

John Paul II/ Encyclical  
**Evangelium Vitae**

*Steps toward mobilizing a “new culture of life” are outlined in the 11<sup>th</sup> encyclical of Pope John Paul II, titled “Evangelium Vitae” or The Gospel of Life). “A new cultural climate is developing and taking hold which gives crimes against life a new and – if possible – even more sinister character,” the pope writes. The fact that laws in many nations do not punish practices opposed to life, and even make them “altogether legal, is both a disturbing symptom and a significant cause of grave moral decline,” he adds. The encyclical was released in Rome March 30. The pope analyzes “how the value of life can today undergo a kind of ‘eclipse’” as he discusses the many forms of violence against life – from abortion to the arms trade, from euthanasia and assisted suicide to drug abuse and the unjust distribution of the world’s resources. Contraception, techniques of artificial reproduction, care for the aged or the sick and capital punishment are among issues the pope examines. How Christians as citizens should respond to human laws which disregard the right to life is addressed by the pope. For example, he says that “no human law can claim to legitimize” abortion and euthanasia and that, through “conscientious objection,” there “is a grave and clear obligation to oppose” laws that do so. This encyclical emphasizes both the contemporary relevance of the commandment not to kill and the core elements in a Gospel of life (No. 81). The pope writes, “I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral” (No. 57). He declares “that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder” (No. 62). And, he says, “I confirm that euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God” (No. 65). The pope asks women who have had an abortion not to lose all hope; he invites them to return to the sacrament of penance and to make a unique commitment to life. The roles of health care personnel, the family as domestic church, educators, civil leaders, women in general, media personnel and others in promoting the Gospel of life are*

*discussed by the pope. The encyclical follows.*

99. In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a "new feminism" which rejects the temptation of imitating models of "male domination", in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation.

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"I would now like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope."

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Making my own the words of the concluding message of the Second Vatican Council, I address to women this urgent appeal: "Reconcile people with life".<sup>133</sup> You are called to bear witness to the meaning of genuine love, of that gift of self and of that acceptance of others which are present in a special way in the relationship of husband and wife, but which ought also to be at the heart of every other interpersonal relationship. The experience of motherhood makes you acutely aware of the other person and, at the same time, confers on you a particular task: "Motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman's womb ... This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings not only towards her own child, but every human being, which profoundly marks the woman's personality".<sup>134</sup> A mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being, enabling it to grow inside her, giving it room, respecting it in its otherness. Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized and loved because of the dignity which comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as

usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health. This is the fundamental contribution which the Church and humanity expect from women. And it is the indispensable prerequisite for an authentic cultural change.

I would now like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord. With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.



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