

Evangelium Vitae

The encyclical entitled “Evangelium Vitae,” meaning “The Gospel of Life,” was promulgated on 25 March 1995 by Pope John Paul II in Rome, Italy. The document was written to reiterate the view of the Roman Catholic Church on the value of life and to warn against violating the sanctity of life. The document focuses on right to life issues including abortion, birth control, and euthanasia, but also touches on other concepts relevant to embryology, such as contraception, in vitro fertilization, sterilization, embryonic stem cell research, and fetal experimentation.

The document begins with a discussion of some of the threats to human life that the world faces, and touches very generally on the Church’s stance on killing. It reaffirms the idea that man must never deliberately kill or assist in killing another human, as the act disobeys one of the Ten Commandments and is against natural moral order. Later in the document, Pope John Paul II discusses the death penalty, stating that it is a form of murder and is therefore unholy and unlawful. He then refers to euthanasia as a “grave violation of the law of God” because it, like murder, is a form of deliberate killing, which is unacceptable to perform on human beings according to the natural law, the word of God, and the traditional teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

In discussing abortion in passage sixty-two, Pope John Paul II agrees with Pope Paul VI’s condemnation of abortion because it is the direct killing of a human. As stated in “Humanae Vitae”, the Church finds that “direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder.”

In addition to general condemnations of abortion, Pope John Paul II also used “Evangelium Vitae” to reject modern techniques of prenatal diagnosis (when performed with the intention of providing selective abortions), chemical abortion methods (such as the RU-486 pill), unnatural methods of fertilization or artificial insemination, sterilization for birth control purposes, and other direct interventions aimed at preventing, artificially creating, or destroying the product of conception. Government policies that provide international aid only to nations with population control plans were also denounced. The document did, however, seek to convey concern and support for post-abortive women.

The letter concludes by stating that direct and intentional euthanasia, murder, and abortion are grave sins that the Roman Catholic Church has condemned throughout history. “Evangelium Vitae” was written to address the value of human life and maintains that societies and individuals, especially Christians, should do everything in their power to preserve this life. Any direct form of killing is prohibited. The contribution made by “Evangelium Vitae” to the body of literature surrounding embryology comes in its specific discussion of abortion as prohibited at any stage, from conception and the earliest embryonic stages, and its reaffirmation of the historic teachings of the Church.

Sources

1. John Paul II. “Evangelium Vitae.” The Vatican: The Holy See. http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0141/_INDEX.HTM (Accessed September 12, 2007).