

Pope St. John Paul II's Challenge to Our Church:

The Inspiration for *Walking with Moms in Need*



On March 25, 2020, the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, the Church celebrates the 25th anniversary of the papal encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*). This prophetic document, written by a great saint of our time, Pope John Paul II, reaffirmed the Church's constant teaching on the value and inviolability of every human life.

In this encyclical, the Holy Father explains that the Gospel of Life is at the *heart* of Jesus' saving message to the world. Through the Incarnation of Christ, God reveals to us the dignity of all human life. Each of us is made in the image and likeness of God, reflecting his glory and his imprint. We are therefore called to "respect, defend and promote the dignity of every human person, at every moment and in every condition of that person's life."¹

Evangelium vitae highlights the special and particular role of women in bearing the gift of life to the world. Pope John Paul II offers heartfelt thanks to these "heroic mothers," who, placing their trust in God, "devote themselves to their own family without reserve, who suffer in giving birth to their children and who are ready to make any effort, to face any sacrifice, in order to pass on to them the best of themselves."²



Pope John Paul II also outlines the many challenges that expectant mothers may face, including lack of support from the father, financial strains, concerns about her own health or that of her child, and pressures from family and friends. The Holy Father recognizes that an "unborn child is totally entrusted to the protection and care of the woman carrying him or her in the womb."³ For this reason, it is particularly important that the Church come alongside mothers, offering them encouragement, assistance, and support.

Through Christ, we have received the gift of the Gospel of Life in its fullness. As members of the Church, we are the *people of life and for life*. It is our duty to proclaim the truth of the Gospel of Life to the world, for "*to proclaim Jesus is itself to proclaim life*."⁴ Pope John Paul II tasked us with building a culture of life to combat the forces at work in the culture of death. He challenged us:

*With great openness and courage, we need to question how widespread is the culture of life today among individual Christians, families, groups and communities in our Dioceses. With equal clarity and determination we must identify the steps we are called to take in order to serve life in all its truth.*⁵

In honor of *Evangelium vitae*'s 25th anniversary and in answer to Pope John Paul II's call, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Pro-Life Activities has launched a nationwide effort beginning March 25, 2020 entitled, ***Walking with Moms in Need: A Year of Service***. Parishes, through the support of their bishops and pastors, are invited to join this effort to increase the Church's outreach and support to pregnant women facing difficult or unexpected pregnancies. This special anniversary year provides the Church with an opportunity to assess, expand, and better communicate resources to pregnant moms and families in need.

Pregnant and parenting moms in need are in our parishes and our neighborhoods, but in desperation, they are turning to other places for help. We know the needs and challenges can be immense

for women in difficult pregnancies, especially women in poverty, and the sources for help may not be apparent to those most needing support. Women facing challenging pregnancies should see the Church as a place where they can find help, especially with its extensive social services dedicated to meeting the needs of people in crisis.

Through the *Year of Service* the Church is being asked to respond to Pope John Paul II's call and honestly assess the pastoral and practical assistance that it currently provides to pregnant moms and families in need and how effective it is in communicating such help.

Pope John Paul II wrote that, "gratitude and joy at the incomparable dignity of the human person impel us to share [the Gospel of Life] with everyone."⁶ He said we need to bring this message "to the hearts of all people and make it penetrate every part of society."⁷ By reaching out to lovingly support and care for pregnant women and their children, we witness to the sanctity of every human person, in every stage and every circumstance.

Evangelium vitae emphasizes that, "where life is involved, the service of charity must be profoundly consistent. It cannot tolerate bias and discrimination, for human life is sacred and inviolable... We need then to 'show care' for all life and for the life of everyone."⁸ Pope John Paul II highlights the incredible history of service and charity that the Church has provided throughout the centuries to those abandoned and forgotten by society. He urges that "every Christian community, with a renewed



sense of responsibility, must continue to write this history."⁹

We are called to reverence and love every human person as ourselves. It is our responsibility to care for and protect human life, especially the lives of the most vulnerable among us. *Evangelium vitae* teaches us that "the task of accepting and serving life involves everyone; and this task must be fulfilled above all towards life when it is at its weakest."¹⁰

Pope John Paul II wrote, "the Gospel of God's love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the Gospel of life are a single and indivisible Gospel."¹¹ The Gospel of Jesus *is* the Gospel of Life, and to love Jesus is to love and serve life. As followers of Christ, may we strive to continually respond to the needs of the poor and vulnerable entrusted to us by God.

For this Year of Service, the USCCB Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities will be providing educational, pastoral, and action-oriented resources to help parishes go to the peripheries and bring hope and help to mothers in need. Through the combined efforts of parishes nationwide, we hope to move closer to the day when every pregnant mother in need knows where to turn for help, and abortion is unthinkable. Visit WalkingWithMoms.com to learn more and to pledge to prayerfully walk with mothers in need.

Excerpts from *Evangelium vitae* © 1995, Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with permission. All rights reserved. iStock.com/Drazen ; iStock.com/RyanJLane; Models used for illustrative purposes only. Photos used with permission. All rights reserved. Copyright © 2020, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC. All rights reserved.

1 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), 81.

2 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 86.

3 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 58.

4 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 80.

5 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 95.

6 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 80.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 87.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 43.

11 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 2.