Introduction

The Gospel of Life is at the heart of Jesus’ message. It is good news to the people of every age and culture. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (Jn. 10:10)

The recent encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, The Gospel of Life, is a vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life. It is an appeal to work together for justice and solidarity so that a new culture of human life will be affirmed for the building of an authentic civilization of truth and love.

In his encyclical, the Pope challenges us with the awesome question: do our daily choices contribute to the building of a culture of life or a culture of death?

In each area of society: the family, medicine, law, education, commerce, politics, the media, individuals daily make important choices which form our culture. Today, choices once unanimously considered criminal and rejected by the common moral sense are becoming socially acceptable.

What follows is a summary of the encyclical. It is offered in the hope that you will be moved to study the full text and make its message and recommendations part of your lives. All passages in italics are quotations from the encyclical.
**A culture of death**

Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self destruction, whatever violates the dignity of the human person such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them ... poison human society.

We face the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity ... [and] takes the form of a veritable “culture of death”. This culture is actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency. It is, in a certain sense, a war of the powerful against the weak.

**Are we each other’s keepers?**

In humanity’s earliest days, Cain asked the question we still face. Yes, we are each other’s keepers, because God entrusts us to one another ... [and] gives everyone freedom, a freedom which possesses an inherently relational dimension. Freedom is at the service of the person and his or her fulfilment through the gift of self and openness to the other.

Around the globe various human rights declarations acknowledge the value and dignity of every individual as a human being. How do we reconcile these noble declarations with the refusal to accept those who are weak and needy or elderly or those who have just been conceived?

This remarkable contradiction is rooted in a mentality which really only recognizes rights for the person who enjoys full or at least developing autonomy and who emerges from a state of dependance on others. Such a mentality also tends to equate personal dignity with the capacity for verbal and explicit, or at least perceptible, communication.

This leaves no room in the world for anyone who, like the unborn or the dying, is a weak element in the social structure or anyone who appears completely at the mercy of others and radically dependant on them and can only communicate through the silent language of a profound sharing of affection.
Freedom of choice for whom?

When the sense of God is lost there is also a tendency to lose the sense of the value of human dignity and life. Freedom negates and destroys itself and becomes a factor leading to the destruction of others when it no longer recognizes and respects its essential link with the truth. People end up making choices based only on subjective and changeable opinions or selfish interests and whims instead of choices based on the truth about good and evil.

Society becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side but without any mutual bonds. Reference to common values and to a truth binding on everyone is lost and relativism takes over. Everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargain, even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life itself. Life is no longer considered a splendid gift of God entrusted to our loving care.

Practical materialism

The eclipse of a sense of God and of the value of the human person fosters individualism, utilitarianism and permissiveness. The values of being are replaced by the values of having. The quality of life is interpreted primarily or exclusively as economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure.

Interpersonal relationships are seriously impoverished in this materialistic perspective. The first to be harmed are women, children, the sick and the suffering, and the elderly. Personal dignity is replaced by the criterion of efficiency, functionality and usefulness. Sexuality is depersonalized and exploited. People are considered, not for what they are, but for what they have, do, and produce.

In such a context suffering is not seen as an occasion for possible human growth, but is rejected as useless and opposed as an evil, always and every way to be avoided. When it cannot be avoided then the temptation grows to claim the right to suppress it, to eliminate it at the root, even by hastening death.

Lights and shadows

There are also positive signs at work in our world today. Many couples generously accept children as the supreme gift of marriage. Centres give practical support to mothers and families in difficulty and movements in defence of life have sprung up all over the world. Developments in medical science offer much promise for the unborn, the suffering and those who are dying.

Physicians from around the world who aid people affected by war or disasters are a sign of a growing solidarity among peoples, a praiseworthy human and moral sensitivity and a greater respect for life. There are also countless daily acts of unselfishness by caregivers of the sick, the elderly, and the disabled. Increasing attention is being given to quality of life, ecology and the ethical implications of life issues, especially in the area of bioethics.

Our current situation with its lights and shadows ought to make us all fully aware that we are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the “culture of death” and the “culture of life”. We are in the midst of this conflict and have the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life.

You shall not kill

To defend and promote all of human life, to show reverence and love for it, is a task which God entrusts to each of us.

Life is always a good

Human life is always a good because it comes from God, sharing in his very breath of life. We are God’s gift, image and imprint.
Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the “creative action of God” and it remains forever in special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end.

Human life is inviolable; no one can claim the right to destroy directly an innocent human being.

**Abortion**

The decision to have an abortion can be tragic and painful for the mother, when she believes she is trying to protect her own health, or a decent standard of living for her family, or fears the terrible living conditions that the child could face. But these reasons, however serious, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.

Other people also participate in the responsibility for the terrible decision to end a life. The father may pressure the mother directly to abort the child, or indirectly by leaving her alone to face the responsibility and the problems. Sometimes pressure comes from parents or other members of the family or from friends.

Doctors and nurses are also responsible when they place at the service of death the skills acquired for promoting life: as are legislators who promote and approve abortion laws; those who operate centres where abortions are performed; those who encourage sexual permissiveness and denigrate motherhood. One cannot overlook the international institutions, foundations and associations which campaign for the legalization and spread of abortion.

Abortion thus becomes a most serious wound inflicted not only on individuals and their families who should provide the sanctuary for life, but inflicted as well on society and its culture, by the very people who ought to be society’s promoters and defenders.

**Euthanasia**

At the other end of life’s spectrum, we face the mystery of death. Science and medicine are now able to treat cases formerly considered untreatable, to reduce or eliminate pain, to sustain and prolong life even in situations of extreme frailty and to resuscitate artificially patients whose basic biological functions have collapsed.

The question arises of controlling death. Euthanasia is understood to be an action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death with the purpose of eliminating all suffering. Even when not motivated by the refusal to be burdened with the life of someone who is suffering, euthanasia must be called a false mercy. True compassion leads to sharing another’s pain, not killing the person whose suffering we cannot bear.

The choice of euthanasia becomes even more serious when it takes the form of a murder committed by others on a person who has in no way requested it and who has never consented to it.

**Disproportionate means**

However, euthanasia must be distinguished from the decisions to forego aggressive medical treatment disproportionate to any expected results. It needs to be determined whether the means of treatment available are objectively proportional to the prospects for improvement. To forego extraordinary or disproportionate
means is not the equivalent of suicide or euthanasia; it rather expresses acceptance of the human condition in the face of death.

Pope Pius XII affirmed that it is licit to relieve pain by narcotics even when the result is decreased consciousness and a shortening of life, “if no other means exists and if in given circumstances this does not prevent the carrying out of other religious and moral duties.”

Suicide

Suicide is always morally objectionable. While certain psychological, cultural and social conditions may induce a person to such an action and thus lessen subjective responsibility, objectively suicide is a gravely immoral act.

To concur with the intention of another person to commit suicide and to help in carrying it out is to co-operate in and at times to be the actual perpetrator of an injustice which can never be excused even if it is requested.

A culture of life

One characteristic of present day attacks on life is the demand for legal justification of them as if they were rights and the claim that it should be possible to exercise these so-called rights with the safe and free assistance of doctors and medical personnel.

Democracy stands or falls with the values it embodies and promotes. These values cannot be based on provisional and changeable “majority opinions”. Consequently, there is a need to recover the basic vision of the relationship between civil and moral law. The real purpose of civil law is to guarantee an ordered social existence in true justice. Civil law must ensure that all members of society enjoy certain fundamental rights which innately belong to the person.

The issue of life, its defence and promotion is not a concern for Christians alone. This question arises in every human conscience which seeks truth and which cares about the future of humanity. The value at stake is one which every human being can grasp by light of reason: thus it necessarily concerns everyone.

The cultural change needed demands from everyone the courage to adopt a new life-style consisting in making practical choices — at the personal, family, social and international level — on the basis of the primacy of being over having, of persons over things. This renewed life-style involves passing from indifference to concern for others, from rejection to acceptance of them.

Renewing our culture

We need to begin with the renewal of a culture of life within Christian communities themselves. Believers can find themselves basing decisions on emotional and personal subjective criteria separated from the ethical requirements of their Christian faith. We must recognize this and identify the steps we are called to take in order to serve life in all its truth.

The first step is forming consciences with regard to the incomparable and inviolable values of every human life and to re-establish the essential connection between life and freedom and recover the necessary link between freedom and truth.

Closely connected to forming consciences is the work of educators who teach the value of human life from its very origin; authentic education in sexuality and love; training for married couples in responsible parenthood; and an understanding of suffering
and death with their profound mystery in all its harsh reality.

A unique responsibility belongs to health care personnel. Their profession calls for them to be guardians and servants of human life, affirmers not manipulators of life.

Biomedical research which promises great benefits for humanity must always reject experiments, research or applications which disregard the inviolable dignity of the human being.

Civil leaders, called to serve people and the common good, have a duty to make courageous choices in support of life, especially through legislative measures. We must encourage politicians to make those choices which, taking into account what is realistically attainable, will lead to the re-establishment of a just order in the defence and promotion of life.

The role of the family in building a culture of life is decisive and irreplaceable. Parents must lead their children to an authentic freedom and cultivate in them respect for others, a sense of justice, generous service, solidarity and other values which help people live the gift of life, as well as teaching them the true meaning of suffering.

The welcomed presence of the elderly in the family is of fundamental importance in creating a climate of mutual interaction and communication between the different age groups.

It is therefore a service of love to which we are all committed to ensure our neighbour that his or her life may be always defended and promoted, especially when it is weak or threatened. It is not only a personal but a social concern which we must all foster: a concern to make unconditional respect for human life the foundation of a renewed society.

For us too, Moses’ invitation to the Israelites rings out loud and clear: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse, therefore choose life that you and your descendants might live.” (Dt. 30: 19)