

THE VALUE OF LIFE
THE PRESENT TIME
THROUGH THE PRISM
OF ST JOHN PAUL II'S
ENCYCLICAL
EVANGELIUM VITAE

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IN WARSAW

THE MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II'S ENCYCLICAL *EVANGELIUM VITAE* IN THE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY OF LIFE

Evangelium Vitae ("The Gospel of Life") – an encyclical of John Paul II promulgated on 25 March 1995, discusses the values and sanctity of human life¹. Life constitutes a natural good, a fundamental value. In the world as well as in theology, the discourse on human life is constantly exploring its meaning and essence. The theology of the Catholic Church, based on the Holy Bible and Tradition, attempts to convey the truth about life in terms both of philosophy and of faith. This paper will first outline the basic message of the Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, which points to the temporal and eternal dimension of human life and to life as a gift of God entrusted to man and at the same time to the call of man to love. From that perspective, marriage and conjugal love gain a special dignity which will be presented in the second part. Part three is focused on family as the space where life is given and accepted as a gift; as a consequence, family has a special obligation to protect life. Finally, man – created in God's image and likeness – is called to cooperate with God in the interest of life. However, to perform detailed analysis of the theological meaning of the message of *Evangelium Vitae*, we must use both some documents of the Catholic Church published before 1995, and also those promulgated by the successors of Pope John Paul II.

1. THE PRIMARY MESSAGE OF *EVANGELIUM VITAE*

Evangelium Vitae of John Paul II presents the issues of respect for human life as the fundamental value given to man, from which all other values may

¹ John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (25 III 1995), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html [access: 01.06.2017]. Later: EV.

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be derived and realised². Consequently, the encyclical contains an objection against the death penalty, abortion, and euthanasia. The sole disposer of human life and its length is God. Even if one does not believe in God, one still has a duty to respect human life because of the dignity of one's humanness and to respect other people. John Paul II shows the value of life as a vocation with both temporal and eternal dimensions. This perspective changes the nature of human existence as a material-spiritual being, gives it meaning, and creates a perspective of active life, also in transcendent terms. The Pope states:

Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals *the greatness and the inestimable value* of human life even in its temporal phase. Life in time, in fact, is the fundamental condition, the initial stage and an integral part of the entire unified process of human existence. It is a process which, unexpectedly and undeservedly, is enlightened by the promise and renewed by the gift of divine life, which will reach its full realization in eternity (cf. 1 John 3:1-2). At the same time, it is precisely this supernatural calling which highlights *the relative character* of each individual's earthly life. After all, life on earth is not an "ultimate" but a "penultimate" reality; even so, *it remains a sacred reality* entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters (EV, no. 2).

The source of life is life: from generation to generation it is transmitted to children by their parents. That continued and repeated cycle is always a result of a gift – in theology deemed as a gift from God. He gave the beginning to human life. God's revelation, a message from God to man, has been *added and attached to* natural life. Christ became a selfless gift of life for us. Through the redeeming actions of Christ that were done in the spirit and body of the Son of God, man was again raised to the level of the complete love of God. Christ, as the Son of God, assumed human form to save human beings and bring them again to the transcendent dimension of life with God, beyond the boundaries of natural death. At the same time, through his sacrifice, he revealed to man his (man's) vocation. The Pope reminds us:

Furthermore, Christ's blood reveals to man that his greatness, and therefore his vocation, consists in the *sincere gift of self*. Precisely because it is poured out as the gift of life, the blood of Christ is no longer a sign of death, of definitive separation from the brethren, but the instrument of a communion which is richness of life for all. Whoever in the Sacrament of the Eucharist drinks this blood and abides in Jesus (cf. John 6:56) is drawn into the dynamism of his love and gift of life, in order to bring to its fullness the original vocation to love which belongs to everyone (cf. Gen 1:27; 2:18-24) (EV, no. 25).

² Some anthropological and theological aspects of *Evangelium Vitae* are discussed in: Z. Struzik, *Przesłanie Świętego Jana Pawła II. Materiały edukacyjne*, Warszawa 2014, pp. 109-113.

To sum up, due to his innate nature and the commandment of God, man is destined to love and must develop this gift within himself to attain fulfilment in temporal and eternal dimensions. What is only reflected in *Evangelium Vitae* was clearly formulated by John Paul II already in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979)³:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it (RH, no. 10).

God is always accompanying man with love and accompanying man's love. As a result, God constantly transforms human life – gives it meaning and action. Redemption by Christ is not just individual but also social. The vocation to love shows to every man the value of life which is lived in the community of blood, marriage, culture, tradition, economy, social and political organization. People are social beings due to their nature and God's calling. A person is not created out of himself and does not exist for himself. Like Christ, each one of us is a gift of ourselves. Life is a gift from God and for God. We receive life from God as a gift, to fulfil it, make good, spiritual and material goods, to share the good. The value of life of each person at every stage of their existence has its unique and distinct meaning. The great work of God creating life was raised to the status of redemption through the sacrifice of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Every man was redeemed, spiritually rescued by the blood of our Saviour, and the testimonial of that is found in the New Testament. John Paul II writes:

The Creator has entrusted man's life to his responsible concern, not to make arbitrary use of it, but to preserve it with wisdom and to care for it with loving fidelity. The God of the Covenant has entrusted the life of every individual to his or her fellow human beings, brothers and sisters, according to the law of reciprocity in giving and receiving, of self-giving and of the acceptance of others. In the fullness of time, by taking flesh and giving his life for us, the Son of God showed what heights and depths this law of reciprocity can reach. With the gift of his Spirit, Christ gives new content and meaning to the law of reciprocity, to our being entrusted to one another. The Spirit who builds up communion in love creates between us a new fraternity and solidarity, a true reflection of the mystery of mutual self-giving and receiving proper to the Most Holy Trinity. The Spirit becomes the new law which gives strength to believers and awakens in them a responsibility for sharing the gift of self and for accepting others, as a sharing in the boundless love of Jesus Christ himself (EV, no. 76).

The revelation of the will of God the Father cannot mislead people. Therefore, our life has a supernatural dimension, and in its existence it is temporal and at the same time eternal. It is meant to be a reflection of the mystery

³ John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (4 III 1979), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html [access: 29.04.2017]. Later: RH.

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of the Holy Trinity in love, in giving and receiving. Acceptance of the principles of faith depends on the effort of the believers, on turning towards the teachings of the Church, and opening to the working of God's Grace⁴.

2. CONJUGAL LOVE AND MARITAL DIGNITY

If the vocation of man is love, and God entrusted man with the care for life, then marital and parental love gain a special dignity. Already the Second Vatican Council indicated the nature of marital love resulting in parental love which in turn is necessary for the gift of life to continue and be transferred from generation to generation. This message and this gift reflect the love of God the Creator. In the Council's document *Gaudium et Spes*⁵ we read:

Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents. The God Himself Who said, "it is not good for man to be alone" (Gen 2:18) and "Who made man from the beginning male and female" (Matt 19:4), wishing to share with man a certain special participation in His own creative work, blessed male and female, saying: "Increase and multiply" (Gen 1:28). Hence, while not making the other purposes of matrimony of less account, the true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Saviour. They should realize that they are thereby co-operators with the love of God the Creator, and are, so to speak, the interpreters of that love (GS, no. 50).

Physical fertility is related to spiritual fertility, as parents are co-operators of God in raising new members of the Kingdom of Heaven. Parenthood is at the same time an invitation to cooperate with God to educate the supreme value – a child, a new human person. Physical care and spiritual education of a person is a great work and the highest good that may be given by the family, blessed by God and accepted by society.

It was stressed equally strongly by Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* (25 July 1968)⁶. Marital dignity results from the dignity of the husband and wife. Their mutual love has its source in God. Observing any marriage, we find this divine element as a gift continuously repeated for many couples, but reserved exclusively for couples made of a male and a female. The gift of mutual conjugal love is reciprocal,

⁴ Cf. Z. Struzik, *Przesłanie Świętego Jana Pawła II. Materiały edukacyjne*, Warszawa 2014.

⁵ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (7 XII 1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html [access: 29.04.2017]. Later: GS.

⁶ Paul VI, Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (25 VII 1968), http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html [access: 29.04.2017]. Later: HV.

lasting and fertile, directed at building a family community. This is what Paul VI writes about it:

Married love particularly reveals its true nature and nobility when we realize that it takes its origin from God, who "is love", the Father *from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named* (HV, no. 8).

The Church, by the command of Christ, holds the authority as the Magisterium of Church to convey certain and true teachings on the dignity of conjugal community, and also on the matters of the spirit and the body⁷. Also the exhortation of John Paul II *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981)⁸ shows the foundation of human, conjugal and family love, based on the love of God to people. The love of God to man supports spouses in maintaining love and faithfulness. Pope John Paul II reminds us:

The family, which is founded and given life by love, is a community of persons: of husband and wife, of parents and children, of relatives. Its first task is to live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons.

The inner principle of that task, its permanent power and its final goal is love: without love the family is not a community of persons and, in the same way, *without love the family cannot live, grow and perfect* itself as a community of persons. What I wrote in the Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* applies primarily and especially within the family as such (FC, no. 18).

Human love is communal, directed at establishing a family, the source of life, love, and education of a new man. It is continuous cooperation with God. John Paul II in his *Wednesday Catechesis*⁹, building a theological anthropology of man, said that it finds its source in the likeness of man to God. The most a man becomes like God is in the menial mystery of the love of others. John Paul II writes:

Created in the image of God, man is both a corporeal and spiritual being. Bound to the external world, he also transcends it. Besides being a bodily creature, as a spirit he is a person. This truth about man is an object of our faith, as is the biblical truth about his being constituted in the "image and likeness" of God. It is a truth constantly presented by the Church's Magisterium during the course of the centuries. In the course of history, this truth has not ceased to be the object of intellectual analysis, both in the sphere of philosophy and of many other human sciences. In a word, it is the object of anthropology¹⁰.

⁷ Cf. theology of the body by John Paul II. On this topic see, for example, J. Kupczak, *Dar i komunija. Teologia ciała w ujęciu Jana Pawła II*, Kraków 2006; P. Kopycki, *Elementarz teologii ciała według Jana Pawła II*, Częstochowa 2013; J. Merecki, *Corpo e trascendenza - L'antropologia filosofica nella teologia del corpo di Giovanni Paolo II*, Siena 2015.

⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 XI 1981), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html [access: 29.04.2017]. Later: FC.

⁹ The series includes catechesis delivered during Wednesday general audiences in the period: 5 September 1979 – 2 April 1980; 11 November 1981 – 9 February 1983; 23 May – 28 November 1984. A new edition in English based on the John Paul II Archives: *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, transl. Michael Waldstein, Boston 2006.

¹⁰ John Paul II, Catechesis *Man Is a Spiritual and Corporeal Being* (16 IV 1986), no. 1,

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The truth about man is needed by each person individually and by whole human communities. The man and human communities must understand and practice reciprocal love. As Benedict XVI wrote in Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*¹¹ (25 December 2005), marriage and family combine the concepts of *eros*, *philia* and *agape* and realise them in common love. God is Love, and the man is the image of that love:

That love between man and woman which is neither planned nor willed, but somehow imposes itself upon human beings, was called *eros* by the ancient Greeks. Let us note straight away that the Greek Old Testament uses the word *eros* only twice, while the New Testament does not use it at all: of the three Greek words for love, *eros*, *philia* (the love of friendship) and *agape*, New Testament writers prefer the last, which occurs rather infrequently in Greek usage. As for the term *philia*, the love of friendship, it is used with added depth of meaning in Saint John's Gospel in order to express the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. The tendency to avoid the word *eros*, together with the new vision of love expressed through the word *agape*, clearly point to something new and distinct about the Christian understanding of love (DC, no. 3).

The mystery of love is understood jointly with the mystery of creation and redemption of human being. That is why the sacrament of marriage is so close to the sacrament of Eucharist. The sacrament of marriage is a sign of the presence of Christ as God. Christ is invited into the marriage and is always present in that relationship, sanctifies it and leads to salvation, through reciprocal love. In the *Instructions of the Polish Episcopate on preparation for marriage in the Catholic Church*¹² (13 December 1989), compiled by the Committee for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, we read:

http://web.archive.org/web/20081225020436/http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/list_1_en.html [access: 01.06.2017]. Anthropological analyses of Pope John Paul II have their source in the anthropology of Karol Wojtyła which was related to axiology and focused on the discovery of the sources of human dignity. Humanness is the essence of a rational human being. The man himself is a testimony to his extraordinary origin and his transcendence is reflected in his actions. Philosophical thoughts on the subject of good and evil were depicted in Karol Wojtyła's books: *Love and Responsibility* (first edition in English 1981; transl. G. Ignatik, new and updated ed., Boston 2013), and then the study *The Acting Person* (transl. A. Potocki, ed. and rev. in collaboration with the author by A.T. Tymieniecka, D. Reidel, Dordrecht – Boston – London 1979): "This is why reading this book (*The Acting Person* – Z.S.) may be of great assistance to us also to understand fully many encyclicals of this Pope, or even to understand historic importance of his pontificate in general," R. Buttiglione, *Kilka uwag o sposobie czytania "Osoby i czynu"*, in: Karol Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne*, ed. T. Styczeń et al., Lublin 2011, p. 12. The axiology of Karol Wojtyła drew from some earlier thoughts of Max Scheler, Jean Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, but also Vladimir Solovyov and Fyodor Dostoyevsky (cf. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, New York 1995). Karol Wojtyła formed the concept of personalistic norm in the book *Love and Responsibility* from the pastoral perspective. Personalistic norm is a translation of the commandment of love to the language of philosophical ethics.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (25 XII 2005), http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html [access: 29.04.2017]. Later: DC.

¹² Komisja do spraw Kultu Bożego i Dyscypliny Sakramentów Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja*

Marriage, already as a work of nature created by God, from the beginning of its existence, according to the intention of the Creator, serves the redemption of man, however, God's plans are realised in marriage raised by Christ to the importance of a sacrament (no. 1).

Understanding the great mystery of God contained in the mystery of family and conjugal love requires preparation and understanding of one's dignity and uniqueness; and the mystery of human love is connected with the mystery of faith, extends it to God, makes it transcendent anthropologically and theologically. Teachings on love and marriage are summarised by Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*¹³ (29 June 2013):

Love cannot be reduced to an ephemeral emotion. True, it engages our affectivity, but in order to open it to the beloved and thus to blaze a trail leading away from self-centredness and towards another person, in order to build a lasting relationship; love aims at union with the beloved. Here we begin to see how love requires truth. Only to the extent that love is grounded in truth can it endure over time, can it transcend the passing moment and be sufficiently solid to sustain a shared journey (LF, no. 27).

The teachings of the Church on the sacramental nature of this relationship of baptised people is clear, certain and based on the evangelical teachings of Jesus Christ. Discovering the mystery of family and conjugal love, all parties participate in the essence of God who is Love.

3. THE OBLIGATION TO DEFEND LIFE IN FAMILY

The fundamental commandment of love is realised in God's commandment: *Thou shalt not kill* (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17; Matt 19:18). This is something more than respect for one's own and others' lives; it is also the obligation to protect life, to help and serve in saving and supporting life. And even more: transmission and protection of life is an obligation of every man and every community. The life of every person has an exclusive, unique, and superlative value. In our life and through living, we experience all other temporal and eternal values. The law of God, and every human law following it, is based on this sacred, great value of life. And the value of life is expressed in its defence, respect, and transmission to next generations. Only when this is accepted, can we talk about making other legal regulations, in relation to an individual person or a collection of people

Episkopatu Polski o przygotowaniu do zawarcia małżeństwa w Kościele katolickim, http://www.duszpasterstwo.rodzin.gniezno.opoka.org.pl/upload/files/dokumenty_kosciola/instrukcja_o_przygotowaniu_do_zawarcia_malzenstwa.pdf [access: 29.04.2017].

¹³ Francis, Encyclical *Lumen Fidei* (29 VI 2013), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html [access: 29.04.2017]. Later: LF.

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constituting a group or a large community. The existence of humans is supported by the Creator, Saviour, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The whole Holy Trinity is, one could say, “interested” in the life of every person, and as a result this life gains greater value – temporal and eternal.

Human life is created, born and developed in a family based on the marriage of a male and a female. The sense of *being a man* is a woman, and the sense of *being a woman* is a man. This is dictated by human nature, expressed in gender: genetic, hormonal, psychological, and social. Gender is related to the ability to transmit life in natural cooperation with God. Family is the most appropriate and beneficial environment for the conception and birth of a new person out of God’s and human will. In the family, based on human love, a person is educated and shaped; in the family, people learn basic values which – accepted and applied as a result of the bond with others and with God – make a person dignified, responsible, useful and happy. Parents assume responsibility for each life conceived into existence. In a marriage this responsibility never ends. Spiritual cooperation with God lasts continuously in the work of creation of new lives. Their full communion will occur in the eternal life. Pope John Paul II reminds us:

Within the “people of life and the people for life”, *the family has a decisive responsibility*. This responsibility flows from its very nature as a community of life and love, founded upon marriage, and from its mission to “guard, reveal and communicate love.” Here it is a matter of God’s own love, of which parents are co-workers and as it were interpreters when they transmit life and raise it according to his fatherly plan. This is the love that becomes selflessness, receptiveness and gift. Within the family each member is accepted, respected and honoured precisely because he or she is a person; and if any family member is in greater need, the care which he or she receives is all the more intense and attentive (EV, no. 92).

In the family, life is a great grace, bringing: parental dignity, the dignity of a child in the family, a dignity of a child brought forth both by humans and by God. Family gives life, cares for it and raises it in the grace of God and people. Life is a gift we received from God thanks to our parents – so it is a gift from God and a gift from human to human, to lead it to complete spiritual, physical and moral perfection in accordance with the will of God and human help. Everyone is obligated to respect their own life, take care of physical fitness and morality. Also, nobody is an exclusive disposer of life, because they received it as a gift that is a participation in the life of God himself. Euthanasia, abortion, the death penalty, or suicide, are in opposition to this rule. People should prudently co-exist with others on the foundation of brotherly or parental love. Christ came to the world and is present in it with this message of life. The Mother of God, Mary, is the best example of the fullest gift of life among people. Numerous biographies of martyrs and saints may also serve as examples of properly fulfilled God’s will.

The source of life is God and the will of parents. The human being is the greatest and indeed an unique creature, therefore everyone is obligated to respect their own and other's lives. Through life, we receive a wealth of material and spiritual values. The most important thing in human life is love of others and of God, determined and expressed through faith. Every life has equal dignity and value. Christ sacrificed himself on the cross for the lives and redemption of all people. He merited redemption and eternal life for us.

Family and love accompanying it are the path of life on earth, and the mystery of the incarnation of Christ enriches and brings supernatural value to the family. John Paul II in the *Letter to Families*¹⁴, promulgated on 2 February 1994, writes:

Among these many paths, *the family is the first and the most important*. It is a path common to all, yet one which is particular, unique and unrepeatable, just as every individual is unrepeatable; it is a path from which man cannot withdraw. Indeed, a person normally comes into the world within a family, and can be said to owe to the family the very fact of his existing as an individual. [...]

The divine mystery of the Incarnation of the Word thus has an intimate connection with the human family. Not only with one family, that of Nazareth, but in some way with every family, analogously to what the Second Vatican Council says about the Son of God, who in the Incarnation "united himself in some sense with every man"¹⁵. Following Christ who "came" into the world "to serve" (Mt 20:28), the Church considers serving the family to be one of her essential duties. In this sense both man and the family constitute "the way of the Church" (LR, no. 2).

Humanness – the highest value of human existence, is realised among other people, and is most complete in the family. However, it should be stressed that life is a gift from God and human beings to society. Life is created and developed in the family, national, and cultural community, so it belongs to the community of the whole of humanity during any given chapter of world history. Family community belongs to further circles of national and church community, including also the great global community, seen as the "global family." The national and state community is obligated to transmit life, protect its *bios*, and provide legal protection against various threats and physical security. The nation and state look after proper natural growth, economic and cultural development of citizens. Nations, organised in the form of independent states, should maintain peace, co-exist and cooperate in dignity towards appropriate objectives set by the global community.

Summing up our deliberations, the theology of the Catholic Church, based on the Holy Bible and Tradition, attempts to convey the truth about life both in terms of philosophy, and in terms of faith. Human life has temporal and eternal aspects, natural and supernatural. The life of every person – a gift of God and a gift of the parents – has unique value and demands protection and support. From

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Letter to Families* (2 II 1994), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_o2021994_families.html [access: 29.04.2017]. Later: LR.

¹⁵ Cf. Second Vatican Council, GS, no. 1.

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this perspective, human love is presented as reciprocal gift of a woman and a man that is realised throughout their lifetime, gives life, cares for it and educates it. Conjugal love is focused on mutual kindness and fertility, is good and creative as it constructs temporal community, and through faith sanctifies it and leads it to its eternal dimension. John Paul II's Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* is a part of those teachings of the Church.

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