

Encyclical calls for reevaluation on issues

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Pope John Paul II's new encyclical, "The Gospel of Life" ("Evangelium Vitae"), may not break much new moral ground, but it is surely more emphatic than previous Vatican documents in reaffirming the church's official teaching on abortion and euthanasia.

Indeed, the pope comes as close to portraying such teachings as infallible, without actually doing so. In three places he uses a special formula to underscore their importance: "... by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I ..."

Significantly, the pope does not do that in the case of contraception. Indeed, he acknowledges that contraception is of a different moral order than is abortion. The one is a violation of chastity, the other is a violation of justice, since it involves the taking of life.

Only those who know little about theological discussions within the Catholic Church will expect there to be any meaningful dissent against the encyclical's central teachings. Catholic theologians are in fundamental agreement with the church's doctrine on abortion and euthanasia.

Some of them might question the manner in which the teaching is communicated in this document — whether the tone is too authoritarian, thereby impeding rather than encouraging dialogue with the many who disagree with that teaching.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Others may wish the teaching had been more nuanced so as to acknowledge possible rare exceptions to the moral prohibitions against abortion. Would it always be morally wrong, for example, to abort a fetus with no brain (a relatively rare condition known as anencephaly), and therefore with absolutely no possibility of a life other than vegetative?

And if we are to regard the fertilized ovum as an individual human person from the very beginning, as the encyclical clearly implies, how is this compatible with the biological fact that the process of twinning (the separation into two distinct embryos, or twins) occurs approximately within the first 6-10 days following fertilization?

Nevertheless, the encyclical's central teaching on abortion and euthanasia is clear and one would expect that it would elicit virtually unan-

imous acceptance by theologians. Whether it will also be accepted by Catholics generally is another matter.

There are many, in fact, who claim that they disagree with the church's teaching on abortion. For some it is a matter of personal autonomy, others have a different evaluation of the human quality of the fetus.

The new encyclical challenges such Catholics to reconsider their position and, if possible, to bring it into conformity with the church's teaching. Whether the encyclical will achieve that purpose is another matter.

Most of the disagreement over abortion within the Catholic Church, however, has less to do with its morality than with its legal and political implications.

For that reason perhaps, the pope devotes a considerable amount of space to the relationship between the moral law and civil law. He repeats earlier statements from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which are critical of politicians who support or advocate legislation permitting abortion or euthanasia. The encyclical views such activities as a form of cooperation in moral evil.

The pope suggests that some people in public life will have to make difficult choices that "may require the sacrifice of prestigious professional positions or the relinquishing of reasonable hopes of career advancement."

At the same time, the pope himself avoids the all-or-nothing approach that is prevalent in some pro-life quarters. He allows for the possibility of compromise "when it is not possible to

overturn or completely abrogate a pro-abortion law."

In such circumstances, he says, an elected official "could licitly support proposals aimed at limiting the harm done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality" (emphasis in text).

As for the citizenry at large, he insists that unjust and immoral laws, "completely lacking in authentic juridical validity," are not to be obeyed. He counsels instead the way of conscientious objection. But he also explicitly rejects recourse to violence as a means of opposing such laws — a point that should not be lost on the more extreme elements of the pro-life movement.

While it is true that the encyclical breaks no real moral ground on abortion and euthanasia, it is the first papal pronouncement of its kind that condemns capital punishment, saying that the circumstances justifying it are so rare as to be practically non-existent.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, cites this teaching on capital punishment as "an important doctrinal advance." He even acknowledges that the pope's opposition to the death penalty is far stronger than the new Catechism of the Catholic Church and he notes that the Catechism will have to be amended accordingly.

The many pro-life Catholics, especially politicians, who are also pro-death penalty will now have to reevaluate their position in light of the encyclical.

Too bad there's no such thing as work ministry

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

"For the past five years I have been attempting to join work and faith more closely in my own life, and I have discovered that I have never been very good at it," writes Thomas Smith, a former priest who is currently an operations manager for American Airlines and the author of "God on the Job: Finding God Who Waits at Work" (Paulist Press, 1995).

What makes Smith's confession especially interesting is that he has spent much of his work life in formal church ministry as a teacher in a Catholic high school, director of religious education on both a parish and a diocesan level, and as a diocesan director of RENEW and communications.

"Even when I was in formal church ministry," he writes, "there was a separation between personal faith and planning and executing work activi-



FAITH AND WORK

ties ... I admit that when I was preaching regularly, I thought of the workplace as a very remote arena for God's activity. I concentrated on what I knew: scripture, sacraments, theolo-

gy, church."

Having been laicized, married and had children, and having entered the secular work force, however, Smith has been forced to learn what most lay people know from the time they take their first job: "It is difficult to find God at work, if the assumption is that God isn't really there anyway," and "Very little theology or spirituality has focused on the work experience as such."

Smith gives many reasons for the failure on the part of the church to help people make the connection between their faith and work. He points out that most theologians, homilists and spiritual writers generally don't work in the secular world. He also notes that the church provides many activities that help people make the connection between their faith and other parts of their lives — education, family, community involvement, for example — but few to help people find God at work.

"In all areas of life except work, we are free to behave explicitly as believers."

"In all areas of life except work," he argues, "we are free to behave explicitly as believers. Not only are we free to express our faith but we have church support for many of these activities. In fact, many of these faith activities have become formal 'ministries.'"

"But there is no work ministry." Yet what Smith has discovered as a layman is that "until we are able to integrate work and faith by finding God, and meaning, in and at work, we will not have an integrated, mature faith. The integration is not just a matter of bringing faith to work; it is even more a matter of discovering the Godpresence that is already there ... We cannot be content with the prevailing separation between work and faith. Work-faith needs to move closer to the center of our life."

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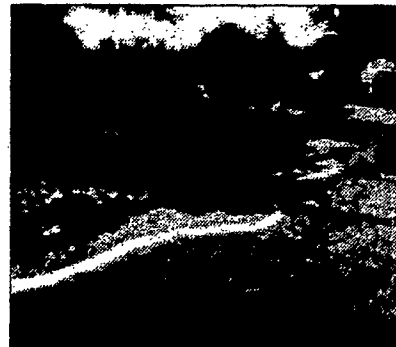
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