

Encyclical attacks spreading 'culture of death'

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — In his new encyclical letter, Pope John Paul II calls for a return to "the Gospel of life" to overcome a growing "culture of death."

The long-anticipated encyclical on the value and inviolability of human life was released today (March 30). It is titled *Evangelium Vitae* — "The Gospel of Life."

At the heart of the encyclical is an urgent plea to reverse world trends toward social acceptance and legalization of abortion and euthanasia — attacks on life's value at its weakest points.

"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," the pope says.

This means no one can permit "the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person or one suf-

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fering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying," he says.

"Nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action," he adds.

The pope invokes the same authority of Christ and communion with the world's bishops to condemn all direct abortion as "a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being."

By the same logic that applies to abortion, he says, "the use of human embryos or fetuses as an object of experimentation constitutes a crime against their dignity as human beings."

The pope attributes the trends toward devaluing of human life in part to "a profound crisis of culture," which he says has led many to lose their moral bearings.

Condemning efforts to legalize the

destruction of life, he says, "Democracy cannot be idolized to the point of making it a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality."

He roundly condemns "powerful cultural, economic and political currents" today that have unleashed "a war of the powerful against the weak... a kind of 'conspiracy against life.'"

Against those currents he proposes a return to the Gospel. He opens the encyclical with the declaration, "The Gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus' message."

"Every human community and the political community itself" are founded on recognition of "the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end," he says.

The encyclical caps years of strenuous papal efforts to reawaken the world's conscience to a new sense of human dig-

nity and the sacredness of life.

The pope sharply denounces abortion, artificial contraception, sterilization, infanticide and euthanasia — elements widely expected since 1991 when he announced his intention to write an encyclical on human life.

But he challenges other threats to life as well, including capital punishment. In "a system of penal justice ever more in line with human dignity," he says, the extreme cases in which the death penalty may be justified "are very rare, if not practically nonexistent."

Early in the encyclical, Pope John Paul II hits hard at "the violence against life done to millions of human beings, especially children, who are forced into poverty, malnutrition and hunger because of an unjust distribution of resources."

"And what of the violence inherent not only in wars as such but in the scandalous arms trade, which spawns the many armed conflicts which stain our world with blood?" he asks. "What of the spreading of death caused by reckless tampering with the world's ecological balance, by the criminal spread of drugs, or by the promotion of certain kinds of sexual activity which, besides being morally unacceptable, also involve grave risks to life?"

Setting the primary focus of the encyclical, he adds: "Here though we shall concentrate particular attention on another category of attacks, affecting life in its earliest and in its final stages."

At 194 pages in the English version, the encyclical is the longest of the 11 Pope John Paul II has issued in his 16-plus years as pope.

It carries forward several key themes developed in his 1993 encyclical on the foundations of morality, *Veritatis Splendor* ("The Splendor of Truth").

As he did in the 1993 document, the pope argues that the problem today is not just the continuing existence of evil and sin, but widespread cultural relativism and individualism in which any sense of sin is severely distorted or even lost.

"Decisions that go against life sometimes arise from difficult or even tragic situations," and these can make a person less at fault for the evil done, the pope says.

"But today the problem goes far beyond the necessary recognition of these personal situations," he adds. "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."

He calls it "a perverse idea of freedom" and a "surprising contradiction" to deny the very right to life in the name of human rights and freedom.

Woven through and through with reflection on Scripture, the new encyclical is divided into four main chapters, each developed thematically around a key story or passage from the Bible.

Chapter 1, "The Voice of Your Brother's Blood Cries to Me from the Ground," reflects on the Genesis account of Cain's murder of Abel.

It sees in God's question to Cain — "What have you done?" — a call to people today to confront the reality of attacks on the sacredness of human life and resensitize their consciences to the evil of "crimes against life."

In Abel's response — "Am I my brother's keeper?" — it sees the basic issue today of an individualistic view of freedom divorced from truth and responsibility toward others.

Chapter 2, "I Came That They May
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Letter combines fervor, call to obedience

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II's latest encyclical is both a cry from the heart and a laying down of the moral law, a two-fold approach aimed at stemming the tide of such anti-life practices as abortion and euthanasia.

From the heart, the pope pleads and reasons with his potential readers, trying to awaken consciences to what he calls the "sinister" mentality that justifies attacks on the unborn and the dying.

From the throne of Peter, he brings the weight of papal authority in confirming these practices as gravely sinful, making clear that this moral injunction — as a direct expression of natural law — extends to doctors, nurses, legislators, population planners and those in the mass media.

In the end, combining personal fervor and a broader call to obedience makes *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life") much more than another pro-life statement.

Addressed to "all people of good will," the 194-page treatise is deliberately calculated to provoke and animate lay Catholics who may think pro-life issues are not their thing as well as the wider circles of social and civil leaders, who may consider this encyclical an intrusive tap on the shoulder.

Perhaps the boldest example is the pope's insistence — he states it twice — that laws allowing abortion and euthanasia are not morally binding, and in fact require "conscientious objection" by the faithful.

The pope realizes his message will challenge people who feel uncomfortable applying moral absolutes to decisions involving the unborn and the dying. But halfway through the encyclical, he steps back and says in simple language why he wrote it: "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 compromise."

Plain language and a surprisingly familiar tone are hallmarks of *Evangelium Vitae*. The text is less concerned with mustering theological arguments than with engaging readers' consciences through human images and biblical lessons.

For example, in appealing to potential mothers who may face the choice of abortion, the pope asks them to consider the innocence of the unborn. He personalizes his argument by evoking the first cry of life.

"He or she is weak, defenseless, even to the point of lacking that minimal form of defense consisting in the poignant power of a newborn baby's cries and tears," he says.

For families trying to deal with an elderly or terminally ill member, the pope questions the "misplaced compassion" that would lead them to view euthanasia as a humane solution and reminds them that unless they see a value in suffering, they do not understand Christ's sacrifice.

To those indifferent to abortion or other threats against society's weakest, the encyclical persistently recalls God's rebuke to Cain, who asked after killing Abel: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes, the pope replies, and he wants that answer to keep echoing in the reader's mind.

But the encyclical will no doubt make its greatest immediate impact in the social sphere, where the pope has identified a wider "network of complicity" in attacks on life.

Some of the papal teachings, if followed, could have serious repercussions in the medical profession. That is particularly true where the pope spells out a "grave and clear obligation" to employ conscientious objection opposing laws that allow abortion and euthanasia.

The entire range of health-care workers, he states, must be guaranteed the opportunity to refuse to take part in the phases of consultation, preparation and execution of any acts against life. Moreover, these conscientious objectors should be protected from legal penalties and from negative effects

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