

Catholic Courier

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'Evangelium Vitae'

Pope: Fulfillment found through love for life

By ROB GULLIVAN
STAFF WRITER

It only took Pope John Paul II two years to catch up with the Rochester diocese in issuing his latest encyclical, "Evangelium Vitae" ("The Gospel of Life"), according to Jack Balinsky, diocesan director of Catholic Charities.

"Teasingly, we say now that the Diocese of Rochester has recognized the consistent ethic of life, the pope has fallen in line," Balinsky quipped.

Balinsky also serves as diocesan administrator of the consistent life ethic goal, selected as the diocese's No. 2 goal by delegates to the 1993 Diocesan Synod. In "Evangelium Vitae," the pope speaks at great length about the consistent life ethic, which denounces all threats to life such as abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, pollution, poverty and war.

"Society as a whole must respect, defend and promote the dignity of every human person, at every moment and in every condition of that person's life," the pope writes.

The encyclical could not have been more timely, Balinsky noted, coming as it did just as New York's legislature adopted the death penalty. The pope states emphatically that capital punishment should only be used when "it would not be possible otherwise to defend society." Such cases in modern society, the pope says, "are very rare if not practically nonexistent."

Sister Patricia Schoelles, SSJ, president of St. Bernard's Institute in Rochester, noted that "Evangelium Vitae" will serve as a useful teaching tool in her own efforts to teach about morals and the consistent life ethic.

She welcomed the pontiff's emphasis on how people's individualism leads to indifference to one another — an apathy that manifests itself in such evils as the arms race, ecological destruction, and the unjust distribution of resources.

"That's a strong indictment of our economy, our culture and what it does to people," she said.

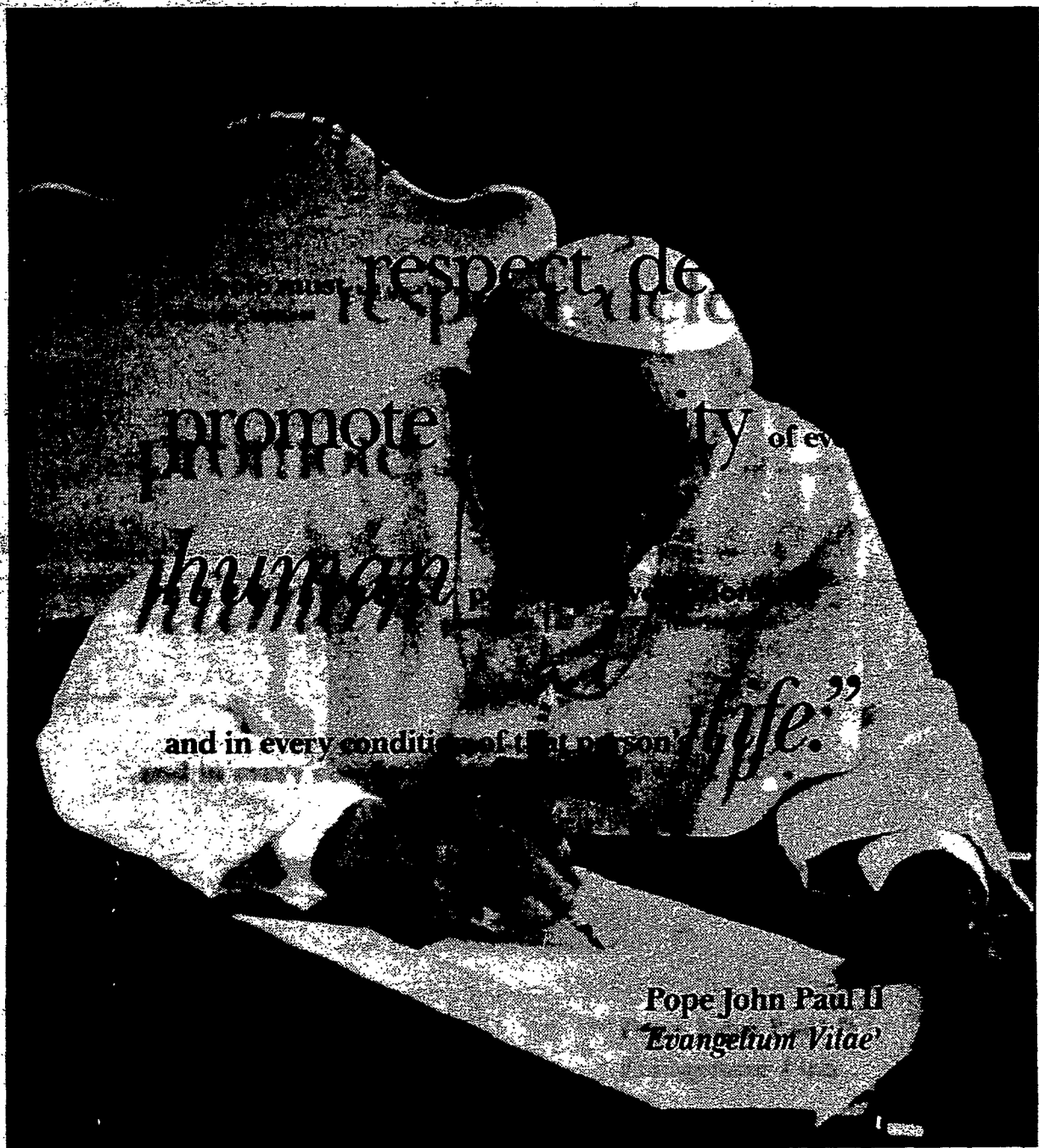
Sister Schoelles also praised the encyclical's reiteration of the Second Vatican Council's denunciation of various attacks on human life in the document, "Gaudium et Spes — The Church in the Modern World." That document lists a hosts of evils from slavery to genocide as examples of "supreme dishonor to the Creator."

As did other commentators, Sister Schoelles found interesting the pope's use of Scripture in "The Gospel of Life." Using the story of Cain and Abel to provide the document with a scriptural framework, the pope notes that the much of the modern world answers Cain's haunting question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" with a resounding "no!"

"We cannot but think of today's tendency for people to refuse to accept responsibility for their brothers and sisters," the pope comments. "Symptoms of this trend include the lack of solidarity toward society's weakest members — such as the elderly, the infirm, immigrants, children — and the indifference frequently found in relations between the world's peoples even when basic values such as survival, freedom and peace are involved."

Worse, yet, the modern world has so embraced rugged individualism and misplaced notions of freedom that it has forgotten that much of life's meaning lies in service to others, the pontiff writes.

"If the promotion of self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another," he



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writes. "Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself."

Those "enemies" include the unborn, the young, the elderly and the sick, the pope stresses. Such groups place demands on the able-bodied, demands that many such people see as burdens to be fled rather than duties to be fulfilled, he adds.

Yet, despite his strong condemnation of forces that combine to create a "culture of death," the pope contrasts this with an upbeat meditation on Christ's Gospel of life. He calls for a renewal of commitment on the part of the church to preaching this Gospel and living by its implications.

"In light of this truth St. Irenaeus qualifies and completes his praise of man," the pope observes. "The glory of God' is indeed 'man, living man,' but 'the life of man consists in the vision of God.'"

The pope praises those who serve society's most vulnerable members, and asks all people to make choices at the "personal, family, social and international level" to enhance life.

"Other people are not rivals from whom we must defend ourselves, but brothers and sisters to be supported," the pope asserts. "They are to be loved for their own sakes, and they enrich us by their presence."

The encyclical brings to fruition a process initiated by the church's cardinals in April, 1991, when they asked the pontiff for an encyclical on human life. The Vatican also consulted the world's bishops for input into the pontiff's 11th encyclical, which, by most accounts, is his most eloquent and clearly written document.

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Father McBrien's column deals with the encyclical. Turn to page 12