

Excerpts from

## ***Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life\****

*In our present social context, marked by a dramatic struggle between the "culture of life" and the "culture of death," there is need to develop a deep critical sense, capable of discerning true values and authentic needs.*

*What is urgently called for is a general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort to activate a great campaign in support of life. All together, we must build a new culture of life.*

—Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)*, no. 95

### **Introduction**

We issue this *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life* (USCCB 2001) to put forth “a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability, and at the same time a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person, in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life” (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 5).

As pastors and teachers, we proclaim that human life is a precious gift from God; that each person who receives this gift has responsibilities toward God, self, and others; and that society, through its laws and social institutions, must protect and nurture human life at every stage of its existence. These beliefs flow from ordinary reason and from our faith's constant witness that “life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception” (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, no. 51)—a teaching that has been a constant part of the Christian message since the apostolic age.

### **A Consistent Ethic of Life**

A wide spectrum of issues touches on the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity. As Pope John Paul II has reminded us: “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 at every stage and in every situation; it is an indivisible good” (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 87).

Among important issues involving the dignity of human life with which the Church is concerned, abortion necessarily plays a central role. Abortion, the direct killing of an innocent human being, is always gravely immoral (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 57); its victims are the most vulnerable and defenseless members of the human family. It is imperative that those who are called to serve the least among us give urgent attention and priority to this issue of justice.

This focus and the Church's commitment to a consistent ethic of life complement one another. A consistent ethic of life, which explains the Church's teaching at the level of moral principle—far from diminishing concern for abortion and euthanasia or equating all issues touching on the dignity of human life—recognizes instead the distinctive character of each issue while giving each its proper place within a coherent moral vision. As bishops of the United States we have issued pastoral letters on war and peace, economic justice, and other social questions affecting the dignity of human life—and we have implemented programs for advancing the Church's witness in these areas through parishes, schools, and other Church institutions (e.g.,

*Communities of Salt and Light* [1994], and *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching* [1998]). Taken together, these diverse pastoral statements and practical programs constitute no mere assortment of unrelated initiatives but rather a consistent strategy in support of all human life in its various stages and circumstances.

To focus on the evil of deliberate killing in abortion and euthanasia is not to ignore the many other urgent conditions that demean human dignity and threaten human rights. Opposing abortion and euthanasia “does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence and injustice. Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing and health care” (*Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, no. 23). We pray that Catholics will be advocates for the weak and the marginalized in all these areas. “But being ‘right’ in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life. Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community” (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 23).

### **Pervasive Threats to Human Life**

Where does one begin? Today, when human rights are proudly proclaimed and the value of life itself given public affirmation, the most basic of all human rights, “the very right to life,” “is being denied or trampled upon, especially at the more significant moments of existence: the moment of birth and the moment of death” (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 18). Sometimes very difficult or even tragic situations can be the basis for decisions made against life, circumstances that can diminish the personal culpability of those who make choices that in themselves are evil. But as Pope John Paul II points out, today the problem goes further: “It is a problem which exists at the cultural, social and political level, where it reveals its more sinister and disturbing aspect in the tendency, ever more widely shared, to interpret ... crimes against life as legitimate expressions of individual freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights” (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 18).

The question “Where does one begin?” is easy to answer: “We must begin with a commitment never to intentionally kill, or collude in the killing, of any innocent human life, no matter how broken, unformed, disabled or desperate that life may seem” (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 21).

Thus some behaviors are always wrong, always incompatible with our love of God and the dignity of the human person. Abortion, the direct taking of innocent human life prior to birth, is always morally wrong, as is the deliberate destruction of human embryos for any reason. Assisted suicide and euthanasia are not acts of mercy but acts that are never morally acceptable. Direct attacks on innocent civilians during war and terrorist acts targeting noncombatants must always be condemned.

Our concern is only intensified by the realization that a policy and practice that result in well over a million deaths from abortions each year cannot but diminish respect for life in other areas. In this pastoral plan, then, “we are guided by a key insight regarding the linkage

between abortion and these other important issues: Precisely because all issues involving human life are interdependent, a society which destroys human life by abortion under the mantle of law unavoidably undermines respect for life in all other contexts. Likewise, protection in law and practice of unborn human life will benefit all life, not only the lives of the unborn” (*Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Reaffirmation* [1985], 5). This is why we focus here on the pervasive threat to human life arising from the widespread recourse to abortion, from public policies that allow, encourage, and even fund abortion, and from a growing effort to promote the taking of human life through euthanasia.

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\* In November 1975, the U.S. Catholic bishops approved for publication the *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities*, activating the Church, its people, and its institutions in a three-prong program in defense of human life (education, pastoral care, and public policy). In 1985 the Plan was updated and the revised *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Reaffirmation* was adopted by the bishops and approved for publication in November of that year. In 2001, the *Plan* was again updated and submitted by the Committee for Pro-Life Activities to the full body of bishops for approval. At their meeting in November 2001, the U.S. Catholic bishops reaffirmed and approved for publication the *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life*”  
—from the authorization of the 2001 edition

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## RESOURCES

Copies of the resources quoted here are available from [USCCB Publishing](#). The full texts are online for reference as follows:

The USCCB statement *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities* is at [usccb.org/prolife/pastoralplan.shtml](http://usccb.org/prolife/pastoralplan.shtml) .

The USCCB statement *Communities of Salt and Light* is at [usccb.org/sdwp/saltandlight.shtml](http://usccb.org/sdwp/saltandlight.shtml) .

The USCCB statement *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions* is at [usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/contents.shtml](http://usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/contents.shtml) .

The USCCB statement *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics* is at [usccb.org/prolife/gospel.shtml](http://usccb.org/prolife/gospel.shtml) .

Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Living the Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)* is at [usccb.org/prolife/tdocs/evangel/evangeli.shtml](http://usccb.org/prolife/tdocs/evangel/evangeli.shtml) .

Pope Paul VI’s apostolic constitution *Gaudium et Spes* on the Vatican Web site is at [vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) .

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