

## Evangelium Vitae – Self Study Guide

# WEEK FOUR

### Chapter Three

#### You Shall Not Kill — God’s Holy Law

##### ***“If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:17): Gospel and commandment***

52. “And behold, one came up to him, saying, ‘Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?’ ” (Mt 19:6). Jesus replied, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:17). The Teacher is speaking about eternal life, that is, a sharing in the life of God himself. This life is attained through the observance of the Lord’s commandments, including the commandment “You shall not kill”. This is the first precept from the Decalogue which Jesus quotes to the young man who asks him what commandments he should observe: “Jesus said, ‘You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal . . .’ ” (Mt 19:18).

*God’s commandment is never detached from his love:* it is always a gift meant for man’s growth and joy. As such, it represents an essential and indispensable aspect of the Gospel, actually becoming “gospel” itself: joyful good news. The *Gospel of life* is both a great gift of God and an exacting task for humanity. It gives rise to amazement and gratitude in the person graced with freedom, and it asks to be welcomed, preserved and esteemed, with a deep sense of responsibility. In giving life to man, God *demand*s that he love, respect and promote life. *The gift thus becomes a commandment, and the commandment is itself a gift.*

Man, as the living image of God, is willed by his Creator to be ruler and lord. Saint Gregory of Nyssa writes that “God made man capable of carrying out his role as king of the earth . . . Man was created in the image of the One who governs the universe. Everything demonstrates that from the beginning man’s nature was marked by royalty . . . Man is a king. Created to exercise dominion over the world, he was given a likeness to the king of the universe; he is the living image who participates by his dignity in the perfection of the divine archetype”.<sup>38</sup> Called to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue the earth and to exercise dominion over other lesser creatures (cf. *Gen 1:28*), man is ruler and lord not only over things but especially over himself,<sup>39</sup> and in a certain sense, over the life which he has received and which he is able to transmit through procreation, carried out with love and respect for God’s plan. Man’s *lordship* however is not absolute, but *ministerial*: it is a real reflection of the unique and infinite lordship of God. Hence man must exercise it with *wisdom and love*, sharing in the boundless wisdom and love of God. And this comes about through obedience to God’s holy Law: a free and joyful obedience (cf. *Ps 119*), born of and fostered by an awareness that the precepts of the Lord are a gift of grace entrusted to man always and solely for his good, for the preservation of his personal dignity and the pursuit of his happiness.

With regard to things, but even more with regard to life, man is not the absolute master and final judge, but rather—and this is where his incomparable greatness lies— he is the “minister of God’s plan”.<sup>40</sup>

Life is entrusted to man as a treasure which must not be squandered, as a talent which must be used well. Man must render an account of it to his Master (cf. *Mt* 25:14-30; *Lk* 19:12-27).

## NOTES

38 *De Hominis Opificio*, 4: PG 44, 136.

39 Cf. SAINT JOHN DAMASCENE, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 2, 12: PG 94, 920, 922, quoted in SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS,

*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Prologue.

40 PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* (25 July 1968), 13: AAS 60 (1968), 489.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. How did Jesus answer when He was asked, “What must I do to have eternal life?”
- b. Is the *Gospel of life* a gift or a task?
- c. What response is the *Gospel of life* likely to evoke in a truly free person?
- d. God presents us with gifts and also demands. Do God’s demands ruin the gifts?

### *Background*

- e. What is a *minister*?
- f. Who was St. Gregory of Nyssa?

### *Discussion*

- What is *free obedience*?

**“From man in regard to his fellow man I will demand an accounting for human life” (Gen 9:5): human life is sacred and inviolable [sections 53–57]**

**53.** “Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves ‘the creative action of God’, and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can,

in any circumstance, claim for himself the right to destroy directly an innocent human being”.<sup>41</sup> With these words the Instruction *Donum Vitae* sets forth the central content of God’s revelation on the sacredness and inviolability of human life.

*Sacred Scripture* in fact presents the precept “You shall not kill” as a divine commandment (*Ex* 20:13; *Dt* 5:17). As I have already emphasized, this commandment is found in the Decalogue, at the heart of the Covenant which the Lord makes with his chosen people; but it was already contained in the original covenant between God and

humanity after the purifying punishment of the Flood, caused by the spread of sin and violence (cf. *Gen* 9:5-6).

God proclaims that he is absolute Lord of the life of man, who is formed in his image and likeness (cf. *Gen* 1:26-28). Human life is thus given a sacred and inviolable character, which reflects the inviolability of the Creator himself. Precisely for this reason

God will severely judge every violation of the commandment “You shall not kill”, the commandment which is at the basis of all life together in society. He is the “*goel*”, the defender of the innocent (cf. *Gen* 4:9-15; *Is* 41:14; *Jer* 50:34; *Ps* 19:14). God thus shows that he does not delight in the death of the living (cf. *Wis* 1:13). Only Satan can delight therein: for through his envy death entered the world (cf. *Wis* 2:24). He who is “a murderer from the beginning”, is also “a liar and the father of lies” (*Jn* 8:44).

By deceiving man he leads him to projects of sin and death, making them appear as goals and fruits of life.

## NOTES

41 CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation *Donum Vitae* (22 February 1987), Introduction, No. 5: AAS 80 (1988), 76-77; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2258.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Why is human life sacred?
- b. Was the commandment “You shall not kill” revealed prior to the events on Mount Sinai?
- c. Who is the ultimate authority over the life of man?

### *Background*

- d. d. What is a *goel*?

### *Discussion*

- Who has the authority to state “the central content of God’s revelation” on an issue?

**54.** As explicitly formulated, the precept “You shall not kill” is strongly negative: it indicates the extreme limit which can never be exceeded. Implicitly, however, it encourages a positive attitude of absolute respect for life; it leads to the promotion of life and to progress along the way of a love which gives, receives and serves. The people of the Covenant, although slowly and with some contradictions, progressively matured in this way of thinking, and thus prepared for the great proclamation of Jesus that the commandment to love one’s neighbour is like the commandment to love God; “on these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (cf. *Mt* 22:36-40). Saint Paul emphasizes that “the commandment . . . you shall not kill . . . and any other commandment, are summed up in this phrase: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (*Rom* 13:9; cf. *Gal* 5:14). Taken up and brought to fulfilment in the New Law,

the commandment “You shall not kill” stands as an indispensable condition for being able “to enter life” (cf. *Mt* 19:16-19). In this same perspective, the words of the Apostle John have a categorical ring: “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 *Jn* 3:15).

From the beginning, the *living Tradition of the Church*—as shown by the *Didache*, the most ancient non-biblical Christian writing—categorically repeated the commandment “You shall not kill”: “There are two ways, a way of life and a way of death; there is a great difference between them . . . In accordance with the precept of the teaching: you shall not kill . . . you shall not put a child to death by abortion nor kill it once it is born . . . The way of death is this: . . . they show no compassion for the poor, they do not suffer with the suffering, they do not acknowledge their Creator, they kill their children and by abortion cause God’s creatures to perish; they drive away the needy, oppress the suffering, they are advocates of the rich and unjust judges of the poor; they are filled with every sin. May you be able to stay ever apart, O children, from all these sins!”<sup>42</sup>

As time passed, the Church’s Tradition has always consistently taught the absolute and unchanging value of the commandment “You shall not kill”. It is a known fact that in the first centuries, murder was put among the three most serious sins—along with apostasy and adultery—and required a particularly heavy and lengthy public penance before the repentant murderer could be granted forgiveness and readmission to the ecclesial community.

## NOTES

<sup>42</sup> *Didache*, I, 1; II, 1-2; V, 1 and 3; *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F.X. Funk, I, 2-3, 6-9, 14-17; cf. *Letter of Pseudo-Barnabas*, XIX, 5: *loc. cit.*, 90-93.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. How did Jesus teach that the negative commandments lead to a positive command?
- b. Does a murderer have eternal life?
- c. What is the *Didache*?
- d. Do the two great commandments of which Jesus spoke include “You shall not kill”?
- e. List some of the evils on the way of death as described in the *Didache*.
- f. Which sins were considered most serious in the early Church?

### *Background*

- g. Why does the pope recall the teaching of the “living Tradition of the Church”? What are the sources of revelation, according to the Catholic Church?

### *Discussion*

- Speaking of their attitude toward life, the pope says that the people of the Covenant “progressively matured,” and says that this growth was slow and “with

some contradictions.” What is he talking about? Did they hear God’s word and obey, or not?

**55.** This should not cause surprise: to kill a human being, in whom the image of God is present, is a particularly serious sin.

*Only God is the master of life!* Yet from the beginning, faced with the many and often tragic cases which occur in the life of individuals and society, Christian reflection has sought a fuller and deeper understanding of what God’s commandment prohibits and prescribes.<sup>43</sup> There are in fact situations in which values proposed by God’s Law seem to involve a genuine paradox.

This happens for example in the case of *legitimate defence*, in which the right to protect one’s own life and the duty not to harm someone else’s life are difficult to reconcile in practice. Certainly, the intrinsic value of life and the duty to love oneself no less than others are the basis of *a true right to self-defence*. The demanding commandment of love of neighbour, set forth in the Old Testament and confirmed by Jesus, itself pre-supposes love of oneself as the basis of comparison: “You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*” (*Mk* 12:31). Consequently, no one can renounce the right to self-defence out of lack of love for life or for self. This can only be done in virtue of a heroic love which deepens and transfigures the love of self into a radical self-offering, according to the spirit of the Gospel Beatitudes (cf. *Mt* 5:38-40). The sublime example of this self-offering is the Lord Jesus himself.

Moreover, “legitimate defence can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another’s life, the common good of the family or of the State”.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately it happens that the need to render the aggressor incapable of causing harm sometimes involves taking his life. In this case, the fatal outcome is attributable to the aggressor whose action brought it about, even though he may not be morally responsible because of a lack of the use of reason.<sup>45</sup>

## NOTES

43 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 2263-2269; cf. also *Catechism of the Council of Trent III*, Nos. 327-332.

44 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2265.

45 Cf. SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 64, a. 7; SAINT ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI, *Theologia Moralis*, 1. III, tr. 4, c. 1, dub. 3.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. God is the master of life. Despite that, are there times when a human has the authority to kill another human being?
- b. Does the Church recognize a “*true right to self-defence*”?
- c. For whom is “legitimate defence” a duty as well as a right?
- d. Does self-defence sometimes lead to the death of the aggressor? Who is responsible for this fatal outcome?

## ***Background***

- e. The Church has taught that there are some circumstances when it is permissible to kill another person. List the three circumstances.

## ***Discussion***

- How do you know when to defend yourself and when to follow Jesus' example of radical self-offering?

**56.** This is the context in which to place the problem of the *death penalty*. On this matter there is a growing tendency, both in the Church and in civil society, to demand that it be applied in a very limited way or even that it be abolished completely.

The problem must be viewed in the context of a system of penal justice ever more in line with human dignity and thus, in the end, with God's plan for man and society. The primary purpose of the punishment which society inflicts is "to redress the disorder caused by the offence".<sup>46</sup> Public authority must redress the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender an adequate punishment for the crime, as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom.

In this way authority also fulfils the purpose of defending public order and ensuring people's safety, while at the same time offering the offender an incentive and help to change his or her behaviour and be rehabilitated.<sup>47</sup>

It is clear that, for these purposes to be achieved, *the nature and extent of the punishment* must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today, however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.

In any event, the principle set forth in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* remains valid: "If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person".<sup>48</sup>

## **NOTES**

<sup>46</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2266.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> No. 2267.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

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

- a. What is the context in which to place the death penalty?
- b. In the teaching of the Church, is capital punishment ever permissible? If so, when?

- c. What is the primary purpose of the punishments society inflicts? Are there other purposes?
- d. If bloodless means of punishment are sufficient to defend against an assailant and to protect public order and safety is capital punishment permitted?
- e. The Church opposes capital punishment except in cases of “absolute necessity.” How is “absolute necessity” defined?

**Background**

- f. Is the penal system today organized better than the penal system of ages past? What has improved?

**Discussion**

- If it is permissible to execute criminals when that is the only way to defend society from them, is it permissible to execute criminals if that is the only way to deter them?

57. If such great care must be taken to respect every life, even that of criminals and unjust aggressors, the commandment “You shall not kill” has absolute value when it refers to the *innocent person*. And all the more so in the case of weak and defenceless human beings, who find their ultimate defence against the arrogance and caprice of others only in the absolute binding force of God’s commandment.

In effect, the absolute inviolability of innocent human life is a moral truth clearly taught by Sacred Scripture, constantly upheld in the Church’s Tradition and consistently proposed by her Magisterium. This consistent teaching is the evident result of that “supernatural sense of the faith” which, inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit, safeguards the People of God from error when “it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals”.<sup>49</sup>

Faced with the progressive weakening in individual consciences and in society of the sense of the absolute and grave moral illicitness of the direct taking of all innocent human life, especially at its beginning and at its end, *the Church’s Magisterium* has spoken out with increasing frequency in defence of the sacredness and inviolability of human life. The Papal Magisterium, particularly insistent in this regard, has always been seconded by that of the Bishops, with numerous and comprehensive doctrinal and pastoral documents issued either by Episcopal Conferences or by individual Bishops. The Second Vatican Council also addressed the matter forcefully, in a brief but incisive passage.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, *I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral*. This doctrine, based upon that unwritten law which man, in the light of reason, finds in his own heart (cf. *Rom 2:14-15*), is reaffirmed by Sacred Scripture, transmitted by the Tradition of the Church and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.<sup>51</sup>

The deliberate decision to deprive an innocent human being of his life is always morally evil and can never be licit either as an end in itself or as a means to a good end. It is in fact a grave act of disobedience to the moral law, and indeed to God himself, the author

and guarantor of that law; it contradicts the fundamental virtues of justice and charity. “Nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying. Furthermore, no one is permitted to ask for this act of killing, either for himself or herself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly. Nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action”.<sup>52</sup>

As far as the right to life is concerned, every innocent human being is absolutely equal to all others. This equality is the basis of all authentic social relationships which, to be truly such, can only be founded on truth and justice, recognizing and protecting every man and woman as a person and not as an object to be used. Before the moral norm which prohibits the direct taking of the life of an innocent human being “there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone. It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the ‘poorest of the poor’ on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal”.<sup>53</sup>

## NOTES

49 SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

50 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 27.

51 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 25.

52 CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration on Euthanasia *Iura et Bona* (5 May 1980), II: AAS 72 (1980), 546.

53 JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (6 August 1993), 96: AAS 85 (1993), 1209.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. The Church’s position on killing criminals and unjust aggressors is not absolute. What is the Church’s position on killing the innocent?
- b. The pope gives several sources for the teaching concerning the absolute inviolability of human life. List those authorities.
- c. After discussing exceptions and lining up authorities, the pope draws a conclusion about killing innocent human beings. State the conclusion.
- d. What authority does the pope claim for this statement?
- e. The pope applies the general principle to several specific situations or groups of people. List them.
- f. What are the exceptions to the moral norm that prohibits the direct taking of the life of an innocent human being?

### *Background*

- g. The pope states that the bishops and the Second Vatican Council addressed the matter. What is the significance of citing these authorities?

### ***Discussion***

- Why did the pope believe that it was necessary for him to teach that it is always immoral to kill innocent human beings?

### ***“Your eyes beheld my unformed substance” (Ps 139:16): the unspeakable crime of abortion [sections 58–63]***

**58.** Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable. The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an “unspeakable crime”.<sup>54</sup>

But today, in many people’s consciences, the perception of its gravity has become progressively obscured. The acceptance of abortion in the popular mind, in behaviour and even in law itself, is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, even when the fundamental right to life is at stake. Given such a grave situation, we need now more than ever to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to *call things by their proper name*, without yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation of self-deception. In this regard the reproach of the Prophet is extremely straightforward: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness” (*Is* 5:20). Especially in the case of abortion there is a widespread use of ambiguous terminology, such as “interruption of pregnancy”, which tends to hide abortion’s true nature and to attenuate its seriousness in public opinion. Perhaps this linguistic phenomenon is itself a symptom of an uneasiness of conscience.

But no word has the power to change the reality of things: procured abortion is *the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth.*

The moral gravity of procured abortion is apparent in all its truth if we recognize that we are dealing with murder and, in particular, when we consider the specific elements involved. The one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life. No one more absolutely *innocent* could be imagined. In no way could this human being ever be considered an aggressor, much less an unjust aggressor! He or she is *weak*, defenceless, even to the point of lacking that minimal form of defence consisting in the poignant power of a newborn baby’s cries and tears. The unborn child is *totally entrusted* to the protection and care of the woman carrying him or her in the womb. And yet sometimes it is precisely the mother herself who makes the decision and asks for the child to be eliminated, and who then goes about having it done.

It is true that the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as the decision to rid herself of the fruit of conception is not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place. Nevertheless, these reasons and others

like them, however serious and tragic, *can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.*

## NOTES

54 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 51: “Abortus necnon infanticidium nefanda sunt crimina”.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Who called abortion “an unspeakable crime”?
- b. According to the pope, grasping the truth requires a virtue that does not have any obvious connection with mental activity. What is that virtue?
- c. What are the specific elements of abortion that are especially disturbing?
- d. The words of Isaiah are contrasted with pro-abortion propaganda. What is the striking difference?
- e. In the decision to have an abortion, are there sometimes important values that are weighed against the child’s life? When are they sufficient to justify abortion?

### *Background*

- f. *Grave* (or *gravity*) is a technical word in moral theology. What does it mean?

### *Discussion*

- Is self-deception a characteristic of all, many or just a few sins?

**59.** As well as the mother, there are often other people too who decide upon the death of the child in the womb. In the first place, the father of the child may be to blame, not only when he directly pressures the woman to have an abortion, but also when he indirectly encourages such a decision on her part by leaving her alone to face the problems of pregnancy:55 in this way the family is thus mortally wounded and profaned in its nature as a community of love and in its vocation to be the “sanctuary of life”. Nor can one overlook the pressures which sometimes come from the wider family circle and from friends.

Sometimes the woman is subjected to such strong pressure that she feels psychologically forced to have an abortion: certainly in this case moral responsibility lies particularly with those who have directly or indirectly obliged her to have an abortion.

Doctors and nurses are also responsible, when they place at the service of death skills which were acquired for promoting life.

But responsibility likewise falls on the legislators who have promoted and approved abortion laws, and, to the extent that they have a say in the matter, on the administrators of the health-care centres where abortions are performed. A general and no less serious responsibility lies with those who have encouraged the spread of an attitude of sexual permissiveness and a lack of esteem for motherhood, and with those who should have ensured — but did not — effective family and social policies in support of families,

especially larger families and those with particular financial and educational needs. Finally, one cannot overlook the network of complicity which reaches out to include international institutions, foundations and associations which systematically campaign for the legalization and spread of abortion in the world. In this sense abortion goes beyond the responsibility of individuals and beyond the harm done to them, and takes on a distinctly social dimension. It is a most serious *wound* inflicted on society and its culture by the very people who ought to be society's promoters and defenders.

As I wrote in my *Letter to Families*, "we are facing an immense threat to life: not only to the life of individuals but also to that of civilization itself".<sup>56</sup> We are facing what can be called a "structure of sin" which opposes human life not yet born.

## NOTES

55 Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988), 14: AAS 80 (1988), 1686.

56 No. 21: AAS 86 (1994), 920.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Describe the responsibility for abortion borne by: (1) fathers, (2) family and friends, (3) doctors and nurses, (4) legislators, (5) administrators of medical facilities, (6) pro-abortion lobbyists, (7) politicians who stay neutral.
- b. Describe the "structure of sin" of abortion.

### *Background*

- c. In section 12 and section 24, the pope referred to the "structure of sin" of abortion. Here, he describes it in more detail. Compare this description of abortion to the description of "social sin" in the pope's letter *On Penance and Reconciliation*.

### *Discussion*

- Today, abortion is a social evil. Was there a structure of abortion 100 years ago?

**60.** Some people try to justify abortion by claiming that the result of conception, at least up to a certain number of days, cannot yet be considered a personal human life. But in fact, "from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. This has always been clear, and . . . modern genetic science offers clear confirmation.

It has demonstrated that from the first instant there is established the program of what this living being will be: a person, this individual person with his characteristic aspects already well determined. Right from fertilization the adventure of a human life begins, and each of its capacities requires time—a rather lengthy time—to find its place and to be in a position to act".<sup>57</sup> Even if the presence of a spiritual soul cannot be ascertained by empirical data, the results themselves of scientific research on the human embryo provide "a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the

moment of the first appearance of a human life: how could a human individual not be a human person?”.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, what is at stake is so important that, from the standpoint of moral obligation, the mere probability that a human person is involved would suffice to justify an absolutely clear prohibition of any intervention aimed at killing a human embryo. Precisely for this reason, over and above all scientific debates and those philosophical affirmations to which the Magisterium has not expressly committed itself, the Church has always taught and continues to teach that the result of human procreation, from the first moment of its existence, must be guaranteed that unconditional respect which is morally due to the human being in his or her totality and unity as body and spirit: “*The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life*”.<sup>59</sup>

## NOTES

57 CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Declaration on Procured Abortion* (18 November 1974), Nos. 12-13: AAS 66 (1974), 738.

58 CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation *Donum Vitae* (22 February 1987), I, No. 1: AAS 80 (1988), 78-79.

59 *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*, 79.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. How does the pope respond to the argument that the result of conception cannot be considered a personal human life for some days or weeks?
- b. Is it permissible to kill an embryo if there is doubt about whether the embryo is a human person?

### *Background*

- c. What is *ensoulment*?
- d. Thomas Aquinas talked about ensoulment at 40 days for boys or 80 days for girls. This notion was based on Aristotle’s description. If Aquinas had understood fertilization as we have understood it since 1829, what would he have said about ensoulment?

### *Discussion*

- Is it reasonable to consider creative activity as evidence of a soul? Is there any time in a person’s life that has more creative activity than the moment of conception?

**61.** The texts of *Sacred Scripture* never address the question of deliberate abortion and so do not directly and specifically condemn it. But they show such great respect for the human being in the mother’s womb that they require as a logical consequence that God’s commandment “You shall not kill” be extended to the unborn child as well.

Human life is sacred and inviolable at every moment of existence, including the initial phase which precedes birth. All human beings, from their mothers' womb, belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow whose days are numbered and whose vocation is even now written in the "book of life" (cf. *Ps* 139:1,

13-16). There too, when they are still in their mothers' womb — as many passages of the Bible bear witness<sup>60</sup> — they are the personal objects of God's loving and fatherly providence.

*Christian Tradition* — as the *Declaration* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith points out so well <sup>61</sup> — is clear and unanimous, from the beginning up to our own day, in describing abortion as a particularly grave moral disorder.

From its first contacts with the Greco-Roman world, where abortion and infanticide were widely practised, the first Christian community, by its teaching and practice, radically opposed the customs rampant in that society, as is clearly shown by the *Didache* mentioned earlier.<sup>62</sup> Among the Greek ecclesiastical writers, Athenagoras records that Christians consider as murderesses women who have recourse to abortifacient medicines, because children, even if they are still in their mother's womb, "are already under the protection of Divine Providence".<sup>63</sup> Among the Latin authors, Tertullian affirms: "It is anticipated murder to prevent someone from being born; it makes little difference whether one kills a soul already born or puts it to death at birth. He who will one day be a man is a man already".<sup>64</sup>

Throughout Christianity's two thousand year history, this same doctrine has been constantly taught by the Fathers of the Church and by her Pastors and Doctors. Even scientific and philosophical discussions about the precise moment of the infusion of the spiritual soul have never given rise to any hesitation about the moral condemnation of abortion.

## NOTES

<sup>60</sup> Hence the Prophet Jeremiah: "The word of the Lord came to me saying: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations'" (1:4-5). The Psalmist, for his part, addresses the Lord in these words: "Upon you I have leaned from my birth; you are he who took me from my mother's womb" (*Ps* 71:6; cf. *Is* 46:3; *Job* 10:8-12; *Ps* 22:10-11). So too the Evangelist Luke in the magnificent episode of the meeting of the two mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, and their two sons, John the Baptist and Jesus, still hidden in their mothers' wombs (cf. 1:39-45) emphasizes how even before their birth the two little ones are able to communicate: the child recognizes the coming of the Child and leaps for joy.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. *Declaration on Procured Abortion* (18 November 1974), No. 7: AAS 66 (1974), 740-747.

<sup>62</sup> "You shall not kill a child by abortion nor shall you kill it once it is born": V, 2: *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F.X. Funk, I, 17.

<sup>63</sup> *Apologia on behalf of the Christians*, 35: PG 6, 969.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. How can a prohibition of deliberate abortion be based on Sacred Scripture if the texts never address this question?
- b. The pope states that “*Christian tradition . . . is clear and unanimous*” describing abortion as a particularly grave moral disorder. What is the significance of this statement?
- c. Has there been unanimity about the “precise moment of the infusion of the spiritual soul” in Christian teaching?
- d. Have disagreements about ensoulment led to any hesitation about condemning abortion?

### *Background*

- e. Who was Athenagoras?
- f. Who was Tertullian?
- g. Who were the “Fathers” and “Doctors” of the Church?

### *Discussion*

- How can you condemn abortion if you are ignorant of or confused about the early stages of a child’s development?

**62.** The more recent *Papal Magisterium* has vigorously re-affirmed this common doctrine. Pius XI in particular, in his Encyclical *Casti Connubii*, rejected the specious justifications of abortion.<sup>65</sup> Pius XII excluded all direct abortion, i.e., every act tending directly to destroy human life in the womb “whether such destruction is intended as an end or only as a means to an end”.<sup>66</sup> John XXIII reaffirmed that human life is sacred because “from its very beginning it directly involves God’s creative activity”.<sup>67</sup> The Second Vatican Council, as mentioned earlier, sternly condemned abortion: “From the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care, while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes”.<sup>68</sup>

The *Church’s canonical discipline*, from the earliest centuries, has inflicted penal sanctions on those guilty of abortion.

This practice, with more or less severe penalties, has been confirmed in various periods of history. The 1917 *Code of Canon Law* punished abortion with excommunication.<sup>69</sup> The revised canonical legislation continues this tradition when it decrees that “a person who actually procures an abortion incurs automatic (*latae sententiae*) excommunication”.<sup>70</sup> The excommunication affects all those who commit this crime with knowledge of the penalty attached, and thus includes those accomplices without whose help the crime would not have been committed.<sup>71</sup> By this reiterated sanction, the Church makes clear that abortion is a most serious and dangerous crime, thereby encouraging those who commit it to seek without delay the path of conversion.

In the Church the purpose of the penalty of excommunication is to make an individual fully aware of the gravity of a certain sin and then to foster genuine conversion and repentance.

Given such unanimity in the doctrinal and disciplinary tradition of the Church, Paul VI was able to declare that this tradition is unchanged and unchangeable.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops—who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine — *I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church’s Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.*<sup>73</sup>

No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church.

## NOTES

65 Cf. Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii* (31 December 1930), 1: AAS 22 (1930), 562-592.

66 Address to the Biomedical Association “San Luca” (12 November 1944): *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi*, VI (1944-1945), 191; cf. Address to the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives (29 October 1951), No. 2: AAS 43 (1951), 838.

67 Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra* (15 May 1961), 3: AAS 53 (1961), 447.

68 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 51.

69 Canon 2350, No. 1.

70 *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1398; cf. *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, canon 1450, No. 2.

71 Cf. *ibid.*, canon 1329; also *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, canon 1417.

72 Cf. Address to the National Congress of Italian Jurists (9 December 1972): AAS 64 (1972), 777; Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* (25 July 1968), 14: AAS 60 (1968), 490.

73 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 25.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. The pope recalls the teaching on abortion of Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council. What is the significance of this?
- b. What is the penalty in canon law for abortion?
- c. The pope makes a declaration about direct abortion. What is that declaration?
- d. What authority does the pope claim in making this declaration?

- e. What circumstance, purpose or law can make abortion lawful?

### ***Background***

- f. What is canon law?
- g. What is excommunication? What is its purpose?
- h. What are the Eastern Churches?

### ***Discussion***

- Is this declaration infallible?

**63.** This evaluation of the morality of abortion is to be applied also to the recent forms of *intervention on human embryos* which, although carried out for purposes legitimate in themselves, inevitably involve the killing of those embryos. This is the case with *experimentation on embryos*, which is becoming increasingly widespread in the field of biomedical research and is legally permitted in some countries. Although “one must uphold as licit procedures carried out on the human embryo which respect the life and integrity of the embryo and do not involve disproportionate risks for it, but rather are directed to its healing, the improvement of its condition of health, or its individual survival”,<sup>74</sup> it must nonetheless be stated that the use of human embryos or fetuses as an object of experimentation constitutes a crime against their dignity as human beings who have a right to the same respect owed to a child once born, just as to every person.<sup>75</sup>

This moral condemnation also regards procedures that exploit living human embryos and fetuses — sometimes specifically “produced” for this purpose by *in vitro* fertilization— either to be used as “biological material” or as *providers of organs or tissue for transplants* in the treatment of certain diseases. The killing of innocent human creatures, even if carried out to help others, constitutes an absolutely unacceptable act.

Special attention must be given to evaluating the morality of *prenatal diagnostic techniques* which enable the early detection of possible anomalies in the unborn child. In view of the complexity of these techniques, an accurate and systematic moral judgment is necessary. When they do not involve disproportionate risks for the child and the mother, and are meant to make possible early therapy or even to favour a serene and informed acceptance of the child not yet born, these techniques are morally licit. But since the possibilities of prenatal therapy are today still limited, it not infrequently happens that these techniques are used with a eugenic intention which accepts selective abortion in order to prevent the birth of children affected by various types of anomalies. Such an attitude is shameful and utterly reprehensible, since it presumes to measure the value of a human life only within the parameters of “normality” and physical well-being, thus opening the way to legitimizing infanticide and euthanasia as well.

And yet the courage and the serenity with which so many of our brothers and sisters suffering from serious disabilities lead their lives when they are shown acceptance and love bears eloquent witness to what gives authentic value to life, and makes it, even in difficult conditions, something precious for them and for others. The Church is close to those married couples who, with great anguish and suffering, willingly accept gravely handicapped children. She is also grateful to all those families which, through adoption, welcome children abandoned by their parents because of disabilities or illnesses.

## NOTES

74 CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation *Donum Vitae* (22 February 1987) I, 3: AAS 80 (1988), 80.

75 *Charter of the Rights of the Family* (22 October 1983), article 4b: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1983.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. The pope immediately applies the evaluation of the morality of abortion to another controversial activity.
- a. What is that tightly related activity?
- b. Under what circumstances is it permissible to carry out experimental procedures on humans in the first days of life?
- c. How much respect is owed to human embryos?
- d. What does the pope teach about in vitro fertilization?
- e. What does the pope teach about the morality of prenatal diagnostic techniques?

### *Background*

- f. What is *eugenic intention*?

### *Discussion*

- Is it common to link abortion and human experimentation the way the pope links them?

### ***“It is I who bring both death and life” (Dt 32:39): the tragedy of euthanasia [sections 64–67]***

**64.** At the other end of life’s spectrum, men and women find themselves facing the mystery of death. Today, as a result of advances in medicine and in a cultural context frequently closed to the transcendent, the experience of dying is marked by new features. When the prevailing tendency is to value life only to the extent that it brings pleasure and well-being, suffering seems like an unbearable setback, something from which one must be freed at all costs. Death is considered “senseless” if it suddenly interrupts a life still open to a future of new and interesting experiences. But it becomes a “rightful liberation” once life is held to be no longer meaningful because it is filled with pain and inexorably doomed to even greater suffering.

Furthermore, when he denies or neglects his fundamental relationship to God, man thinks he is his own rule and measure, with the right to demand that society should guarantee him the ways and means of deciding what to do with his life in full and complete autonomy. It is especially people in the developed countries who act in this way: they feel encouraged to do so also by the constant progress of medicine and its ever more advanced techniques. By using highly sophisticated systems and equipment, science and

medical practice today are able not only to attend to cases formerly considered untreatable and to reduce or eliminate pain, but also to sustain and prolong life even in situations of extreme frailty, to resuscitate artificially patients whose basic biological functions have undergone sudden collapse, and to use special procedures to make organs available for transplanting.

In this context the temptation grows to have recourse to *euthanasia*, that is, *to take control of death and bring it about before its time*, “gently” ending one’s own life or the life of others. In reality, what might seem logical and humane, when looked at more closely is seen to be *senseless and inhumane*. Here we are faced with one of the more alarming symptoms of the “culture of death”, which is advancing above all in prosperous societies, marked by an attitude of excessive preoccupation with efficiency and which sees the growing number of elderly and disabled people as intolerable and too burdensome.

These people are very often isolated by their families and by society, which are organized almost exclusively on the basis of criteria of productive efficiency, according to which a hopelessly impaired life no longer has any value.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What are two new features of the experience of dying in our day?
- b. What is the attitude toward suffering in a hedonistic culture?
- c. What is the attitude toward death in a hedonistic culture?
- d. How does an excessive preoccupation with efficiency lead to a desire for ending life “gently”?

### *Background*

- e. Why are people in developed nations more likely to demand control over their deaths?

### *Discussion*

- Is euthanasia in any way an exercise of a “woman’s right to choose”? Why are abortion and euthanasia linked by people on both sides of the controversy?

**65.** For a correct moral judgment on euthanasia, in the first place a clear definition is required. *Euthanasia in the strict sense* is understood to be an action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death, with the purpose of eliminating all suffering.

“Euthanasia’s terms of reference, therefore, are to be found in the intention of the will and in the methods used”.<sup>76</sup>

Euthanasia must be distinguished from the decision to forego so-called “aggressive medical treatment”, in other words, medical procedures which no longer correspond to the real situation of the patient, either because they are by now disproportionate to any expected results or because they impose an excessive burden on the patient and his family. In such situations, when death is clearly imminent and inevitable, one can in conscience “refuse forms of treatment that would only secure a precarious and

burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted”.<sup>77</sup> Certainly there is a moral obligation to care for oneself and to allow oneself to be cared for, but this duty must take account of concrete circumstances. It needs to be determined whether the means of treatment available are objectively proportionate to the prospects for improvement. To forego extraordinary or disproportionate means is not the equivalent of suicide or euthanasia; it rather expresses acceptance of the human condition in the face of death.<sup>78</sup>

In modern medicine, increased attention is being given to what are called “methods of palliative care”, which seek to make suffering more bearable in the final stages of illness and to en-sure that the patient is supported and accompanied in his or her ordeal. Among the questions which arise in this context is that of the licitness of using various types of painkillers and sedatives for relieving the patient’s pain when this involves the risk of shortening life. While praise may be due to the person who voluntarily accepts suffering by foregoing treatment with painkillers in order to remain fully lucid and, if a believer, to share consciously in the Lord’s Passion, such “heroic” behaviour cannot be considered the duty of everyone. Pius XII affirmed that it is licit to relieve pain by narcotics, even when the result is decreased consciousness and a shortening of life,

“if no other means exist, and if, in the given circumstances, this does not prevent the carrying out of other religious and moral duties”.<sup>79</sup> In such a case, death is not willed or sought, even though for reasonable motives one runs the risk of it: there is simply a desire to ease pain effectively by using the analgesics which medicine provides. All the same, “it is not right to deprive the dying person of consciousness without a serious reason”:<sup>80</sup> as they approach death people ought to be able to satisfy their moral and family duties, and above all they ought to be able to prepare in a fully conscious way for their definitive meeting with God.

Taking into account these distinctions, in harmony with the Magisterium of my Predecessors<sup>81</sup> and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, *I confirm that euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God*, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God, as transmitted by the Church’s Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.<sup>82</sup>

Depending on the circumstances, this practice involves the malice proper to suicide or murder.

## NOTES

76 CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration on Euthanasia *Iura et Bona* (5 May 1980), II: AAS 72 (1980) 546.

77 *Ibid.*, IV: *loc cit.*, 551.

78 Cf. *ibid.*

79 PIUS XII, Address to an International Group of Physicians (24 February 1957), III: AAS 49 (1957), 147; cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration on Euthanasia *Iura et Bona*, III: AAS 72 (1980), 547-548.

80 Pius XII, Address to an International Group of Physicians (24 February 1957), III: AAS 49 (1957), 145.

81 Cf. Pius XII, Address to an International Group of Physicians, (24 February 1957): *loc. cit.*, 129-147; CONGREGATION OF THE HOLY OFFICE, *Decretum de directa insontium occisione* (2 December 1940): AAS 32 (1940), 553-554; PAUL VI, Message to French Television: "Every life is sacred" (27 January 1971): *Insegnamenti IX* (1971) 57-58; Address to the International College of Surgeons (1 June 1972) AAS 64 (1972), 432-436; SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 27.

82 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 25.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. The word *euthanasia* is used in many confusing ways. What does the word mean in this letter?
- b. Is it euthanasia to decide not to use aggressive medical treatment?
- c. When is it permissible to refuse medical treatment that would prolong life?
- d. Is it permissible to use painkillers even when they involve a risk of shortening life?
- e. What is the pope's formal statement about euthanasia?
- f. What authority does the pope assert in this formal statement?

### *Background*

- f. What is the significance of the pope's statement that euthanasia may involve *malice*?

### *Discussion*

- When a person is preparing for death, he or she is also preparing for a definitive meeting with God. How does a person prepare for such a meeting?

**66.** Suicide is always as morally objectionable as murder. The Church's tradition has always rejected it as a gravely evil choice.<sup>83</sup> Even though a certain psychological, cultural and social conditioning may induce a person to carry out an action which so radically contradicts the innate inclination to life, thus lessening or removing subjective responsibility, *suicide*, when viewed objectively, is a gravely immoral act. In fact, it involves the rejection of love of self and the renunciation of the obligation of justice and charity towards one's neighbour, towards the communities to which one belongs, and towards society as a whole.<sup>84</sup> In its deepest reality, suicide represents a rejection of God's absolute sovereignty over life and death, as proclaimed in the prayer of the ancient sage of Israel: "You have power over life and death; you lead men down to the gates of Hades and back again" (*Wis 16:13*; cf. *Tob 13:2*).

To concur with the intention of another person to commit suicide and to help in carrying it out through so-called "assisted suicide" means to cooperate in, and at times to be the

actual perpetrator of, an injustice which can never be excused, even if it is requested. In a remarkably relevant passage Saint Augustine writes that “it is never licit to kill another: even if he should wish it, indeed if he request it because, hanging between life and death, he begs for help in freeing the soul struggling against the bonds of the body and longing to be released; nor is it licit even when a sick person is no longer able to live”.<sup>85</sup>

Even when not motivated by a selfish refusal to be burdened with the life of someone who is suffering, euthanasia must be called a *false mercy*, and indeed a disturbing “perversion” of mercy. True “compassion” leads to sharing another’s pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear. Moreover, the act of euthanasia appears all the more perverse if it is carried out by those, like relatives, who are supposed to treat a family member with patience and love, or by those, such as doctors, who by virtue of their specific profession are supposed to care for the sick person even in the most painful terminal stages.

The choice of euthanasia becomes more serious when it takes the form of a *murder* committed by others on a person who has in no way requested it and who has never consented to it. The height of arbitrariness and injustice is reached when certain people, such as physicians or legislators, arrogate to themselves the power to decide who ought to live and who ought to die. Once again we find ourselves before the temptation of Eden: to become like God who “knows good and evil” (cf. *Gen* 3:5). God alone has the power over life and death: “It is I who bring both death and life” (*Dt* 32:39; cf. *2 Kg* 5:7; *1 Sam* 2:6).

But he only exercises this power in accordance with a plan of wisdom and love. When man usurps this power, being enslaved by a foolish and selfish way of thinking, he inevitably uses it for injustice and death. Thus the life of the person who is weak is put into the hands of the one who is strong; in society the sense of justice is lost, and mutual trust, the basis of every authentic interpersonal relationship, is undermined at its root.

## NOTES

83 Cf. SAINT AUGUSTINE, *De Civitate Dei* I, 20: CCL 47, 22; SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 6, a. 5.

84 CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration On Euthanasia *Iura et Bona* (5 May 1980), I: AAS 72 (1980), 545; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 2281-2283.

85 *Ep.* 204, 5: CSEL 57, 320.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Is suicide as serious as murder?
- b. What may lessen or remove responsibility for suicide?
- c. What relations are damaged by suicide?
- d. When can “assisted suicide” be excused?
- e. What is the difference between “involuntary euthanasia” and murder?

## **Background**

- f. What is the “temptation of Eden”?

## **Discussion**

- In human society, what happens when the weak are put in the hands of the strong?

**67.** Quite different from this is the *way of love and true mercy*, which our common humanity calls for, and upon which faith in Christ the Redeemer, who died and rose again, sheds ever new light. The request which arises from the human heart in the supreme confrontation with suffering and death, especially when faced with the temptation to give up in utter desperation, is above all a request for companionship, sympathy and support in the time of trial. It is a plea for help to keep on hoping when all human hopes fail. As the Second Vatican Council reminds us: “It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence becomes most acute” and yet “man rightly follows the intuition of his heart when he abhors and repudiates the absolute ruin and total disappearance of his own person. Man rebels against death because he bears in himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to mere matter”.<sup>86</sup>

This natural aversion to death and this incipient hope of immortality are illumined and brought to fulfilment by Christian faith, which both promises and offers a share in the victory of the Risen Christ: it is the victory of the One who, by his redemptive death, has set man free from death, “the wages of sin” (*Rom 6:23*), and has given him the Spirit, the pledge of resurrection and of life (cf. *Rom 8:11*). The certainty of future immortality and *hope in the promised resurrection* cast new light on the mystery of suffering and death, and fill the believer with an extraordinary capacity to trust fully in the plan of God.

The Apostle Paul expressed this newness in terms of belonging completely to the Lord who embraces every human condition:

“None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (*Rom 14:7-8*). *Dying to the Lord* means experiencing one’s death as the supreme act of obedience to the Father (cf. *Phil 2:8*), being ready to meet death at the “hour” willed and chosen by him (cf. *Jn 13:1*), which can only mean when one’s earthly pilgrimage is completed. *Living to the Lord* also means recognizing that suffering, while still an evil and a trial in itself, can always become a source of good. It becomes such if it is experienced for love and with love through sharing, by God’s gracious gift and one’s own personal and free choice, in the suffering of Christ Crucified. In this way, the person who lives his suffering in the Lord grows more fully conformed to him (cf. *Phil 3:10*; *1 Pet 2:21*) and more closely associated with his redemptive work on behalf of the Church and humanity.<sup>87</sup> This was the experience of Saint Paul, which every person who suffers is called to relive: “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church” (*Col 1:24*).

## **NOTES**

<sup>86</sup> Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 18.

87 Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* (11 February 1984), 14-24; AAS 76 (1984), 214-234.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What is the “request which arises from the human heart in the supreme confrontation with suffering and death”?
- b. What is the response of Jesus to this request?
- c. St. Paul writes of “living to the Lord” and of “dying to the Lord.” What do these phrases mean?
- d. How can suffering become a source of good?

### *Background*

- e. What was St. Paul’s attitude toward his suffering?

### *Discussion*

- Do suffering and death separate us from God?
- Is death an effective way to end pain? In other words, is it certain that life after death will be pain-free?

### **“We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29): civil law and the moral law [sections 68–74]**

**68.** One of the specific characteristics of present-day attacks on human life—as has already been said several times—consists in the trend to demand a *legal justification* for them, as if they were rights which the State, at least under certain conditions, must acknowledge as belonging to citizens. Consequently, there is a tendency to claim that it should be possible to exercise these rights with the safe and free assistance of doctors and medical personnel.

It is often claimed that the life of an unborn child or a seriously disabled person is only a relative good: according to a proportionalist approach, or one of sheer calculation, this good should be compared with and balanced against other goods. It is even maintained that only someone present and personally involved in a concrete situation can correctly judge the goods at stake: consequently, only that person would be able to decide on the morality of his choice. The State therefore, in the interest of civil coexistence and social harmony, should respect this choice, even to the point of permitting abortion and euthanasia.

At other times, it is claimed that civil law cannot demand that all citizens should live according to moral standards higher than what all citizens themselves acknowledge and share. Hence the law should always express the opinion and will of the majority of citizens and recognize that they have, at least in certain extreme cases, the right even to abortion and euthanasia.

Moreover the prohibition and the punishment of abortion and euthanasia in these cases would inevitably lead — so it is said — to an increase of illegal practices: and these would not be subject to necessary control by society and would be carried out in a

medically unsafe way. The question is also raised whether supporting a law which in practice cannot be enforced would not ultimately undermine the authority of all laws.

Finally, the more radical views go so far as to maintain that in a modern and pluralistic society people should be allowed complete freedom to dispose of their own lives as well as of the lives of the unborn: it is asserted that it is not the task of the law to choose between different moral opinions, and still less can the law claim to impose one particular opinion to the detriment of others.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. The pope lists a number of arguments for legalizing abortion or euthanasia. Does he answer them here?
- b. What is *proportionalism*?
- c. Is the life of a seriously disabled person as valuable as the life of a healthy person?

### *Discussion*

- Have you heard these arguments in favor of legalizing abortion and euthanasia? Where?
- Are the people who are personally involved in a situation the best ones to decide moral questions?
- Should law be based on the consent of the governed? Should it be based on the will of the majority?
- If the majority of citizens would permit some abortion and euthanasia, does that fact create a right to abortion and euthanasia?
- If the law prohibits abortion and euthanasia when many people want them, will there be an increase in unregulated, dangerous and illegal activity?
- Is it the task of the law to choose between different moral opinions, and to impose one opinion?

**69.** In any case, in the democratic culture of our time it is commonly held that the legal system of any society should limit itself to taking account of and accepting the convictions of the majority. It should therefore be based solely upon what the majority itself considers moral and actually practices. Furthermore, if it is believed that an objective truth shared by all is *de facto* unattainable, then respect for the freedom of the citizens—who in a democratic system are considered the true rulers— would require that on the legislative level the autonomy of individual consciences be acknowledged. Consequently, when establishing those norms which are absolutely necessary for social coexistence, the only determining factor should be the will of the majority, whatever this may be. Hence every politician, in his or her activity, should clearly separate the realm of private conscience from that of public conduct.

As a result we have what appear to be two diametrically opposed tendencies. On the one hand, individuals claim for themselves in the moral sphere the most complete freedom of

choice and demand that the State should not adopt or impose any ethical position but limit itself to guaranteeing maximum space for the freedom of each individual, with the sole limitation of not infringing on the freedom and rights of any other citizen. On the other hand, it is held that, in the exercise of public and professional duties, respect for other people's freedom of choice requires that each one should set aside his or her own convictions in order to satisfy every demand of the citizens which is recognized and guaranteed by law; in carrying out one's duties the only moral criterion should be what is laid down by the law itself. Individual responsibility is thus turned over to the civil law, with a renouncing of personal conscience, at least in the public sphere.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. The pope outlines two arguments for legalizing abortion based on a particular view of democracy. Are the arguments answered here?

### *Discussion*

- Can a democratic society find agreement about objective truths?
- If there is no agreement about objective truths, is there any guide to behavior better than the individual conscience?
- Should politicians separate their own private views from their public positions?
- Some people believe that the state has a duty to guarantee the maximum space for freedom of the individual and also that professionals should set aside their convictions in order to satisfy the demands of the citizens. What is wrong with this?

**70.** At the basis of all these tendencies lies the *ethical relativism* which characterizes much of present-day culture. There are those who consider such relativism an essential condition of democracy, inasmuch as it alone is held to guarantee tolerance, mutual respect between people and acceptance of the decisions of the majority, whereas moral norms considered to be objective and binding are held to lead to authoritarianism and intolerance.

But it is precisely the issue of respect for life which shows what misunderstandings and contradictions, accompanied by terrible practical consequences, are concealed in this position.

It is true that history has known cases where crimes have been committed in the name of "truth". But equally grave crimes and radical denials of freedom have also been committed and are still being committed in the name of "ethical relativism". When

a parliamentary or social majority decrees that it is legal, at least under certain conditions, to kill unborn human life, is it not really making a "tyrannical" decision with regard to the weakest and most defenceless of human beings? Everyone's conscience rightly rejects those crimes against humanity of which our century has had such sad experience. But would these crimes cease to be crimes if, instead of being committed by unscrupulous tyrants, they were legitimated by popular consensus?

Democracy cannot be idolized to the point of making it a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality. Fundamentally, democracy is a “system” and as such is a means and not an end. Its “moral” value is not automatic, but depends on conformity to the moral law to which it, like every other form of human behaviour, must be subject: in other words, its morality depends on the morality of the ends which it pursues and of the means which it employs. If today we see an almost universal consensus with regard to the value of democracy, this is to be considered a positive “sign of the times”, as the Church’s Magisterium has frequently noted.<sup>88</sup> But the value of democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes. Of course, values such as the dignity of every human person, respect for inviolable and inalienable human rights, and the adoption of the “common good” as the end and criterion regulating political life are certainly fundamental and not to be ignored.

The basis of these values cannot be provisional and changeable “majority” opinions, but only the acknowledgment of an objective moral law which, as the “natural law” written in the human heart, is the obligatory point of reference for civil law itself. If, as a result of a tragic obscuring of the collective conscience, an attitude of scepticism were to succeed in bringing into question even the fundamental principles of the moral law, the democratic system itself would be shaken in its foundations, and would be reduced to a mere mechanism for regulating different and opposing interests on a purely empirical basis.<sup>89</sup>

Some might think that even this function, in the absence of anything better, should be valued for the sake of peace in society.

While one acknowledges some element of truth in this point of view, it is easy to see that without an objective moral grounding not even democracy is capable of ensuring a stable peace, especially since peace which is not built upon the values of the dignity of every individual and of solidarity between all people frequently proves to be illusory. Even in participatory systems of government, the regulation of interests often occurs to the advantage of the most powerful, since they are the ones most capable of maneuvering not only the levers of power but also of shaping the formation of consensus. In such a situation, democracy easily becomes an empty word.

## NOTES

88 Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), 46: AAS 83 (1991), 850; Pius XII, Christmas Radio Message (24 December 1944): AAS 37 (1945) 10-20.

89 Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (6 August 1993), 97 and 99: AAS 85 (1993), 1209-1211.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What is *ethical relativism*?
- b. Does relativism lead to mutual respect? Do binding moral norms lead to intolerance?
- c. Would genocide be legal if the majority of a society voted for it?

- d. Is democracy a means or an end?
- e. If natural law is set aside, what is left of democracy?
- f. In a democracy, who shapes consensus?
- g. Can the democratic process ensure peace if it fails to acknowledge the dignity of each individual?

### ***Background***

- h. In history, when have crimes been committed in the name of religion or truth?
- i. In this century, list the times when over one million people were killed. How many of these slaughters were carried out in the name of religion or truth?

### ***Discussion***

- Is it “tyranny” when the majority decides to strip a minority of rights?

**71.** It is therefore urgently necessary, for the future of society and the development of a sound democracy, to rediscover those essential and innate human and moral values which flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person: values which no individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy, but must only acknowledge, respect and promote.

Consequently there is a need to recover the *basic elements of a vision of the relationship between civil law and moral law*, which are put forward by the Church, but which are also part of the patrimony of the great juridical traditions of humanity.

Certainly *the purpose of civil law* is different and more limited in scope than that of the moral law. But “in no sphere of life can the civil law take the place of conscience or dictate norms concerning things which are outside its competence”,<sup>90</sup> which is that of ensuring the common good of people through the recognition and defence of their fundamental rights, and the promotion of peace and of public morality.<sup>91</sup> The real purpose of civil law is to guarantee an ordered social coexistence in true justice, so that all may “lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way” (1 Tim 2:2). Precisely for this reason, civil law must ensure that all members of society enjoy respect for certain fundamental rights which innately belong to the person, rights which every positive law must recognize and guarantee. First and fundamental among these is the inviolable right to life of every innocent human being. While public authority can sometimes choose not to put a stop to something which—were it prohibited—would cause more serious harm,<sup>92</sup> it can never presume to legitimize as a right of individuals—even if they are the majority of the members of society—an offence against other persons caused by the disregard of so fundamental a right as the right to life. The legal toleration of abortion or of euthanasia can in no way claim to be based on respect for the conscience of others, precisely because society has the right and the duty to protect itself against the abuses which can occur in the name of conscience and under the pretext of freedom.<sup>93</sup>

In the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII pointed out that “it is generally accepted today that the common good is best safeguarded when personal rights and duties are guaranteed. The chief concern of civil authorities must therefore be to ensure that these rights are recognized, respected, co-ordinated, defended and promoted, and that each

individual is enabled to perform his duties more easily. For ‘to safeguard the inviolable rights of the human person, and to facilitate the performance of his duties, is the principal duty of every public authority’. Thus any government which refused to recognize human rights or acted in violation of them, would not only fail in its duty; its decrees would be wholly lacking in binding force”.<sup>94</sup>

## NOTES

90 CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction on Respect for Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation *Donum Vitae* (22 February 1987), III: AAS 80 (1988), 98.

91 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 7.

92 Cf. SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 96, a. 2.

93 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 7.

94 Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris* (11 April 1963), II; AAS 55 (1963), 273-274. The internal quote is from Pius XII, Radio Message of Pentecost 1941 (1 June 1941): AAS 33 (1941), 200. On this topic, the Encyclical cites: Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Mit brennender Sorge* (14 March 1937): AAS 29 (1937), 159; Encyclical Letter *Divini Redemptoris* (19 March 1937), III: AAS 29 (1937), 79; Pius XII, Christmas Radio Message (24 December 1942): AAS 35 (1943), 9-24.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. Can a democracy abolish the dignity of the person, or is that based on something deeper than social consensus?
- b. What is the purpose of civil law?
- c. Whose rights may be ignored by civil law?
- d. If a government refuses to recognize and protect human rights, what authority does it have?

### *Background*

- e. Often, advocates of abortion appeal to religious freedom to silence the voices of life advocates. How does the pope respond to that line of argument?

### *Discussion*

- When Pope John XXIII wrote about attacks on human rights, he did not have abortion in mind. Is it reasonable to apply his teaching to abortion?

72. The doctrine on the necessary *conformity of civil law with the moral law* is in continuity with the whole tradition of the Church. This is clear once more from John XXIII’s Encyclical: “Authority is a postulate of the moral order and derives from God. Consequently, laws and decrees enacted in contravention of the moral order, and hence of the divine will, can have no binding force in conscience . . . ; indeed, the passing of such

laws undermines the very nature of authority and results in shameful abuse”.<sup>95</sup> This is the clear teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who writes that “human law is law inasmuch as it is in conformity with right reason and thus derives from the eternal law. But when a law is contrary to reason, it is called an unjust law; but in this case it ceases to be a law and becomes instead an act of violence”.<sup>96</sup> And again: “Every law made by man can be called a law insofar as it derives from the natural law.

But if it is somehow opposed to the natural law, then it is not really a law but rather a corruption of the law”.<sup>97</sup>

Now the first and most immediate application of this teaching concerns a human law which disregards the fundamental right and source of all other rights which is the right to life, a right belonging to every individual. Consequently, laws which legitimize the direct killing of innocent human beings through abortion or euthanasia are in complete opposition to the inviolable right to life proper to every individual; they thus deny the equality of everyone before the law. It might be objected that such is not the case in euthanasia, when it is requested with full awareness by the person involved. But any State which made such a request legitimate and authorized it to be carried out would be legalizing a case of suicide-murder, contrary to the fundamental principles of absolute respect for life and of the protection of every innocent life. In this way the State contributes to lessening respect for life and opens the door to ways of acting which are destructive of trust in relations between people. Laws which authorize and promote abortion and euthanasia are therefore radically opposed not only to the good of the individual but also to the common good; as such they are completely lacking in authentic juridical validity. Disregard for the right to life, precisely because it leads to the killing of the person whom society exists to serve, is what most directly conflicts with the possibility of achieving the common good. Consequently, a civil law authorizing abortion or euthanasia ceases by that very fact to be a true, morally binding civil law.

## NOTES

<sup>95</sup> Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris* (11 April 1963), II: *loc cit.*, 271.

<sup>96</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 93, a. 3, ad 2um.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-11, q. 95, a. 2. Aquinas quotes SAINT AUGUSTINE: “Non videtur esse lex, quae iusta non fuerit”, *De Libero Arbitrio*, I, 5, 11: PL 32. 1227.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. What did Pope John XXIII teach about unjust law?
- b. What did St. Thomas Aquinas say about unjust law?
- c. Applying the principles stated here, is it fair to say that the Catholic Church teaches that the British Abortion Act, the American decision *Roe v. Wade* and similar laws in other nations (as well as all laws that are based on them) are “completely lacking in authentic juridical validity” and that they are not morally binding?

### *Background*

d. Has the Church ever before declared that a government or its laws are invalid?

### **Discussion**

- If laws permitting abortion have no force, does that lay a foundation for nonviolent direct action to protect unborn children who are in danger of death (or, as some would say, “rescues”)?

**73.** Abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a *grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection*. From the very beginnings of the Church, the apostolic preaching reminded Christians of their duty to obey legitimately constituted public authorities (cf. *Rom* 13:1-7; *1 Pet* 2:13-14), but at the same time it firmly warned that “we must obey God rather than men” (*Acts* 5:29). In the Old Testament, precisely in regard to threats against life, we find a significant example of resistance to the unjust command of those in authority. After Pharaoh ordered the killing of all new-born males, the Hebrew midwives refused.

“They did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live” (*Ex* 1:17). But the ultimate reason for their action should be noted: “*the midwives feared God*” (*ibid.*). It is precisely from obedience to God—to whom alone is due that fear which is acknowledgment of his absolute sovereignty—that the strength and the courage to resist unjust human laws are born. It is the strength and the courage of those prepared even to be imprisoned or put to the sword, in the certainty that this is what makes for “the endurance and faith of the saints” (*Rev* 13:10).

In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is therefore never licit to obey it, or to “take part in a propaganda campaign in favour of such a law, or vote for it”.<sup>98</sup>

A particular problem of conscience can arise in cases where a legislative vote would be decisive for the passage of a more restrictive law, aimed at limiting the number of authorized abortions, in place of a more permissive law already passed or ready to be voted on. Such cases are not infrequent. It is a fact that while in some parts of the world there continue to be campaigns to introduce laws favoring abortion, often supported by powerful international organizations, in other nations—particularly those which have already experienced the bitter fruits of such permissive legislation — there are growing signs of a rethinking in this matter. In a case like the one just mentioned, when it is not possible to overturn or completely abrogate a pro-abortion law, an elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well known, could licitly support proposals aimed at *limiting the harm* done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality. This does not in fact represent an illicit cooperation with an unjust law, but rather a legitimate and proper attempt to limit its evil aspects.

### **NOTES**

98 CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Declaration on Procured Abortion* (18 November 1974), No. 22: AAS 66 (1974), 744.

### **STUDY QUESTIONS**

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

- a. The pope states that there is a “grave and clear obligation to oppose [illegitimate abortion and euthanasia laws] by conscientious objection.” What is *conscientious objection*?
- b. In his call to resist unjust laws, what models from Sacred Scripture does the pope hold up?
- c. What price should we be prepared to pay in resisting laws that permit abortion and euthanasia?
- d. When a nation already has laws permitting abortion or euthanasia, can an elected official support compromise measures designed to limit the evil, but not end it? Under what conditions?

### ***Background***

- e. When the pope refers to laws about abortion that fail to protect children, does he call them “liberal”?
- f. What does he call them?
- e. What are the “bitter fruits of . . . permissive legislation”?

### ***Discussion***

- May a legislator vote in favor of a law that provides for some funding of abortion, but reduces the amount of funding that is available? Is it formal cooperation in abortion if you fail to protect a child? Is it formal cooperation if you fund an abortion?

**74.** The passing of unjust laws often raises difficult problems of conscience for morally upright people with regard to the issue of cooperation, since they have a right to demand not to be forced to take part in morally evil actions. Sometimes the choices which have to be made are difficult; they may require the sacrifice of prestigious professional positions or the relinquishing of reasonable hopes of career advancement. In other cases, it can happen that carrying out certain actions, which are provided for by legislation that overall is unjust, but which in themselves are indifferent, or even positive, can serve to protect human lives under threat. There may be reason to fear, however, that willingness to carry out such actions will not only cause scandal and weaken the necessary opposition to attacks on life, but will gradually lead to further capitulation to a mentality of permissiveness.

In order to shed light on this difficult question, it is necessary to recall the general principles concerning *cooperation in evil actions*. Christians, like all people of good will, are called upon under grave obligation of conscience not to cooperate formally in practices which, even if permitted by civil legislation, are contrary to God’s law. Indeed, from the moral standpoint, it is never licit to cooperate formally in evil. Such cooperation occurs when an action, either by its very nature or by the form it takes in a concrete situation, can be defined as a direct participation in an act against innocent human life or a sharing in the immoral intention of the person committing it. This cooperation can never be justified either by invoking respect for the freedom of others or by appealing to

the fact that civil law permits it or requires it. Each individual in fact has moral responsibility for the acts which he personally performs; no one can be exempted from this responsibility, and on the basis of it everyone will be judged by God himself (cf. *Rom* 2:6; 14:12).

To refuse to take part in committing an injustice is not only a moral duty; it is also a basic human right. Were this not so, the human person would be forced to perform an action intrinsically incompatible with human dignity, and in this way human freedom itself, the authentic meaning and purpose of which are found in its orientation to the true and the good, would be radically compromised. What is at stake therefore is an essential right which, precisely as such, should be acknowledged and protected by civil law. In this sense, the opportunity to refuse to take part in the phases of consultation, preparation and execution of these acts against life should be guaranteed to physicians, health-care personnel, and directors of hospitals, clinics and convalescent facilities. Those who have recourse to conscientious objection must be protected not only from legal penalties but also from any negative effects on the legal, disciplinary, financial and professional plane.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. In institutions that do some good and some evil, professionals may be faced with difficult choices.
- f. What are the advantages of cooperation? What are the problems?
- b. What is *formal cooperation* in evil? When is it permissible?

### *Background*

- c. Does conscientious objection protect preborn children, or the consciences of the objectors?

### *Discussion*

- Is it permissible to work as a pro-life counselor inside an abortion facility?
- Discussions of conscientious objection usually refer to the dilemma of health care personnel in a facility where there is killing. Do the same arguments apply to law enforcement personnel when there is a rescue taking place?
- Refusing to take part in evil is a moral duty and a basic human right. What is the obligation of the state toward conscientious objectors? In a society that is already committing evil, who will protect the rights of conscientious objectors?

**“You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Lk 10:27): “promote” life [sections 75–77]**

**75.** God’s commandments teach us the way of life. *The negative moral precepts*, which declare that the choice of certain actions is morally unacceptable, have an absolute value for human freedom: they are valid always and everywhere, without exception. They make it clear that the choice of certain ways of acting is radically incompatible with the love of God and with the dignity of the person created in his image. Such choices cannot be redeemed by the goodness of any intention or of any consequence; they are irrevocably

opposed to the bond between persons; they contradict the fundamental decision to direct one's life to God.<sup>99</sup>

In this sense, the negative moral precepts have an extremely important positive function. The “no” which they unconditionally require makes clear the absolute limit beneath which free individuals cannot lower themselves. At the same time they indicate the minimum which they must respect and from which they must start out in order to say “yes” over and over again, a “yes” which will gradually embrace the *entire horizon of the good* (cf. *Mt 5:48*). The commandments, in particular the negative moral precepts, are the beginning and the first necessary stage of the journey towards freedom. As Saint Augustine writes, “the beginning of freedom is to be free from crimes . . . like murder, adultery, fornication, theft, fraud, sacrilege and so forth. Only when one stops committing these crimes (and no Christian should commit them), one begins to lift up one's head toward freedom. But this is only the beginning of freedom, not perfect freedom”.<sup>100</sup>

## NOTES

99 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 1753-1755; JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (6 August 1993), 81-82: AAS 85 (1993), 1198-1199.

100 *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 41, 10: CCL 36, 363; cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (6 August 1993), 13: AAS 85 (1993), 1144.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding the text*

- a. How strong are the negative moral precepts of God's commandments?
- b. What is the positive function of the negative moral precepts?
- c. What is the beginning of freedom?

### *Background*

- d. What is the “*entire horizon of the good*”? (See *Mt 5:48*.)

### *Discussion*

- What is the beginning of wisdom? Is that the same as complete wisdom? What is the beginning of freedom? Is that the same as full freedom?

**76.** The commandment “You shall not kill” thus establishes the point of departure for the start of true freedom. It leads us to promote life actively, and to develop particular ways of thinking and acting which serve life. In this way we exercise our responsibility toward the persons entrusted to us and we show, in deeds and in truth, our gratitude to God for the great gift of life (cf. *Ps 139:13-14*).

The Creator has entrusted man's life to his responsible concern, not to make arbitrary use of it, but to preserve it with wisdom and to care for it with loving fidelity. The God of the Covenant has entrusted the life of every individual to his or her fellow human beings, brothers and sisters, according to the law of reciprocity in giving and receiving, of self-giving and of the acceptance of others. In the fullness of time, by taking flesh and giving his life for us, the Son of God showed what heights and depths this law of reciprocity can reach. With the gift of his Spirit, Christ gives new content and meaning to the law of

reciprocity, to our being entrusted to one another. The Spirit who builds up communion in love creates between us a new fraternity and solidarity, a true reflection of the mystery of mutual self-giving and receiving proper to the Most Holy Trinity. The Spirit becomes the new law which gives strength to believers and awakens in them a responsibility for sharing the gift of self and for accepting others, as a sharing in the boundless love of Jesus Christ himself.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

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

- a. Is killing a child an act of freedom?
- b. In one paragraph, the pope develops an idea —care for life — through three steps, from natural law to the Old Testament to the New Testament. Mark off each step.
- c. Since Pentecost, Christians are invited to share a new life. What is this life?

### ***Background***

- d. What is the *law of reciprocity*?

### ***Discussion***

- How can the Spirit become a new law?

77. This new law also gives spirit and shape to the commandment “You shall not kill”. For the Christian it involves an absolute imperative to respect, love and promote the life of every brother and sister, in accordance with the requirements of God’s bountiful love in Jesus Christ. “He laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 Jn 3:16).

The commandment “You shall not kill”, even in its more positive aspects of respecting, loving and promoting human life, is binding on every individual human being. It resounds in the moral conscience of everyone as an irrepressible echo of the original covenant of God the Creator with mankind. It can be recognized by everyone through the light of reason and it can be observed thanks to the mysterious working of the Spirit who, blowing where he wills (cf. Jn 3:8), comes to and involves every person living in this world.

It is therefore a service of love which we are all committed to ensure to our neighbour, that his or her life may be always defended and promoted, especially when it is weak or threatened. It is not only a personal but a social concern which we must all foster: a concern to make unconditional respect for human life the foundation of a renewed society.

We are asked to love and honour the life of every man and woman and to work with perseverance and courage so that our time, marked by all too many signs of death, may at last witness the establishment of a new culture of life, the fruit of the culture of truth and of love.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

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

- a. Does the commandment “You shall not kill” include any positive commands?
- b. Who is responsible for protecting the weak and threatened: individuals, or society?

***Background***

- c. The pope asserts that the commandment “You shall not kill” is seen by reason and observed by revelation.
- e. Can everyone understand this commandment, even people who have not yet accepted revelation?

***Discussion***

- Is it possible to build a culture of life, of truth and of love on earth?
- Chapter Three (from section 52 to section 77) applies the commandment “You shall not kill” to our time. How would you characterize this chapter:
  - analysis of a problem
  - reflection in the light of revelation
  - decision, an exercise of authority
  - call to action

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End of Lesson Four

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*Coming next week.*

**WEEK FIVE**

*If you would like to receive an E-mail reminder, please contact:*  
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