

The Gospel of Life in the Church and in the World

Presented by Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila, Bishop of Fargo,
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I want to thank Archbishop Carlson, Bishop Hermann, and the Saint Louis Legatus Chapter for the invitation to address you this morning at the Inaugural Gospel of Life Prayer Breakfast. Thank you too for your presence this morning. The work for life is one that is close to my heart, especially the life of the unborn child.

When I was a pre-med college student in the late 60's, early 70's, I worked as an orderly in the emergency room of the college hospital. Colorado as a state had passed a state abortion law even prior to Roe v. Wade. One evening we were confronted with a unique crisis that forever changed how I viewed abortion. As a college student at a liberal university my conviction on abortion was not strong and faith played little role in my life at that time.

A young woman came into the emergency room who had been sent home by her doctor after a saline abortion. He had told her that she would pass, in her words, the "remains" at home. Instead she came into the emergency room because she was having hard contractions. A few minutes after arriving, she started to hemorrhage and pass the body parts of her unborn child. I remember gazing at a tiny arm and leg and thinking this was an unborn child, a human being forever destroyed. Since that day I have been pro-life.

In my talk this morning I will provide first an overview of *Evangelium Vitae*, the Gospel of Life, as presented in the 1995 encyclical of our late Holy Father John Paul II. It will be only in broad strokes, highlighting important points in the encyclical. In the conclusion, I will briefly state practical ways to live the Gospel of Life in our lives as Catholics and in the world.

In April 1991 Pope John Paul called a special meeting of the College of Cardinals in Rome to discuss the current threats against human life at that time. After their reflections "the Cardinals

unanimously asked [the Holy Father] to reaffirm with the authority of the Successor of Peter the value of human life and its inviolability” (EV 5).

The Holy Father then sent a personal letter to every bishop in the world seeking their concerns and recommendations for a document on human life. The encyclical in the words of the pope is written in communion with all the bishops of the world and is addressed to all the faithful.

The encyclical took four years to see completion, and, appropriately, Pope John Paul signed it on the feast of the Annunciation—the day we celebrate Mary’s reply to the Father to conceive in her womb the Word Made Flesh. Mary welcomed with joy the “Son of the Most High” (Lk 1:12) “the Son of God” (Lk 1:35). Let us now turn to the encyclical itself.

The Gospel of Life

John Paul II began his encyclical with these words, “The Gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus’ message...to be preached with dauntless fidelity to the people of every age and culture” (EV 1). He calls every Catholic to be faithful to the message of Jesus Christ on human life. Furthermore, he notes that we live in times in which there is a great cultural war between a “culture of death” and a “culture of life.” As Catholics we must have the courage to proclaim the culture of life for the common good of society. This is both a duty and responsibility of every Catholic.

The four chapters of the encyclical are: 1) “The Voice of Your Brother’s Blood Cries To Me From the Ground” - “Present-Day Threats to Human Life”; 2) “I Came That They May Have Life” - “The Christian Message Concerning Human Life”; 3) “You Shall Not Kill” - “God’s Holy Law”; and 4) “You Did It To Me” - “For A New Culture of Human Life.” As you can note each section is based on a theme from Scripture.

In the introduction to the Gospel of Life John Paul II cites the threats to human life as articulated by the Second Vatican Council. In EV 3, John Paul II references the Second Vatican Council’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes* (GS 27) and its strong condemnation of attacks against the dignity of human life. The quote is lengthy, yet helps

us to understand that the “culture of death” existed even in 1965, and indeed well before then, and has only grown deeper in our times.

The Council Fathers stated: “Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator.”

1. It is in this light that the Holy Father begins the first chapter of his reflection with the sin of Cain, as the first attack on innocent human life. All of us know the story of Cain and Abel. After Abel is slain, Cain first lies to God that he does not know his whereabouts, and then asks the all telling question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gn 4: 9). And God responds, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground” (Gn 4:10). The innocent blood of Abel cries to the Father of Life. The “supreme dishonor to the Creator” is evident.

The Holy Father then moves into how innocent human life is under attack in our own day. We can observe that the attacks against life articulated in Vatican II have only grown worse over the 40-plus years since the Council. Today in our own country abortion is legal throughout all nine months of pregnancy, euthanasia is actively promoted in some of our states, new fertility treatments create embryos that are often indefinitely frozen or discarded, and embryonic stem-cell research occurs without new therapeutic applications and still with great pressure to support it, even with federal funds.

Globally we observe the plight of innocent human life in the unjust distribution of resources, rampant promiscuity that diminishes the truth and meaning of human sexual intimacy, human

trafficking, drug trafficking, and the presence of terrorism. Most tragically of all, we watch the contradiction of professed Catholics and Christians taking public positions against innocent human life in their so called “pro-choice” positions of personally opposed to abortion but supportive of the so called “right to abortion.” The culture of death has grown to a far greater magnitude than ever imagined by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council.

The Holy Father asks the question “what are the roots” of the “culture of death?” (EV 19) which undermine the value of innocent human life. He highlights four factors. While I will not go into detail on each one, they are important to note for further study and reflection. All four address serious philosophical issues of our day which subvert the value of innocent human life. The first is a misunderstanding of the person as a “subject.” The second is a false understanding of freedom. The third is a loss of the sense of God, and the fourth is an obscuring of the moral conscience.

First, in the misunderstanding of the person as a subject, there is present today the idea that a person only enjoys full autonomy when he emerges from a state of total dependence on others (EV 19). The value of a person is determined by his or her autonomy from others. There is also an idea that “... [equates] personal *dignity with the capacity for verbal and explicit...communication*” (EV 19). These ideas diminish the value of persons who are unborn, handicapped, or terminally ill, as they are dependent on others for their well-being and cannot always communicate. Every human being, regardless of their condition in life, has the inalienable right to life bestowed by the Creator and is a human subject.

Second, in the false understanding of freedom, the pope refers to “*a notion of freedom*” which exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way, and gives no place to solidarity, to openness to others and service of them” (EV 19). Authentic freedom is a gift bestowed by God which “possesses an *inherently relational dimension.*” Freedom when viewed from an absolute point of view, without reference to the relational dimension, leads to an abuse which often times violates the dignity of the human person and is often used by those who support abortion.

Furthermore, there is a separation today between freedom and truth. The Holy Father developed this at length in his encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*. He observes that when freedom is separated from truth this leads to no point of reference between what is good and what is evil, and leads the person to “only his subjective and changeable opinion or, indeed, his selfish interest and whim” (EV 19). This distortion leads to “the shifting sands of complete relativism” in which “*everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining*: even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life” (EV 20).

Third, the loss of the sense of God leads only to the exaltation of secularism and a practical materialism which brings about a rugged individualism, utilitarianism, and hedonism (EV 23). The meaning of suffering is diminished. The human body and human sexuality can be “reduced to pure materiality” as they are no longer seen as a place of relations with God and others but rather become “the occasion and instrument for self-assertion and the selfish satisfaction of personal desires and instincts” (EV 23).

The Holy Father references the impact of the loss of the sense of God in other places in his encyclical. The pope notes, “When God is not acknowledged as God, the profound meaning of man is betrayed and communion between people is compromised” (EV 36). And, he reminds us towards the conclusion of his encyclical, “Where God is denied and people live as though he did not exist, or his commandments are not taken into account, the dignity of the human person and the inviolability of human life also end up being rejected or compromised” (EV 96).

The fourth factor is the loss of the proper notion of moral conscience. Conscience today, rather than understood as the “voice of God” in the human heart which is the same for everyone, is understood more as one’s opinion. There is a notion that conscience can never make erroneous judgments, which is false in light of Church teaching (CCC 1786-1794). Conscience can never contradict the laws of God. John Paul declares that both the individual and social conscience influenced by a false notion of tolerance and by a media which promotes anti-life attitudes and behaviors leads “to an extremely serious and mortal danger: that of confusion between good and evil, precisely in relation to the fundamental right to life” (EV 24).

Towards the end of the section, John Paul II acknowledges that today “we are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the ‘culture of death’ and the ‘culture of life.’ We find ourselves not only ‘faced with’ but necessarily ‘in the midst of’ this conflict: we are all involved and we all share in it, with the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life” (EV 28). The Holy Father in this section lays out the signs of the “culture of death,” the present day ideas that undermine the dignity of innocent human life, and concludes by reminding Catholics, to be “unconditionally pro-life” and to accept this responsibility no matter what the cost. In order to be pro-life we must understand both the inherent dignity of human life and develop a critical eye as to the thoughts and ideas which undermine the truth.

2. The Holy Father then moves to the second chapter of his encyclical, “I Came That They May Have Life” - “The Christian Message Concerning Human Life.” The pope begins with the person of Jesus. “The *Gospel of Life* is something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of *the very person of Jesus*” (EV 29). He notes the many Gospel messages in which Jesus identifies himself with life. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). “I am the resurrection and the life...” (Jn 11: 25). “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10), just to call to mind a few. John Paul declares, “Through the words, the actions and the very person of Jesus, man is given the possibility of ‘knowing’ *the complete truth* concerning the value of human life” (EV 29).

As Catholics we believe in the dignity of human life. The Holy Father notes that “Life is always good... and found everywhere in the Bible...” (EV 34). In the book of Genesis we hear how the Creator has created the human being in his image and likeness, male and female, he created them (Gn 1: 26 ss). God blessed the first couple and gave them a command to be fruitful and multiply. The couple shares in God’s creation through their sexual intimacy. Life is a gift freely bestowed by the Creator, a good that is to be received. Human beings alone share in God’s image and likeness and are given the ability to know, receive and return the love of God. The dignity of human life is determined by God and is always to be protected.

The Holy Father notes that at the heart of the ten commandments is the protection of human life, reflected in the fifth commandment, “You shall not kill” (Ex 20:13). Jesus expands this teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus teaches, “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire” (Mt 5: 21-22). Jesus teaches further that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Mt 5:38-48; Lk 6: 26-27).

The Holy Father then reflects on the death of Jesus and the revelation that in his total gift of his life on the Cross, he gives life to each one of us and to the world. He states in EV 50, “Today we too find ourselves in the midst of a dramatic conflict between the ‘culture of death’ and the ‘culture of life.’ But the glory of the Cross is not overcome by this darkness; rather, it shines forth evermore radiantly and brightly, and is revealed as the centre, meaning and goal of all history and every human life.”

This section thus reminds us that as a people of life we must keep the truth of Jesus Christ and the Cross ever before our eyes! In the midst of the great battle we face, we must never lose hope! In Jesus Christ we have received the gift of life, a life that no one can ever take from us! In the Gospel, he who is true God and true man, Jesus Christ, has revealed to humanity how precious each and every human being is in the eyes of God. He has given his life so that we might have life and reflect the very glory of God!

3. The third chapter of *Evangelium Vitae*, “You Shall Not Kill” - “God’s Holy Law,” presents the core of the teaching in the encyclical. The Holy Father reaffirms the traditional teaching of the Church on the commandment, “You shall not kill.” The commandment has absolute value concerning the taking of innocent human life.

He notes the two instances when the taking of human life is not absolute. The first is in the case of legitimate self-defense. It is far beyond the scope of this presentation to address this teaching and all the moral requirements for a just war. The second is the case for the possibility of

morally legitimate capital punishment. While recognizing the possibility of legitimate use, the pope notes the good of it being prohibited and foresees few instances where it can be used. He states in EV 56, “Today...as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent.”

Due to the grievous attacks on human life today Pope John Paul II reasserts three central teachings of the Catholic faith which may never be changed. The first concerns innocent human life. He declares, “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” (EV 57).

The second declaration addresses abortion. The Holy Father cites the Didache and the Fathers of the Church as well as the consistent teaching of the Church prior to his declaration. “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” (EV 62). Abortion, the direct killing of an unborn human being, is an intrinsic evil and one which can never be justified. The Holy Father also notes the scientific truth that the life of every human person begins at the moment of conception and is thus a distinct human being with the inalienable right to life (EV 60).

The third declaration by the Holy Father concerns euthanasia. Pope John Paul defines euthanasia as “an action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death with the purpose of eliminating all suffering” (EV 65). He explains too in a very careful manner the distinction

between euthanasia and withholding treatment when death is inevitable. If one is near death there can be moral reasons to withhold treatment or to continue pain medication to relieve suffering even if it may hasten death. The Holy Father speaks to human suffering and notes that true compassion is the willingness to share in someone else's pain, and not to kill someone whose pain we cannot bear (EV 66). I limit this discussion here to these few words as it is beyond our topic and could easily be another talk.

The pope also reaffirms the teaching on suicide as a "gravely evil choice" as "...it involves the rejection of love of self and the renunciation of the obligation of justice and charity towards one's neighbor, towards the communities to which one belongs, and towards society as a whole. In its deepest reality, suicide represents a rejection of God's absolute sovereignty over life and death..." (EV 66).

John Paul declares the definitive teaching on euthanasia, when he states, "...in harmony with the Magisterium of my Predecessors 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, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium" (EV 65).

At the conclusion of this chapter John Paul addresses the connection between civil law and moral law. He makes clear the moral responsibility of every Catholic to uphold life in the civil arena. The pope notes that there are authentic moral values that can be known from reason and are objectively true and binding on every human being and are the bedrock of authentic democracy. He states, "...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" (EV 70).

John Paul teaches that any law which is contrary to reason is an unjust law that is not binding on citizens, and that in the case of abortion and euthanasia, “it ceases to be a law and becomes instead an act of violence” (EV 72). Concerning laws on abortion and euthanasia the pope makes clear that “there is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a *grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection*” (EV 73). And I want to extend my sincere gratitude to the doctors, nurses or pharmacists who are present here this morning who have refused to participate in abortions or the distribution of abortifacient drugs. You are a true witness to the Gospel of Life and a true leaven in creating a “culture of life” in the society in which we live.

He further declares, and this is very important for voters and Catholic legislators to hear, “In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is...never licit to obey it, or to ‘take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law, or vote for it’” (EV 73). Unfortunately for some Catholics in the civil arena this teaching has fallen on ears that would rather listen to the voice of the father of lies than to the truth of Jesus Christ and the life he alone offers. Rather than being a leaven in the world for the common good of the world they become cooperators with the “culture of death.”

In summary, section three, makes known to every Catholic the authentic teaching of the Church on the taking of innocent human life, abortion and euthanasia. He delineates the true foundations of a democracy and reminds Catholics of their responsibility to participate in the civil arena to promote a culture of life.

4. In the fourth chapter of the encyclical, “You Did It To Me” - “For A New Culture of Human Life,” John Paul makes the point that the Gospel of Life is an integral part of the evangelizing mission of the Church (EV 78). Every Catholic is called to participate in the promotion of life. “For us, being at the service of life is not a boast but rather a duty born of our awareness of being ‘God’s own people, that we may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light’ (cf. 1 Pet 2:9)” (EV79). In proclaiming Jesus Christ we proclaim life (EV 80).

As baptized Catholics we are called into a living communion within the heart of the Trinity. Our God's deepest desire for every human being is that he or she enters into the communion of love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are invited to be in a personal relationship with each person of the Trinity. This truth recognizes "human life as a life of relationship, a gift of God, the fruit and sign of his love. It is the proclamation that Jesus has a unique relationship with every person, which enables us to see in every human face the face of Christ. It is the call for a 'sincere gift of self' as the fullest way to realize our personal freedom" (EV 81).

The Holy Father reminds us to be teachers of truth. "In the proclamation of this Gospel, we must not fear hostility or unpopularity, and we must refuse any compromise or ambiguity which might conform us to the world's way of thinking (cf. Rom 12:2). We must be *in the world* but not *of the world* (cf. Jn 15:19; 17:16), drawing our strength from Christ, who by his Death and Resurrection has overcome the world (cf. Jn 16:33)" (EV 82).

Important in this mission is personal prayer and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. We build up a culture of life by exercising the virtue of charity in visiting the sick and those in prison, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, reaching out to immigrants, and in building up places that support and welcome human life such as homes for unwed mothers, for destitute mothers, for the dying, for the sick and disabled.

We are to participate in the civil arena and promote life at all times. Here the pope reminds civil leaders of their particular responsibility "to make courageous choices in support of life, especially through *legislative measures*" (EV 90). There can be no backing away in the public square from the call to proclaim the dignity of human life from the moment of conception to natural death.

The Holy Father calls us as Catholics to promote the dignity of family life, the gift of children and the constant maintaining of the unitive or procreative aspects of the conjugal act (EV 92). He calls for us to walk as children of light (Eph 5:8), developing a "*deep critical sense*, capable of discerning true values and authentic needs" (EV 95). This includes first and foremost the

forming of consciences that reestablishes “*the essential connection between life and freedom*” and “*the necessary link between freedom and truth*” (EV 96). In the promotion of a culture of life there must be an education, especially of the young, which leads them to the truth about life, suffering, and death. There must be education in the area of human sexuality and in love that includes teaching the virtue of chastity and the gift of natural family planning, and most especially the nuptial meaning of the body (EV 97).

The Holy Father concludes the encyclical with a zealous plea to Mary the Mother of God, the Mother of Life, who in her motherhood embraces the gift of He who is Life and even bestows life on her. He closes with a fervent prayer to Mary, entrusting to her the cause of life, and seeking her intercession to help us to proclaim the Gospel of life, to accept it with ever greater joy and gratitude, and “to build, together with all people of good will, the civilization of truth and love, to the praise and glory of God, the Creator and lover of life” (EV 105).

Conclusion: The Promotion of a Culture of Life

I will now briefly highlight what we can do in concrete ways to promote a culture of life.

1. As Catholics we place our faith in Jesus Christ. We must know and receive the love that Jesus Christ desires to give us. Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est (DCE)*, *God is Love*, reminded us that “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*DCE* 1). That person is Jesus Christ!

This means we must enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. As the Second Vatican Council taught, and John Paul II never tired of citing, “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (GS 22).

Only through a living faith in the person of Jesus Christ does the human person come to fully understand himself or herself. We must personally pray for the gift of faith each day. In Jesus, we truly become the beloved sons and daughters of the Father. Like any human relationship,

intimacy grows and develops through one's entire life. This relationship is our joy, our deepest desire, and God's will for us. The relationship as the beloved daughters and sons of the Father is most fully lived in union with Christ and the Church; and most especially in the regular reception of the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist and the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture. That is Mass every weekend and Confession at a minimum of once a month.

2. We must continue to educate ourselves in the Catholic faith. We never have full knowledge of our faith or, for that matter, of any subject we may study. None of us would go to a doctor who stopped learning about medicine after he finished medical school. We can continue to grow in knowledge of our faith in order to grow in intimacy with God. Ways we can grow in faith in our personal lives are:

-- The prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture – if you have not read the four Gospels, I encourage you to start with the Gospel of Mark, reading half a chapter a day, or one chapter a day, and go through the whole year reading and praying with the four Gospels.

-- The study of the theology of the body by John Paul II will help us to promote a culture of life. Receiving the gift of the Father's plan for the gift of human sexuality in the nuptial meaning of the body is foundational to building a culture of life and respect for human dignity. There are plenty of easy to read books on the theology of the body as well as DVD's available for Catholics and especially young people. For those of you who are parents it is essential in today's world to speak openly and candidly with your children on human sexuality. Do not make the mistake of letting the culture or their schools form them! I remember a young girl of 15 whose mother brought her to me when I was newly ordained. The girl was pregnant and her mother wanted me to speak with her. As we talked I became aware that the girl really did not know how she got pregnant. I asked her gently and bluntly, "What did you think you and your boyfriend were doing in the garage?" She responded, "I don't know, all I can tell you is it felt good." I turned to the mother and asked her, "Did you ever share the facts of life with your daughter?" To my astonishment the mother responded, "No, that is the school's responsibility." My heart ached for the young girl. Your children are bombarded day in and day out by a promiscuous message that only leads to devastation and unhappiness. Be blunt and direct with them in explaining human sexual intimacy to them and be not afraid. If you are not forming their hearts and minds, the media and their schools will. Also, be certain to have filters on your

computers and monitor your children's computers each week for pornography and other anti-life sites they may happen upon.

-- Read the entire encyclical on the Gospel of Life. Perhaps form a study group in your parishes or read it as a family. Do not attempt to read it all at once. Rather take time to read and digest it, perhaps a chapter at a time.

--Read the sections of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the dignity of the human person and especially on the Fifth Commandment to understand the clear teaching of the Church on human life.

--The proper formation of our consciences is essential and this is possible again through reading the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on conscience.

-- We must speak honestly and directly about abortion and not buy into the politically correct language of the media or society. John Paul II noted in EV 58 that "...we need now to *call things by their proper name*, without yielding to convenient compromises or the temptation of self-deception." There is no place for "ambiguous terminology, such as 'interruption of pregnancy,' which tends to hide abortion's true nature..." (EV 58). In the same paragraph John Paul insists that in procured abortion, no matter what others may say, we are dealing with "murder." We must also challenge people on the notion of imposing our morals on others. Every law imposes a value or moral. A couple years ago I was interviewed by a media person who was questioning me on abortion. She did not like God in the equation of abortion, so I told her that I wanted to ask her two questions without referencing God. She agreed. The first question was "When did your life begin?" She became silent, and I finally said, "You know as well as I do from biology, your life began at the moment of conception in your mother's womb." The second question I asked was, "What gives your life more value today than it did at that time, and who determines that value?" Once again she was silent. She could see that, however she answered, the value was going to be subjective and relative. It is important to ask these types of questions to get people to think about their positions.

3. On the diocesan level, things that could take place to promote life are:

-- There could be the mandating by the archbishop of natural family planning classes for couples preparing for marriage. I started this in Eastern North Dakota five years ago with just 17 instructors for around 400 marriages a year. Engaged couples are required to take the full NFP

course. Within the next few months we will have 24 instructors, many of them young married couples. Each year has seen growth in instructors, but most important is the impact it is having on couples preparing for marriage. More than half plan on using NFP and most are grateful for the classes. How can we be serious about the dignity of human sexuality without providing the faithful the tools to live it out?

-- The promotion in the Catholic high schools of curriculum texts such as *Theology of the Body for Teens*. Young people have found this book extremely helpful in providing them the reasons to be chaste, to save sexual intimacy for marriage, as well as the nuptial meaning of the body and the truth that marriage is possible only between a man and woman.

-- In St. Louis you have the 40 Days for Life campaign. I encourage your participation in 40 Days for Life through prayer, fasting, and participation in the vigils at abortion clinics. If you are unaware of 40 Days for Life, visit the website. Simply Google, "Forty Days for Life" and all the information will come up on your computers. In the three years that we have participated in 40 Days we know the lives of over 30 unborn children were saved. One life alone makes the prayer and fasting worth it. We began our fourth year of participation in 40 Days this very morning with an ecumenical prayer service on the sidewalk outside of North Dakota's only abortion facility.

-- Rachel's Vineyard is another vital diocesan program that gives outreach to women who have had abortions. Many women who have had abortions later repent and it takes time for the wounds to heal. Rachel's Vineyard helps in this healing process. All of us as priests know in hearing Confessions the shame, guilt, and pain a woman has once she realizes what she has done and how she believed the lies fed to her. Rachel's Vineyard communicates the compassion of Christ as it is he and he alone who can forgive and heal such a wound.

Finally, and most challenging, is the promotion of the culture of life in society. Catholics in the political arena today are too often more faithful to party platforms and partisanship than to their faith in Jesus Christ, his Church, and the promotion of a "culture of life." There is a false separation between one's private life and faith and one's public life and faith. This started with President Kennedy as he ran for the presidency. As citizens we must take seriously our opportunities to vote and to provide an encouraging witness to those who represent us through letters, calls, emails and other forms of communication.

Today some Catholic politicians who support abortion hide behind the lies of “pro-choice” or not wanting to “impose their morality” on others. Yet they strongly support other life issues by opposing capital punishment, seeking just treatment for immigrants, and correctly understanding that part of just governance is ensuring the dignity of human life. Quite rightly, they do not consider this to be “imposing morality” in these areas, but rightly responding to the dignity of the human person. There may also be politicians who are pro-life with respect to abortion, euthanasia and embryonic stem-cell research, yet who support capital punishment and policies that result in the oppression of immigrants. They seem to forget to opt for the dignity of the human person in these cases, and they choose to be more faithful to their party platform than to their Catholic faith that calls one to a complete and comprehensive defense of human dignity.

Catholics in the political arena must recognize that opposition to intrinsic evils, such as abortion, euthanasia, genocide, embryonic stem-cell research and same sex unions is always required by the faithful Catholic. Because these intrinsic evils are direct attacks on human life and marital dignity, they are non-negotiable for every Catholic.

Every Catholic who supports intrinsic evils is reminded that they will one day stand before the judgment seat of God and give an account of themselves and how they lived the Gospel of Life. Furthermore, if they obstinately maintain their support for pro-abortion, pro-euthanasia measures they should refrain from receiving Holy Communion and causing scandal to the faithful of the Church. One sees in the Gospel too that Jesus was most unyielding with those who were obstinate to his message. One has only to read the twenty-third chapter of Matthew. If a Catholic has continuously publicly supported so called abortion rights they are obstinate to the teaching of Christ and His Church. They need to ponder in their hearts the question that Jesus raises with the obstinate. In firm love he asks, “how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (Mt 23: 33).

At the same time, as pro-life Catholics, we must have concern for immigrants, the suffering, the sick and the poor. We must work for the avoidance of war, the elimination of the death penalty and an end to drug-trafficking. If we are truly going to be pro-life and build a true culture of life,

all of these are matters of concern. We must remember the words of Jesus, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25: 40). While there can be legitimate differences regarding solutions for the questions for some issues which are not intrinsic evils, the inherent dignity of the human person from the moment of conception to natural death must be the lens through which all decisions are made.

In closing, I thank you again for the opportunity to offer these reflections to you. I encourage you, as Catholics, to promote a culture of life. This must begin with each one of you, reflecting on how you personally place your faith in Jesus Christ, support his truth and teaching in your families, educate yourselves, form your consciences, and participate in the civil arena.

I encourage you to pray. Pray most especially for the conversion of the hearts and minds of those who support intrinsic evils that they may come to acknowledge the dignity of the human person and promote a “culture of life”. Pray for the conversion of the hearts and minds of those who support a “culture of death” in the public arena, especially for Catholics who have opted against life and the Gospel. Pray for the obstinate of mind and heart that they may come to know the truth. Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies (Matt. 5:44) and he himself forgave his enemies from the Cross. We are to do no less. Only prayer will lead to a true conversion of heart and mind, and to the truth of Jesus Christ and the abundant life he promises to us. Made stronger by prayer, may each of us work untiringly for a culture of life and live faithfully the Gospel of Life. May the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit fill your hearts and grant you fortitude in the proclamation of the Gospel of Life. Thank you.