who daily sought alms at the “Beautiful Gate” of the Temple in Jerusalem, saying: “I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (*Acts 3:6*). By faith in Jesus, “the Author of life” (*Acts 3:15*), life which lies abandoned and cries out for help regains self-esteem and full dignity.

The words and deeds of Jesus and those of his Church are not meant only for those who are sick or suffering or in some way neglected by society. On a deeper level they affect *the very meaning of every person's life in its moral and spiritual dimensions*.

Only those who recognize that their life is marked by the evil of sin can discover in an encounter with Jesus the Saviour the truth and the authenticity of their own existence. Jesus himself says as much: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (*Lk 5:31-32*).

But the person who, like the rich landowner in the Gospel parable, thinks that he can make his life secure by the possession of material goods alone, is deluding himself. Life is slipping away from him, and very soon he will find himself bereft of it without ever having appreciated its real meaning: “Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (*Lk 12:20*).

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Jesus served the poor. What was the good news that He proclaimed to them?
- b. When Peter cured a cripple at the gate of the Temple in Jerusalem (*Acts* 3:6), what did he give him besides the ability to walk?
- c. What was Jesus' attitude toward the rich who are smug about their wealth?

### ***Background***

- d. Was Jesus sought by the rich or the poor? Why?

### ***Discussion***

- The words of Jesus are for the sick, the suffering and the neglected, but also for those who recognize that their own lives are marked by evil. Do you think He was serving the right people?

**33.** In Jesus' own life, from beginning to end, we find a singular "dialectic" between the experience of the uncertainty of human life and the affirmation of its value. Jesus' life is marked by uncertainty from the very moment of his birth. He is certainly *accepted* by the righteous, who echo Mary's immediate and joyful "yes" (cf. *Lk* 1:38). But there is also, from the start, *rejection* on the part of a world which grows hostile and looks for the child in order "to destroy him" (*Mt* 2:13); a world which remains indifferent and unconcerned about the fulfilment of the mystery of this life entering the world: "there was no place for them in the inn" (*Lk* 2:7). In this contrast between threats and insecurity on the one hand and the power of God's gift on the other, there shines forth all the more clearly the glory which radiates from the house at Nazareth and from the manger at Bethlehem: this life which is born is salvation for all humanity (cf. *Lk* 2:11).

Life's contradictions and risks were fully accepted by Jesus: "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (*2 Cor* 8:9). The poverty of which Paul speaks is not only a stripping of divine privileges, but also a sharing in the lowliest and most vulnerable conditions of human life (cf. *Phil* 2:6-7). Jesus lived this poverty throughout his life, until the culminating moment of the Cross: "he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (*Phil* 2:8-9). It is precisely *by his death* that *Jesus reveals all the splendour and value of life*, inasmuch as his self-oblation on the Cross becomes the source of new life for all people (cf. *Jn* 12:32). In his journeying amid contradictions and in the very loss of his life, Jesus is guided by the certainty that his life is in the hands of the Father. Consequently, on the Cross, he can say to him: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!" (*Lk* 23:46), that is, my life. Truly great must be the value of human life if the Son of God has taken it up and made it the instrument of the salvation of all humanity!

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

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

- a. In the life of Jesus, what was certain and what was uncertain? Who accepted Him and who rejected Him?
- b. Did the power of God remove all uncertainties and insecurities from the life of His Son?

### ***Background***

- c. What is a *self-oblation*?
- d. Compare section 31 with sections 32-33. How do they complement each other? (What texts do they cite?)

### ***Discussion***

- The pope asserts that “it is precisely by his death that Jesus reveals all the splendour and value of life.” Explain.

***“Called . . . to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:28–29): God’s glory shines on the face of man***  
***[Sections 34–36]***

**34.** Life is always a good. This is an instinctive perception and a fact of experience, and man is called to grasp the profound reason why this is so.

*Why is life a good?* This question is found everywhere in the Bible, and from the very first pages it receives a powerful and amazing answer. The life which God gives man is quite different from the life of all other living creatures, inasmuch as man, although formed from the dust of the earth (cf. *Gen* 2:7, 3:19; *Job* 34:15; *Ps* 103:14; 104:29), *is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory* (cf. *Gen* 1:26-27; *Ps* 8:6). This is what Saint Irenaeus of Lyons wanted to emphasize in his celebrated definition: “Man, living man, is the glory of God”.<sup>23</sup> Man has been given a *sublime dignity*, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator: in man there shines forth a reflection of God himself.

The Book of Genesis affirms this when, in the first account of creation, it places man at the summit of God’s creative activity, as its crown, at the culmination of a process which leads from indistinct chaos to the most perfect of creatures. *Everything in creation is ordered to man and everything is made subject to him*: “Fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every living thing” (1:28); this is God’s command to the man and the woman. A similar message is found also in the other account of creation: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (*Gen* 2:15). We see here a clear affirmation of the primacy of man over things; these are made subject to him and entrusted to his responsible care, whereas for no reason can he be made subject to other men and almost reduced to the level of a thing.

In the biblical narrative, the difference between man and other creatures is shown above all by the fact that only the creation of man is presented as the result of a special decision

on the part of God, a deliberation to establish *a particular and specific bond with the Creator*: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (*Gen 1:26*). *The life which God offers to man is a gift by which God shares something of himself with his creature.*

Israel would ponder at length the meaning of this particular bond between man and God. The Book of Sirach too recognizes that God, in creating human beings, “endowed them with strength like his own, and made them in his own image” (17:3). The biblical author sees as part of this image not only man’s dominion over the world but also *those spiritual faculties which are distinctively human*, such as reason, discernment between good and evil, and free will: “He filled them with knowledge and understanding, and showed them good and evil” (*Sir 17:7*). *The ability to attain truth and freedom are human prerogatives inasmuch as man is created in the image of his Creator, God who is true and just* (cf. *Dt 32:4*). Man alone, among all visible creatures, is “capable of knowing and loving his Creator”.<sup>24</sup> *The life which God bestows upon man is much more than mere existence in time. It is a drive towards fullness of life; it is the seed of an existence which transcends the very limits of time*: “For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity” (*Wis 2:23*).

## NOTES

23 “Gloria Dei vivens homo”: *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 20, 7: *SCh* 100/2, 648-649.

24 SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 12.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Is life always a good?
- b. What does the Book of Genesis say about life as a good?
- c. What does the Book of Sirach say about life as a good? What specific qualities are presented in Sirach as distinctively human?
- d. According to the Book of Wisdom, what aspect of God’s image is found in man?

### *Background*

- e. In all of the physical universe, which creatures are capable of knowing and loving the Creator?

### *Discussion*

- Why is life a good?

**35.** The Yahwist account of creation expresses the same conviction. This ancient narrative speaks of *a divine breath which is breathed into man* so that he may come to life: “The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (*Gen 2:7*).

The divine origin of this spirit of life explains the perennial dissatisfaction which man feels throughout his days on earth. Because he is made by God and bears within himself an indelible imprint of God, man is naturally drawn to God. When he heeds the deepest yearnings of the heart, every man must make his own the words of truth expressed by Saint Augustine: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”.<sup>25</sup>

How very significant is the dissatisfaction which marks man’s life in Eden as long as his sole point of reference is the world of plants and animals (cf. *Gen 2:20*). Only the appearance of the woman, a being who is flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones (cf. *Gen 2:23*), and in whom the spirit of God the Creator is also alive, can satisfy the need for interpersonal dialogue, so vital for human existence. In the other, whether man or woman, there is a reflection of God himself, the definitive goal and fulfilment of every person.

“What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?”, the Psalmist wonders (*Ps 8:4*). Compared to the immensity of the universe, man is very small, and yet this very contrast reveals his greatness: “You have made him little less than a god, and crown him with glory and honour” (*Ps 8:5*). *The glory of God shines on the face of man*. In man the Creator finds his rest, as Saint Ambrose comments with a sense of awe: “The sixth day is finished and the creation of the world ends with the formation of that masterpiece which is man, who exercises dominion over all living creatures and is as it were the crown of the universe and the supreme beauty of every created being. Truly we should maintain a reverential silence, since the Lord rested from every work he had undertaken in the world. He rested then in the depths of man, he rested in man’s mind and in his thought; after all, he had created man endowed with reason, capable of imitating him, of emulating his virtue, of hungering for heavenly graces. In these his gifts God reposes, who has said: ‘Upon whom shall I rest, if not upon the one who is humble, contrite in spirit and trembles at my word?’ (*Is 66:1-2*). I thank the Lord our God who has created so wonderful a work in which to take his rest”.<sup>26</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>25</sup> *Confessions*, I, 1: CCL 27, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Exameron*, VI, 75-76: CSEL 32, 260-261.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What is the relationship between *spirit* and *breath* in Genesis?

- b. What do men and women see in each other, according to the Pope?
- c. St. Ambrose, commenting on the account of creation in Genesis, talked about God resting on the seventh day.
- d. According to St. Ambrose, where does God rest?

**Background**

- e. d. What is the “Yahwist account of creation”?
- f. e. Who was St. Ambrose?

**Discussion**

- When you ignore God, does that make man appear more important or less important? Explain.
- Compare Psalm 8 and the Magnificat (*Lk 1:46-55*). What gives a modest girl the confidence to say that people will talk about her with admiration for the rest of history?

**36.** Unfortunately, God’s marvelous plan was marred by the appearance of sin in history. Through sin, man rebels against his Creator and ends up by *worshipping creatures*: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (*Rom 1:25*). As a result man not only deforms the image of God in his own person, but is tempted to offences against it in others as well, replacing relationships of communion by attitudes of distrust, indifference, hostility and even murderous hatred. When *God* is not acknowledged *as God*, the profound meaning of man is betrayed and communion between people is compromised.

In the life of man, God’s image shines forth anew and is again revealed in all its fullness at the coming of the Son of God in human flesh. “Christ is the image of the invisible God” (*Col 1:15*), he “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature” (*Heb 1:3*). He is the perfect image of the Father.

The plan of life given to the first Adam finds at last its fulfilment in Christ. Whereas the disobedience of Adam had ruined and marred God’s plan for human life and introduced death into the world, the redemptive obedience of Christ is the source of grace poured out upon the human race, opening wide to everyone the gates of the kingdom of life (cf. *Rom 5:12-21*). As the Apostle Paul states: “The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (*1 Cor 15:45*).

All who commit themselves to following Christ are given the fullness of life: the divine image is restored, renewed and brought to perfection in them. God’s plan for human beings is this, that they should “be conformed to the image of his Son” (*Rom 8:29*). Only thus, in the splendour of this image, can man be freed from the slavery of idolatry, rebuild lost fellowship and rediscover his true identity.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What is the impact of sin in history?
- b. If man's life is distorted by sin, how can God's image be revealed in man?
- c. How do you "rediscover your true identity"?

### *Background*

- d. What is the "slavery of idolatry"?

### *Discussion*

- Does the glory of God shine on the face of a sinful man?

### ***"Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn 11:26): the gift of eternal life [sections 37–38]***

**37.** The life which the Son of God came to give to human beings cannot be reduced to mere existence in time. The life which was always "in him" and which is the "light of men" (*Jn 1:4*) consists in being begotten of God and sharing in the fullness of his love: "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (*Jn 1:12-13*).

Sometimes Jesus refers to this life which he came to give simply as "life", and he presents being born of God as a necessary condition if man is to attain the end for which God has created him: "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (*Jn 3:3*). To give this life is the real object of Jesus' mission: he is the one who "comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world" (*Jn 6:33*). Thus can he truly say: "He who follows me . . . will have the light of life" (*Jn 8:12*).

At other times, Jesus speaks of "eternal life". Here the adjective does more than merely evoke a perspective which is beyond time. The life which Jesus promises and gives is "eternal" because it is a full participation in the life of the "Eternal One". Whoever believes in Jesus and enters into communion with him has eternal life (cf. *Jn 3:15; 6:40*) because he hears from Jesus the only words which reveal and communicate to his existence the fullness of life. These are the "words of eternal life" which Peter acknowledges in his confession of faith: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (*Jn 6:68-69*). Jesus himself, addressing the Father in the great priestly prayer, declares what eternal life consists in: "This is eternal life, that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (*Jn 17:3*). To know God and his Son is to accept the mystery of the loving communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit into one's own life, which *even now* is open to eternal life because it *shares in the life of God*.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Describe the life that is given to human beings by the Son of God.
- b. When Jesus spoke of “life,” was He referring to the experience between conception and death, or to eternal life?
- c. When Jesus refers specifically to “eternal life,” does that mean “life beyond time”? What else, if anything, does it mean?

### *Background*

- d. All the quotations in this section and in section 38 are from the Gospel of John. Why?

### *Discussion*

- Christians, and especially perhaps the orthodox, have celebrated three attributes of God in a special way: God is holy, almighty and eternal. Why pick these three?

**38.** Eternal life is therefore the life of God himself and at the same time the *life of the children of God*. As they ponder this unexpected and inexpressible truth which comes to us from God in Christ, believers cannot fail to be filled with ever new wonder and unbounded gratitude. They can say in the words of the Apostle John: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. . . . Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:1-2).

*Here the Christian truth about life becomes most sublime.* The dignity of this life is linked not only to its beginning, to the fact that it comes from God, but also to its final end, to its destiny of fellowship with God in knowledge and love of him.

In the light of this truth Saint Irenaeus qualifies and completes his praise of man: “the glory of God” is indeed, “man, living man”, but “the life of man consists in the vision of God”.<sup>27</sup>

Immediate consequences arise from this for human life in its *earthly state*, in which, for that matter, eternal life already springs forth and begins to grow. Although man instinctively loves life because it is a good, this love will find further inspiration and strength, and new breadth and depth, in the divine dimensions of this good. Similarly, the love which every human being has for life cannot be reduced simply to a desire to have sufficient space for self-expression and for entering into relationships with others; rather, it develops in a joyous awareness that life can become the “place” where God manifests

himself, where we meet him and enter into communion with him. The life which Jesus gives in no way lessens the value of our existence in time; it takes it and directs it to its final destiny: “I am the resurrection and the life . . . whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (*Jn* 11:25-26).

## NOTES

27 “Vita autem hominis visio Dei”: *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 20, 7: *SCh* 100/2, 648-649.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What is the basis of the dignity of human life?
- b. When does eternal life begin?
- c. Does the perspective of eternity lessen the value of our existence in time?

### *Background*

- e. What is the pope’s attitude toward “self-expression”?

### *Discussion*

- Can a human being see God? When Moses led the Israelite people through the desert, they expected that the sight of God would destroy them: Were they right?
- Why does the pope describe life as a “place”? “Where” is heaven?

**“From man in regard to his fellow man I will demand an accounting” (Gen 9:5):  
reverence and love for every human life [sections 39–41]**

**39.** Man’s life comes from God; it is his gift, his image and imprint, a sharing in his breath of life. *God therefore is the sole Lord of this life*: man cannot do with it as he wills. God himself makes this clear to Noah after the Flood: “For your own lifeblood, too, I will demand an accounting . . . and from man in regard to his fellow man I will demand an accounting for human life” (*Gen* 9:5). The biblical text is concerned to emphasize how the sacredness of life has its foundation in God and in his creative activity: “For God made man in his own image” (*Gen* 9:6).

Human life and death are thus in the hands of God, in his power: “In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind”, exclaims Job (12:10). “The Lord brings to death and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up” (1 *Sam* 2:6). He alone can say: “It is I who bring both death and life” (*Dt* 32:39).

But God does not exercise this power in an arbitrary and threatening way, but rather as part of his *care and loving concern for his creatures*. If it is true that human life is in the

hands of God, it is no less true that these are loving hands, like those of a mother who accepts, nurtures and takes care of her child: “I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother’s breast; like a child that is quieted is my soul” (*Ps* 131:2; cf. *Is* 49:15; 66:12-13; *Hos* 11:4). Thus Israel does not see in the history of peoples and in the destiny of individuals the outcome of mere chance or of blind fate, but rather the results of a loving plan by which God brings together all the possibilities of life and opposes the powers of death arising from sin: “God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things that they might exist” (*Wis* 1:13-14).

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. How much authority does a person have over his own life?
- b. What is the foundation of the sacredness of life?
- c. “Human life is in the hands of God.” Describe these hands.

### *Discussion*

- The pope describes God’s plan as “loving,” not as “inscrutable” or “mysterious” or “arbitrary.” Is that a fair and accurate description?
- “*God . . . is the sole Lord of this life*”. Who is threatened or disturbed by this assertion of God’s sovereignty?

**40.** The sacredness of life gives rise to its *inviolability*, written from the beginning in *man’s heart*, in his conscience. The question: “What have you done?” (*Gen* 4:10), which God addresses to Cain after he has killed his brother Abel, interprets the experience of every person: in the depths of his conscience, man is always reminded of the inviolability of life—his own life and that of others — as something which does not belong to him, because it is the property and gift of God the Creator and Father.

The commandment regarding the inviolability of human life reverberates *at the heart of the “ten words” in the covenant of Sinai* (cf. *Ex* 34:28). In the first place that commandment prohibits murder: “You shall not kill” (*Ex* 20:13); “do not slay the innocent and righteous” (*Ex* 23:7). But, as is brought out in Israel’s later legislation, it also prohibits all personal injury inflicted on another (cf. *Ex* 21:12-27). Of course we must recognize that in the Old Testament this sense of the value of life, though already quite marked, does not yet reach the refinement found in the Sermon on the Mount. This is apparent in some aspects of the current penal legislation, which provided for severe forms of corporal punishment and even the death penalty. But the overall message, which the New Testament will bring to perfection, is a forceful appeal for respect for the inviolability of physical life and the integrity of the person. It culminates in the positive commandment which obliges us to be responsible for our neighbour as for ourselves: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (*Lev* 19:18).

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What is *inviolability*?

### *Background*

- b. In the Old Testament, particularly in the Book of Exodus, what value is placed on human life?
- c. Is the Old Testament view of the value of life the same as that of the Sermon on the Mount? What are the differences, if any?

### *Discussion*

- Is it fair to say that the pope sees the death penalty as a reflection of values based on the Old Testament and not on the Sermon on the Mount?

**41.** The commandment “You shall not kill”, included and more fully expressed in the positive command of love for one’s neighbour, is *reaffirmed in all its force by the Lord Jesus*. To the rich young man who asks him: “Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?”, Jesus replies: “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (*Mt 19:16, 17*). And he quotes, as the first of these: “You shall not kill” (*Mt 19:18*). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus demands from his disciples a *righteousness which surpasses* that of the Scribes and Pharisees, also with regard to respect for life: “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment’. But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (*Mt 5:21-22*).

By his words and actions Jesus further unveils the positive requirements of the commandment regarding the inviolability of life. These requirements were already present in the Old Testament, where legislation dealt with protecting and defending life when it was weak and threatened: in the case of foreigners, widows, orphans, the sick and the poor in general, including children in the womb (cf. *Ex 21:22; 22:20-26*). With Jesus these positive requirements assume new force and urgency, and are revealed in all their breadth and depth: they range from caring for the life of one’s *brother* (whether a blood brother, someone belonging to the same people, or a foreigner living in the land of Israel) to showing concern for the *stranger*, even to the point of loving one’s *enemy*.

A stranger is no longer a stranger for the person who must *become a neighbour* to someone in need, to the point of accepting responsibility for his life, as the parable of the Good Samaritan shows so clearly (cf. *Lk 10:25-37*). Even an enemy ceases to be an enemy for the person who is obliged to love him (cf. *Mt 5:38-48; Lk 6:27-35*), to “do good” to him (cf. *Lk 6:27, 33, 35*) and to respond to his immediate needs promptly and with no expectation of repayment (cf. *Lk 6:34-35*). The height of this love is to pray for

one's enemy. By so doing we achieve harmony with the providential love of God: "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (*Mt 5:44-45*; cf. *Lk 6:28, 35*).

Thus the deepest element of God's commandment to protect human life is the *requirement to show reverence and love* for every person and the life of every person. This is the teaching which the Apostle Paul, echoing the words of Jesus, addresses to the Christians in Rome: "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet', and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, '*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (*Rom 13:9-10*).

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What did Jesus say about the commandment "You shall not kill"?
- b. To protect the inviolability of life, is it enough to refrain from killing, or are there any additional requirements?
- c. What are the limits on the list of people whom God asks us to love?
- d. What is the meaning of *reverence*? What is *reverence for life*? What is the difference, if any, between *reverence for life* and *reverence for a person*?

### *Background*

- e. Where are the quotations in section 39 from? In section 40? In section 41?

### *Discussion*

- Are we really supposed to love our enemies? Is that possible?

***"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28): man's responsibility for life [sections 42–43]***

**42.** To defend and promote life, to show reverence and love for it, is a task which God entrusts to every man, calling him as his living image to share in his own lordship over the world: "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (*Gen 1:28*).

The biblical text clearly shows the breadth and depth of the lordship which God bestows on man. It is a matter first of all of *dominion over the earth and over every living creature*, as the Book of Wisdom makes clear: "O God of my fathers and Lord of mercy .

. . by your wisdom you have formed man, to have dominion over the creatures you have made, and rule the world in holiness and righteousness” (*Wis* 9:1, 2-3). The Psalmist too extols the dominion given to man as a sign of glory and honour from his Creator: “You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea” (*Ps* 8:6-8).

As one called to till and look after the garden of the world (cf. *Gen* 2:15), man has a specific responsibility towards *the environment in which he lives*, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity, of his life, not only for the present but also for future generations. It is the *ecological question*—ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and of other forms of life to “human ecology” properly speaking<sup>28</sup>—which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction, leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life.

In fact, “the dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to ‘use and misuse’, or to dispose of things as one pleases. The limitation imposed from the beginning by the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the prohibition not to ‘eat of the fruit of the tree’ (cf. *Gen* 2:16-17) shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity”.<sup>29</sup>

## NOTES

28 Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), 38: AAS 83 (1991), 840-841.

29 JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 December 1987), 34: AAS 80 (1988), 560.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What part of creation was placed under man’s authority?
- b. How much power over the world did God give to man? What are the limitations, if any?
- c. Does man have the authority to dispose of things as he pleases?
- d. What is the pope’s attitude toward environmentalism?

### *Background*

- e. What is *human ecology*? (Cf. *Centesimus Annus*, sections 38-39.)
- f. Read section 22 again. What is man’s relationship with nature?

## Discussion

- Some environmentalists believe that the “natural state” of a forest or an area of the world means that the area has never been affected by humans. Are there parts of creation that should be closed off from human contact?

**43.** A certain sharing by man in God’s lordship is also evident in the *specific responsibility* which he is given *for human life as such*. It is a responsibility which reaches its highest point in the giving of life *through procreation* by man and woman in marriage. As the Second Vatican Council teaches: “God himself who said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone’ (*Gen 2:18*) and ‘who made man from the beginning male and female’ (*Mt 19:4*), wished to share with man a certain special participation in his own creative work. Thus he blessed male and female saying: ‘Increase and multiply’” (*Gen 1:28*).<sup>30</sup>

By speaking of “a certain special participation” of man and woman in the “creative work” of God, the Council wishes to point out that having a child is an event which is deeply human and full of religious meaning, insofar as it involves both the spouses, who form “one flesh” (*Gen 2:24*), and God who makes himself present. As I wrote in my *Letter to Families*: “When a new person is born of the conjugal union of the two, he brings with him into the world a particular image and likeness of God himself: *the genealogy of the person is inscribed in the very biology of generation*. In affirming that the spouses, as parents, cooperate with God the Creator in conceiving and giving birth to a new human being, we are not speaking merely with reference to the laws of biology. Instead, we wish to emphasize that *God himself is present in human fatherhood and motherhood* quite differently than he is present in all other instances of begetting ‘on earth’. Indeed, God alone is the source of that ‘image and likeness’ which is proper to the human being, as it was received at Creation. Begetting is the continuation of Creation”.<sup>31</sup>

This is what the Bible teaches in direct and eloquent language when it reports the joyful cry of the first woman, “the mother of all the living” (*Gen 3:20*). Aware that God has intervened, Eve exclaims: “I have begotten a man with the help of the Lord” (*Gen 4:1*). In procreation therefore, through the communication of life from parents to child, God’s own image and likeness is transmitted, thanks to the creation of the immortal soul.<sup>32</sup> The beginning of the “book of the genealogy of Adam” expresses it in this way: “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and called them man when they were created. When Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth” (*Gen 5:1-3*). It is precisely in their role as coworkers with God *who transmits his image to the new creature* that we see the greatness of couples who are ready “to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Saviour, who through them will enlarge and enrich his own family day by day”.<sup>33</sup>

This is why the Bishop Amphilochius extolled “holy matrimony, chosen and elevated above all other earthly gifts” as “the begetter of humanity, the creator of images of God”.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, a man and woman joined in matrimony become partners in a divine undertaking: through the act of procreation, God's gift is accepted and a new life opens to the future.

But over and above the specific mission of parents, *the task of accepting and serving life involves everyone; and this task must be fulfilled above all towards life when it is at its weakest*. It is Christ himself who reminds us of this when he asks to be loved and served in his brothers and sisters who are suffering in any way: the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned . . . Whatever is done to each of them is done to Christ himself (cf. *Mt 25:31-46*).

## NOTES

30 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 50.

31 Letter to Families *Gratissimam sane* (2 February 1994), 9 AAS 86 (1994), 878; cf. PIUS XII, Encyclical

Letter *Humani Generis* (12 August 1950): AAS 42 (1950), 574.

32 "Animas enim a Deo immediate creati catholica fides nos retinere iubet": PIUS XII, Encyclical Letter

*Humani Generis* (12 August 1950): AAS 42 (1950), 575.

33 SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 50; cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*

(22 November 1981), 28: AAS 74 (1982), 114.

34 *Homilies*, II, 1; *CCSG* 3, 39.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Who is involved in procreation?
- b. What is the difference between the conception of a human and the conception of an animal?
- c. Who besides parents has the task of serving life, especially the lives of the weakest?

### *Background*

- d. Who was Bishop Amphilochius?
- e. Does God participate in the procreation of illegitimate children? In those uncommon instances when a child is conceived by rape, did God participate in the procreation of that child?

## *Discussion*

- Compare man's authority over creation to his authority over procreation. Is man the absolute lord, the servant, the steward, the heir or something else?
- Does your family tree include God? Is that what the *Letter to Families* says?

### ***“For you formed my inmost being” (Ps 139:13): the dignity of the unborn child*** *[sections 44–45]*

**44.** Human life finds itself most vulnerable when it enters the world and when it leaves the realm of time to embark upon eternity. The word of God frequently repeats the call to show care and respect, above all where life is undermined by sickness and old age. Although there are no direct and explicit calls to protect human life at its very beginning, specifically life not yet born, and life nearing its end, this can easily be explained by the fact that the mere possibility of harming, attacking, or actually denying life in these circumstances is completely foreign to the religious and cultural way of thinking of the People of God.

In the Old Testament, sterility is dreaded as a curse, while numerous offspring are viewed as a blessing: “Sons are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward” (*Ps* 127:3; cf. *Ps* 128:3-4). This belief is also based on Israel's awareness of being the people of the Covenant, called to increase in accordance with the promise made to Abraham: “Look towards heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them . . . so shall your descendants be” (*Gen* 15:5). But more than anything else, at work here is the certainty that the life which parents transmit has its origins in God. We see this attested in the many biblical passages which respectfully and lovingly speak of conception, of the forming of life in the mother's womb, of giving birth and of the intimate connection between the initial moment of life and the action of God the Creator.

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (*Jer* 1:5): *the life of every individual, from its very beginning, is part of God's plan.* Job, from the depth of his pain, stops to contemplate the work of God who miraculously formed his body in his mother's womb. Here he finds reason for trust, and he expresses his belief that there is a divine plan for his life: “You have fashioned and made me; will you then turn and destroy me? Remember that you have made me of clay; and will you turn me to dust again? Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese? You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and steadfast love; and your care has preserved my spirit” (*Job* 10:8-12). Expressions of awe and wonder at God's intervention in the life of a child in its mother's womb occur again and again in the Psalms.<sup>35</sup>

How can 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? Certainly the mother of the seven brothers did not think so; she professes her faith in God, both the source and guarantee of life from its very

conception, and the foundation of the hope of new life beyond death: “I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws” (2 *Mac* 7:22-23).

## NOTES

35 See, for example, Psalms 22:10-11; 71:6; 139:14.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. When is life most vulnerable?
- b. There are no explicit calls in Sacred Scripture to protect life at the beginning. Why not?
- c. In the Old Testament, what was the attitude toward sterility? Toward large families? Toward life before birth?
- d. In the Second Book of Maccabees, what is the attitude toward life before birth and life after death?

### *Background*

- e. Was there abortion anywhere in the Mediterranean world when the Old Testament was written?

### *Discussion*

- What does the Old Testament teach about the dignity of the preborn child?

**45.** The New Testament revelation confirms the *indisputable recognition of the value of life from its very beginning*. The exaltation of fruitfulness and the eager expectation of life resound in the words with which Elizabeth rejoices in her pregnancy: “The Lord has looked on me . . . to take away my reproach among men” (*Lk* 1:25). And even more so, the value of the person from the moment of conception is celebrated in the meeting between the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth, and between the two children whom they are carrying in the womb. It is precisely the children who reveal the advent of the Messianic age: in their meeting, the redemptive power of the presence of the Son of God among men first becomes operative. As Saint Ambrose writes: “The arrival of Mary and the blessings of the Lord’s presence are also speedily declared . . . Elizabeth was the first to hear the voice; but John was the first to experience grace. She heard according to the order of nature; he leaped because of the mystery. She recognized the arrival of Mary; he the arrival of the Lord. The woman recognized the woman’s arrival; the child, that of the

child. The women speak of grace; the babies make it effective from within to the advantage of their mothers who, by a double miracle, prophesy under the inspiration of their children. The infant leaped, the mother was filled with the Spirit. The mother was not filled before the son, but after the son was filled with the Holy Spirit, he filled his mother too”.<sup>36</sup>

## NOTES

36 *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, II, 22-23: CCL, 14, 40-41.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What stage of development had John reached at the time that Mary visited Elizabeth (*Lk* 1:39-56)?
- b. What stage of development had Jesus reached?
- c. According to St. Ambrose, who recognized whom at the Visitation? Who was filled with the Holy Spirit first?

### *Background*

- d. Who was St. Ambrose?
- e. How do section 44 and section 45 fit together? (What texts are quoted in each?)

### *Discussion*

- What does the New Testament teach about the dignity of the preborn child?

***“I kept my faith even when I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted’” (Ps 116:10): life in old age and at times of suffering [sections 46-47]***

**46.** With regard to the last moments of life too, it would be anachronistic to expect biblical revelation to make express reference to present-day issues concerning respect for elderly and sick persons, or to condemn explicitly attempts to hasten their end by force. The cultural and religious context of the Bible is in no way touched by such temptations; indeed, in that context the wisdom and experience of the elderly are recognized as a unique source of enrichment for the family and for society.

*Old age is characterized by dignity and surrounded with reverence* (cf. *2 Mac* 6:23). The just man does not seek to be delivered from old age and its burden; on the contrary his prayer is this: “You, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth . . . so even to old age and grey hairs, O God, do not forsake me, till I proclaim your might to all the

generations to come” (*Ps* 71:5, 18). The ideal of the Messianic age is presented as a time when “no more shall there be . . . an old man who does not fill out his days” (*Is* 65:20). In old age, how should one face the inevitable decline of life? *How should one act in the face of death? The believer knows that his life is in the hands of God:* “You, O Lord, hold my lot” (cf. *Ps* 16:5), and he accepts from God the need to die: “This is the decree from the Lord for all flesh, and how can you reject the good pleasure of the Most High?” (*Sir* 41:3-4). Man is not the master of life, nor is he the master of death. In life and in death, he has to entrust himself completely to the “good pleasure of the Most High”, to his loving plan.

In moments of *sickness* too, man is called to have the same trust in the Lord and to renew his fundamental faith in the One who “heals all your diseases” (cf. *Ps* 103:3). When every hope of good health seems to fade before a person’s eyes — so as to make him cry out: “My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass” (*Ps* 102:11)—even then the believer is sustained by an unshakable faith in God’s life-giving power. Illness does not drive such a person to despair and to seek death, but makes him cry out in hope: “I kept my faith, even when I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted’ ” (*Ps* 116:10); “O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you have brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the pit” (*Ps* 30:2-3).

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Does the Bible condemn euthanasia for the elderly?
- b. What is the attitude in Sacred Scripture toward old age?
- c. In the period of history when Sacred Scripture was written, was old age accompanied by a decline in life?

### *Background*

- d. Are the difficulties of old age new with the advent of modern medicine?

### *Discussion*

- In our time, do we associate old age with dignity?

**47.** The mission of Jesus, with the many healings he performed, shows *God’s great concern even for man’s bodily life*. Jesus, as “the physician of the body and of the spirit”,<sup>37</sup> was sent by the Father to proclaim the good news to the poor and to heal the brokenhearted (cf. *Lk* 4:18; *Is* 61:1). Later, when he sends his disciples into the world, he gives them a mission, a mission in which healing the sick goes hand in hand with the proclamation of the Gospel: “And preach as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons” (*Mt* 10:7-8; cf. *Mk* 6:13; 16:18).

Certainly *the life of the body in its earthly state is not an absolute good* for the believer, especially as he may be asked to give up his life for a greater good. As Jesus says: “Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (*Mk 8:35*). The New Testament gives many different examples of this. Jesus does not hesitate to sacrifice himself and he freely makes of his life an offering to the Father (cf. *Jn 10:17*) and to those who belong to him (cf. *Jn 10:15*). The death of John the Baptist, precursor of the Saviour, also testifies that earthly existence is not an absolute good; what is more important is remaining faithful to the word of the Lord even at the risk of one’s life (cf. *Mk 6:17- 29*). Stephen, losing his earthly life because of his faithful witness to the Lord’s Resurrection, follows in the Master’s footsteps and meets those who are stoning him with words of forgiveness (cf. *Acts 7:59-60*), thus becoming the first of a countless host of martyrs whom the Church has venerated since the very beginning.

No one, however, can arbitrarily choose whether to live or die; the absolute master of such a decision is the Creator alone, in whom “we live and move and have our being” (*Acts 17:28*).

## NOTES

37 SAINT IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 7, 2: *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F.X. Funk, II, 82.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. In the mission of Jesus, did He show any concern about man’s bodily life or just eternal life?
- b. Is life on earth an absolute good?
- c. What three examples does the pope give of people who offered their lives to God, showing that there is a good higher than life on earth?

### *Background*

- d. What is the relationship between section 46 and section 47? (What texts are cited?)
- e. Why didn’t the pope talk about aging in the New Testament? (How many elderly people are there in the New Testament?)
- f. Who was Saint Ignatius of Antioch?

### *Discussion*

- In our day, it seems that there is more scorn for a “martyr complex” than respect for martyrs. Why?

*“All who hold her fast will live” (Bar 4:1): from the law of Sinai to the gift of the Spirit [sections 49–49]*

**48.** Life is indelibly marked by *a truth of its own*. By accepting God’s gift, man is obliged to *maintain life in this truth* which is essential to it. To detach oneself from this truth is to condemn oneself to meaninglessness and unhappiness, and possibly to become a threat to the existence of others, since the barriers guaranteeing respect for life and the defence of life, in every circumstance, have been broken down.

*The truth of life is revealed by God’s commandment.* The word of the Lord shows concretely the course which life must follow if it is to respect its own truth and to preserve its own dignity. The protection of life is not only ensured by the specific commandment “You shall not kill” (*Ex 20:13; Dt 5:17*); *the entire Law of the Lord* serves to protect life, because it reveals that truth in which life finds its full meaning.

It is not surprising, therefore, that God’s Covenant with his people is so closely linked to the perspective of life, also in its bodily dimension. In that Covenant, God’s *commandment* is offered as *the path of life*: “I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of” (*Dt 30:15-16*). What is at stake is not only the land of Canaan and the existence of the people of Israel, but also the world of today and of the future, and the existence of all humanity. In fact, it is altogether impossible for life to remain authentic and complete once it is detached from the good; and the good, in its turn, is essentially bound to the commandments of the Lord, that is, to the “law of life” (*Sir 17:11*). The good to be done is not added to life as a burden which weighs on it, since the very purpose of life is that good and only by doing it can life be built up.

It is thus *the Law as a whole* which fully protects human life. This explains why it is so hard to remain faithful to the commandment “You shall not kill” when the other “words of life” (cf. *Acts 7:38*) with which this commandment is bound up are not observed. Detached from this wider framework, the commandment is destined to become nothing more than an obligation imposed from without, and very soon we begin to look for its limits and try to find mitigating factors and exceptions. Only when people are open to the fullness of the truth about God, man and history will the words “You shall not kill” shine forth once more as a good for man in himself and in his relations with others. In such a perspective we can grasp the full truth of the passage of the Book of Deuteronomy which Jesus repeats in reply to the first temptation: “Man does not live by bread alone, but . . . by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord” (*Dt 8:3; cf. Mt 4:4*).

It is by listening to the word of the Lord that we are able to live in dignity and justice. It is by observing the Law of God that we are able to bring forth fruits of life and happiness: “All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die” (*Bar* 4:1).

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. “Life is indelibly marked by *a truth of its own*.” Does that mean that I have my own truth and you have yours?
- b. What is the “law of Sinai”?
- c. What does God offer us if we keep His commandments?
- d. In Baruch 4:1, we read, “All who hold her fast will live.” To whom does the pronoun *her* refer?

### *Background*

- e. In the Old Testament, what is the *Law*? What texts are cited in this section?

### *Discussion*

- Is doing good an additional burden in a busy and difficult life?
- The pope asserts that when people ignore the “law of life,” it is hard to keep the commandment “You shall not kill.” Explain.

**49.** The history of Israel shows how *difficult it is to remain faithful to the Law of life* which God has inscribed in human hearts and which he gave on Sinai to the people of the Covenant. When the people look for ways of living which ignore God’s plan, it is the Prophets in particular who forcefully remind them that the Lord alone is the authentic source of life. Thus Jeremiah writes: “My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (2:13). The Prophets point an accusing finger at those who show contempt for life and violate people’s rights: “They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” (*Amos* 2:7); “they have filled this place with the blood of innocents” (*Jer* 19:4). Among them, the Prophet Ezekiel frequently condemns the city of Jerusalem, calling it “the bloody city” (22:2; 24:6, 9), the “city that sheds blood in her own midst” (22:3).

But while the Prophets condemn offences against life, they are concerned above all to awaken *hope for a new principle of life*, capable of bringing about a renewed relationship with God and with others, and of opening up new and extraordinary possibilities for understanding and carrying out all the demands inherent in the *Gospel of life*. This will only be possible thanks to the gift of God who purifies and renews: “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your

idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you” (*Ezek 36:25-26*; cf. *Jer 31:34*). This “new heart” will make it possible to appreciate and achieve the deepest and most authentic meaning of life: namely, that of 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: “When he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his life . . . he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied” (*Is 53:10, 11*).

It is in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth that the Law is fulfilled and that a new heart is given through his Spirit. Jesus does not deny the Law but brings it to fulfilment (cf. *Mt 5:17*): the Law and the Prophets are summed up in the golden rule of mutual love (cf. *Mt 7:12*). In Jesus the Law becomes once and for all the “gospel”, the good news of God’s lordship over the world, which brings all life back to its roots and its original purpose. This is the *New Law*, “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (*Rom 8:2*), and its fundamental expression, following the example of the Lord who gave his life for his friends (cf. *Jn 15:13*), is *the gift of self love for one’s brothers and sisters*: “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren” (*1 Jn 3:14*). This is the law of freedom, joy and blessedness.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Is it easy to be faithful to the law of life?
- b. In the Old Testament, who taught that the Lord alone is the source of life?

### *Background*

- c. In section 48, the pope draws from Exodus and Deuteronomy; in section 49, he draws from Jeremiah, Amos and Ezekiel. What is the significance of this?
- d. How important is *cleanliness* in Sacred Scripture? How is cleanliness linked to life?
- e. What is the meaning of *law* in the Letter to the Romans?

### *Discussion*

- What is the “deepest and most authentic meaning of life”?
- Is the “law of freedom” a contradiction? What does it mean?

***“They shall look on him whom they have pierced” (Jn 19:37): the Gospel of life is brought to fulfilment on the tree of the Cross [sections 50–51]***

**50.** At the end of this chapter, in which we have reflected on the Christian message about life, I would like to pause with each one of you to *contemplate the One who was pierced*

and who draws all people to himself (cf. *Jn* 19:37; 12:32). Looking at “the spectacle” of the Cross (cf. *Lk* 23:48) we shall discover in this glorious tree the fulfilment and the complete revelation of the whole *Gospel of life*.

In the early afternoon of Good Friday, “there was darkness over the whole land . . . while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (*Lk* 23:44, 45). This is the symbol of a great cosmic disturbance and a massive conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil, between life and death. Today we too find ourselves in the midst of a dramatic conflict between the “culture of death” and the “culture of life”. But the glory of the Cross is not overcome by this darkness; rather, it shines forth ever more radiantly and brightly, and is revealed as the centre, meaning and goal of all history and of every human life.

Jesus is nailed to the Cross and is lifted up from the earth. He experiences the moment of his greatest “powerlessness”, and his life seems completely delivered to the derision of his adversaries and into the hands of his executioners: he is mocked, jeered at, insulted (cf. *Mk* 15:24-36). And yet, precisely amid all this, having seen him breathe his last, the Roman centurion exclaims: “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (*Mk* 15:39). It is thus, at the moment of his greatest weakness, that the Son of God is revealed for who he is: *on the Cross his glory is made manifest*.

By his death, Jesus sheds light on the meaning of the life and death of every human being. Before he dies, Jesus prays to the Father, asking forgiveness for his persecutors (cf. *Lk* 23:34), and to the criminal who asks him to remember him in his kingdom he replies: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (*Lk* 23:43). After his death “the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (*Mt* 27:52). The salvation wrought by Jesus is the bestowal of life and resurrection. Throughout his earthly life, Jesus had indeed bestowed salvation by healing and doing good to all (cf. *Acts* 10:38). But his miracles, healings and even his raising of the dead were signs of another salvation, a salvation which consists in the forgiveness of sins, that is, in setting man free from his greatest sickness and in raising him to the very life of God.

On the Cross, the miracle of the serpent lifted up by Moses in the desert (*Jn* 3:14-15; cf. *Num* 21:8-9) is renewed and brought to full and definitive perfection. Today too, by looking upon the one who was pierced, every person whose life is threatened encounters the sure hope of finding freedom and redemption.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

### *Understanding the text*

- a. In this passage, who is talking to whom?
- b. The pope invites us to “*contemplate the One who was pierced*.” How much time does this take?

- c. When the curtain of the Temple was torn in two (*Lk 23:45*), what did that symbolize?
- d. What was the miracle of the serpent lifted up by Moses in the desert? How is the crucifixion like that?

### ***Background***

- e. In the encyclical so far, the pope has drawn upon the Law, the Prophets, Wisdom books, the account of Jesus' birth and the Sermon on the Mount. Now he turns our attention to the crucifixion. What is the significance of this? Is this a Gospel?

### ***Discussion***

- The pope says that by looking at the spectacle of the cross, “we shall discover in this glorious tree the fulfilment and the complete revelation of the whole *Gospel of life*.” Is this hyperbole? If the full revelation is here, why did he spend so much time on the Law and the Prophets?
- When Jesus is seen as most vulnerable and powerless, the Roman centurion exclaims, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” Explain.
- How does the death of Jesus shed “light on the meaning of the life and death of every human being”?

**51.** But there is yet another particular event which moves me deeply when I consider it. “When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, ‘It is finished’; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (*Jn 19:30*). Afterwards, the Roman soldier “pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (*Jn 19:34*).

Everything has now reached its complete fulfilment. The “giving up” of the spirit describes Jesus’ death, a death like that of every other human being, but it also seems to allude to the “gift of the Spirit”, by which Jesus ransoms us from death and opens before us a new life.

It is the very life of God which is now shared with man. It is the life which through the Sacraments of the Church—symbolized by the blood and water flowing from Christ’s side — is continually given to God’s children, making them the people of the New Covenant. *From the Cross, the source of life, the “people of life” is born and increases.* The contemplation of the Cross thus brings us to the very heart of all that has taken place. Jesus, who upon entering into the world said: “I have come, O God, to do your will” (cf. *Heb 10:9*), made himself obedient to the Father in everything and, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (*Jn 13:1*), giving himself completely for them.

He who had come “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (*Mk 10:45*), attains on the Cross the heights of love: “Greater love has no man

than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (*Jn* 15:13). And he died for us while we were yet sinners (cf. *Rom* 5:8).

In this way Jesus proclaims that *life finds its centre, its meaning and its fulfilment when it is given up*.

At this point our meditation becomes praise and thanksgiving, and at the same time urges us to imitate Christ and follow in his footsteps (cf. *1 Pt* 2:21).

We too are called to give our lives for our brothers and sisters, and thus to realize in the fullness of truth the meaning and destiny of our existence.

We shall be able to do this because you, O Lord, have given us the example and have bestowed on us the power of your Spirit. We shall be able to do this if every day, with you and like you, we are obedient to the Father and do his will.

Grant, therefore, that we may listen with open and generous hearts to every word which proceeds from the mouth of God. Thus we shall learn not only to obey the commandment not to kill human life, but also to revere life, to love it and to foster it.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. When Jesus was pierced with a spear, blood and water flowed out (*Jn* 19:34). What does that symbolize?
- b. What is the new life that began at the death of Jesus?
- c. What were the limits on the love that Jesus showed for mankind?

### *Background*

- d. In Exodus, what was the meaning of *freedom*? What is the meaning of *freedom* after the crucifixion?

### *Discussion*

- In the life and death of Jesus, was He *obedient* or *loving*? Did He see a tension between these two virtues?
- The pope invites us to “realize in the fullness of truth the meaning and destiny of our existence.” How?
- Chapter Two, from section 29 to section 51, explains the Christian message concerning life. How would you characterize this chapter:
  - analysis of a problem

- reflection in the light of revelation
- decision, an exercise of authority
- call to action
- Summarize Chapter Two: Explain why life is always a good.

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End of Lesson Three

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*Coming next week.*

**WEEK FOUR**

*If you would like to receive an E-mail reminder, please contact:*  
[ev@priestsforlifecanada.com](mailto:ev@priestsforlifecanada.com)