

# To Life!

September 28, 1995

A Special Section of the Catholic Courier

## 'Evangelium Vitae' labeled modern era death culture

By J. Augustine Di Nosa, OP

On March 25, 1995 — the feast of the annunciation — Pope John Paul II signed the 11th encyclical of his pontificate, "Evangelium Vitae" ("The Gospel of Life"). In remarks after its publication, the Holy Father called the encyclical "a message of hope" to counter modern threats to human life and to invite everyone to "protect, defend, and love life, which is a daily miracle of God's tenderness."

Although sin and violent death have been part of human history from earliest recorded times, certain aspects of our modern "culture of death" are especially disquieting. For example, the state is no longer the "common home" where all may live in peace. Weapons of mass destruction — missiles, bombs, chemical warfare — are employed against one's own countrymen and women over ethnic, cultural, religious, or political differences.

Today the drug epidemic and its criminal activity destroy lives and turn neighborhoods into battlegrounds.

No longer the place of unconditional love and support, the modern family often seems to coalesce and disband according to whether relationships are mutually beneficial. Where burdens seem to outweigh benefits, people often turn to divorce, abandonment, euthanasia, abortion, and infanticide.

Against this gloomy backdrop, the encyclical unveils a glorious vision of humanity as God sees us, creatures made resplendent by his inexhaustible love. Human beings have been given a sublime dignity based on the intimate bond which unites each of us to our Creator. God shares with us his power to create human life. What mother and father alone could give their child an eternal soul? With the gift of human life comes the solemn responsibility to care for, protect, and defend every human life; to love one another even as God loves us.

It follows from this that violence against human life is a "supreme dishonor to God." However serious or tragic may be the circumstances that impel a woman to seek an abortion, circumstances can never justify the deliberate killing of an unborn child.

The encyclical also teaches that the moral responsibility for an abortion is shared by

those who pressure or encourage the mother to have an abortion, by the abortionist and those in the health-care community who indirectly facilitate abortion, by legislators who promote and approve laws legitimizing abortion, by organizations that campaign for legalized abortion, and even by the media and public opinion shapers who encourage sexual permissiveness and a lack of esteem for motherhood.

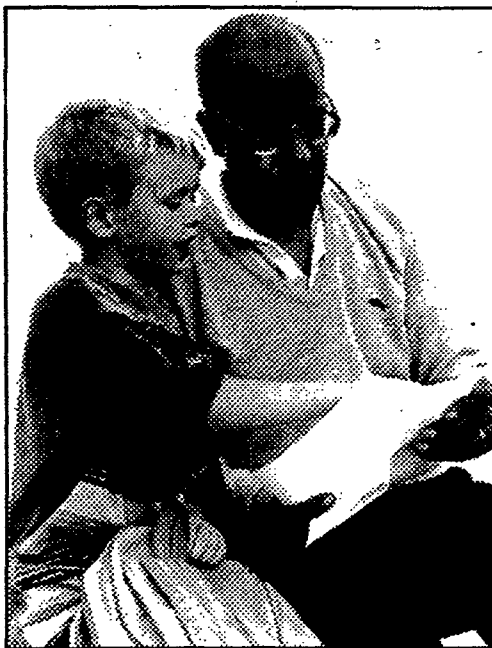
The encyclical states that the same "evaluation of the morality of abortion is to be applied also to the recent forms of intervention on human embryos which, although carried out for purposes legitimate in themselves, inevitably involve the killing of those embryos."

Similarly condemned are methods of artificial reproduction which — apart from other moral considerations — result in a high risk of death to artificially created embryos, the discarding of "excess embryos," and the "selective reduction" of unborn children already thriving in the womb to enhance the survival prospects of siblings.

At the other end of life, when human beings can again become totally dependent on the care and concern of others, moral confusion likewise abounds. Even when not motivated by a selfish refusal to be burdened with the suffering of others, euthanasia must be called a false mercy, the encyclical says. "True compassion leads to sharing another's pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear."

Highlighted in "Evangelium Vitae" is the church's teaching that capital punishment, rather than enhancing respect for human life, contributes to what Pope John Paul II calls the "culture of death."

At a time when many in this nation seek to broaden the death penalty's application, often in response to people's fears about escalating violence and impatience with the judicial system, the encyclical makes clear the church's teaching that the life of another — even one guilty of a heinous crime — must be taken as a last resort if that is necessary to protect the country's citizens. But cases where capital punishment might be justifiable in today's society "are very rare, if not practically nonexistent."



## Faithful for Life

A MORAL REFLECTION

## U.S. bishops call on nation to end grave attacks on life

By Jerry Filteau  
Catholic News Service

CHICAGO — During their June 15-17 spring meeting in Chicago, the U.S. Catholic bishops overwhelmingly approved a statement — which will be released publicly Sept. 28 — condemning abortion and euthanasia as "particularly grave" attacks on human life.

The 29-page statement, titled "Faithful for Life," calls advances in abortion and euthanasia in the name of human freedom "freedom gone wrong."

In a meeting marked by sharp divisions and lengthy debates over liturgical issues, the bishops approved "Faithful for Life" by a 207-1 margin June 16 with almost no debate.

The statement compares legal abortion and proposals of legal euthanasia in America to the nation's former denial of human rights to blacks in slavery. It also compares them to this century's Nazi campaigns to exterminate Jews, Slavs, Gypsies and the mentally ill on the basis of theories that classified those groups as "subhuman."

It addresses the major themes and teachings of Pope John Paul II's recent encyclical on life issues, "Evangelium Vitae" ("The Gospel of Life").

The papal encyclical, it says, "reminded us that the modern phenomena of abortion and euthanasia highlight a crying need to respect, protect, love and serve human life."

According to the statement, the widespread "disdain for life" that has made abortion and euthanasia acceptable to many Americans today is rooted "in the breakdown of the family."

There has been a "decay of inviolable trust" within families

— between spouses, between parents and children and between adult children and their elder parents — it says.

It says the church's primary concern is to form consciences on these issues, even though the bishops are sometimes perceived as being interested only or primarily in legislation.

"Faithful for Life," subtitled "A Moral Reflection," was drafted by the Committee on Pro-Life Activities of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, chaired by Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles.

In linking abortion and euthanasia to a breakdown of fidelity in family relations, the statement — like the papal encyclical — criticizes "an individualistic concept of freedom" which "severs the true meaning of freedom from its moorings and distorts social life." This notion of freedom, it says, "extols a society in which individuals stand side by side but have no bonds holding them together."

"In the course of a very few years," it says, "many people have come to think of an unplanned baby as an unwanted baby and of an undesired baby as an undesirable one. The prescribed social remedy has been to put an end to the baby's life before he or she can make a claim on yours."

It describes a similar dynamic behind the acceptance of euthanasia: "Some even believe that a parent or a spouse who has lost the capacity to fend for herself or himself, or is too old or sick to be a good companion, or for whom the cost of care is hard to bear, should be helped to die."

"It is cruelly ironic that the thought of eliminating one's child or one's parent could be

considered an acceptable, even altruistic, action," the text says.

It acknowledges the often "tragic and painful" problems that may lead a woman to an abortion decision but says that "none of these circumstances, however serious or tragic, gives a parent a right to kill his or her child before birth."

It also acknowledges that people dealing with questions of death and dying often face complex and anguishing dilemmas, but it says such dilemmas never justify "the violation of life known as euthanasia."

"A genuine respect for life abhors euthanasia and assisted suicide as attacks on life," the statement says. "At the same time, it does not require us to impose the burdens of overtreatment on persons near death ... The capacity to manage pain, to prevent isolation and to offer a comforting presence to patients we cannot cure, is essential to the health care profession and is among its duties to patients."

The statement emphasizes the primary role of the bishops as that of moral teachers.

"Our public statements on abortion and euthanasia have often responded to events in the legislative and social order," it says. "This has unfortunately fed a misunderstanding, both within the church and without, that we look only to laws and government to assure society of justice." On the contrary, it says. "Helping to inform the consciences of our Catholic people is our first priority."

At the same time, it says, the bishops as citizens have a right and duty to insist that "the laws and policies of the United States" protect human rights including "the foremost 'unalienable right' of life itself."