



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
(CALIFORNIA, NEVADA AND HAWAII)**

2 October 1998

Dear Cardinal Mahony,

*Dear Brother Bishops,*¹ With joy and affection I welcome you, the Bishops of the Church in California, Nevada and Hawaii, on the occasion of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. Your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul is a celebration of the ecclesial bonds linking your particular Churches to the See of Peter. Mindful that the Church throughout the world is preparing to celebrate the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I have chosen to devote this series of reflections with you and your Brother Bishops to the renewal of the Church's life envisaged by the Second Vatican Council. The Council was a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, and its full implementation is the best means of ensuring that the Catholic community in the United States enters the new millennium strengthened in faith and holiness, effectively contributing to a better society through its witness to the truth about man that is revealed in Jesus Christ (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24). Indeed, the marvelous responsibility of the Church in your country is to spread this truth, which "enlightens man's intelligence and shapes his freedom, leading him to know and love the Lord" (*Veritatis Splendor*, Proem). We are coming to the end of a century which began with confidence in humanity's prospects of almost unlimited progress, but which is now ending in widespread fear and moral confusion. If we want a springtime of the human spirit, we must rediscover the foundations of hope (cf. *Address to the 50th General Assembly of the United Nations Organization*, October 5, 1995, 16-18). Above all, society must learn to embrace once more the great gift of life, to cherish it, to protect it, and to defend it against the culture of death, itself an expression of the great fear that stalks our times. One of your most noble tasks as Bishops is to stand firmly on the side of life, encouraging those who defend it and building with them a genuine culture of life.² The Second Vatican Council was quite aware of the forces shaping contemporary society when it spoke out clearly in defense of human life against the many threats facing it (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 27). The Council also made a priceless contribution to the culture of life by its eloquent presentation of the full meaning of married love (cf. *ibid.*, 48-51). Following the lead of the Council and expounding its teaching, Pope Paul VI wrote the prophetic Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, the thirtieth anniversary of which we are celebrating this year, in which he addressed the

moral implications of the power to cooperate with the Creator in bringing new life into the world. The Creator has made man and woman to complement one another in love, and their union is no less than a sharing in the creative power of God himself. Conjugal love serves life not only insofar as it generates new life but also because, rightly understood as the total gift of spouses to one another, it shapes the loving and caring context in which new life is wholeheartedly welcomed as a gift of incomparable value. Thirty years after *Humanae Vitae*, we see that mistaken ideas about the individual's moral autonomy continue to inflict wounds on the consciences of many people and on the life of society. Paul VI pointed out some of the consequences of separating the unitive aspect of conjugal love from its procreative dimension: a gradual weakening of moral discipline; a trivialization of human sexuality; the demeaning of women; marital infidelity, often leading to broken families; state-sponsored programs of population control based on imposed contraception and sterilization (cf. *Humanae Vitae*, 17). The introduction of legalized abortion and euthanasia, ever increasing recourse to *in vitro* fertilization, and certain forms of genetic manipulation and embryo experimentation are also closely related in law and public policy, as well as in contemporary culture, to the idea of unlimited dominion over one's body and life. The teaching of *Humanae Vitae* honors married love, promotes the dignity of women, and helps couples grow in understanding the truth of their particular path to holiness. It is also a response to contemporary culture's temptation to reduce life to a commodity. As Bishops, together with your priests, deacons, seminarians, and other pastoral personnel, you must find the right language and imagery to present this teaching in a comprehensible and compelling way. Marriage preparation programs should include an honest and complete presentation of the Church's teaching on responsible procreation, and should explain the natural methods of regulating fertility, the legitimacy of which is based on respect for the human meaning of sexual intimacy. Couples who have embraced the teaching of Pope Paul VI have discovered that it is truly a source of profound unity and joy, nourished by their increased mutual understanding and respect; they should be invited to share their experience with engaged couples taking part in marriage preparation programs.³ Reflection on a very different anniversary serves to heighten the sense of the urgency of the pro-life task. In the twenty-five years which have passed since the judicial decision legalizing abortion in your country there has been a widespread mobilization of consciences in support of life. The pro-life movement is one of the most positive aspects of American public life, and the support given it by the Bishops is a tribute to your pastoral leadership. Despite the generous efforts of so many, however, the idea that elective abortion is a "right" continues to be asserted. Moreover, there are signs of an almost unimaginable insensitivity to the reality of what actually happens during an abortion, as evidenced in recent events surrounding so-called "partial-birth" abortion. This is a cause for deep concern. A society with a diminished sense of the value of human life at its earliest stages has already opened the door to a culture of death. As Pastors, you must make every effort to ensure that there is no dulling of consciences regarding the seriousness of the crime of abortion, a crime which cannot be morally justified by any circumstance, purpose or law (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 62). Those who would defend life must make alternatives to abortion increasingly visible and available. Your recent pastoral statement, *Lights and Shadows*, draws attention to the need to support women in crisis pregnancies, and to provide counseling services for those who have had an abortion and must cope with its psychological and spiritual effects. Likewise, the unconditional defense of life must always include the message that true healing is possible, through reconciliation with the Body of Christ. In the spirit of the coming Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, American Catholics should be more than ever willing to open their hearts and their homes to "unwanted" and abandoned children, to young people in difficulty, to the handicapped and those who have no one to care for them.⁴ The Church likewise offers a truly vital service to the nation when she awakens public awareness to the morally objectionable nature of campaigns for the legalization of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. Euthanasia and suicide are grave violations of God's law (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 65 and 66); their legalization introduces a direct threat to the persons least capable of defending themselves and it proves most harmful to the

democratic institutions of society. The fact that Catholics have worked successfully with members of other Christian communities to resist efforts to legalize physician-assisted suicide is a very hopeful sign for the future of ecumenical public witness in your country, and I urge you to build an even broader ecumenical and inter-religious movement in defense of the culture of life and the civilization of love. As ecumenical witness in defense of life develops, a great teaching effort is needed to clarify the substantive moral difference between discontinuing medical procedures that may be burdensome, dangerous or disproportionate to the expected outcome - what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls "the refusal of 'over-zealous' treatment" (No. 2278; cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 65) - and taking away the ordinary means of preserving life, such as feeding, hydration and normal medical care. The statement of the United States Bishops' Pro-Life Committee, *Nutrition and Hydration: Moral and Pastoral Considerations*, rightly emphasizes that the omission of nutrition and hydration intended to cause a patient's death must be rejected and that, while giving careful consideration to all the factors involved, the presumption should be in favor of providing medically assisted nutrition and hydration to all patients who need them. To blur this distinction is to introduce a source of countless injustices and much additional anguish, affecting both those already suffering from ill health or the deterioration which comes with age, and their loved ones.⁵ In a culture that has difficulty in defining the meaning of life, death and suffering, the Christian message is the good news of Christ's victory over death and the certain hope of resurrection. The Christian accepts death as the supreme act of obedience to the Father, and is ready to meet death at the "hour" known only to him (cf. Mk 13:32). Life is a pilgrimage in faith to the Father, on which we travel in the company of his Son and the Saints in heaven. Precisely for this reason, the very real trial of suffering can become a source of good. Through suffering, we actually have a part in Christ's redemptive work for the Church and humanity (cf. *Salvifici Doloris*, 14-24). This is so when suffering is "experienced for love and with love through sharing, by God's gracious gift and one's own personal and free choice, in the suffering of Christ crucified" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 67). The work of Catholic health care institutions in meeting the physical and spiritual needs of the sick is a form of imitation of Christ who, in the words of Saint Ignatius of Antioch, is "the doctor of the flesh and of the spirit" (*Ad Ephesios*, 7, 2). Doctors, nurses and other medical personnel deal with people in their time of trial, when they have an acute sense of life's fragility and precariousness; just when they most resemble the suffering Jesus in Gethsemane and on Calvary. Health care professionals should always bear in mind that their work is directed to individuals, unique persons in whom God's image is present in a singular way and in whom he has invested his infinite love. The sickness of a family member, friend or neighbor is a call to Christians to demonstrate true compassion, that gentle and persevering sharing in another's pain. Likewise, the handicapped and those who are ill must never feel that they are a burden; they are persons being visited by the Lord. The terminally ill in particular deserve the solidarity, communion and affection of those around them; they often need to be able to forgive and to be forgiven, to make peace with God and with others. All priests should appreciate the pastoral importance of celebrating the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, particularly when it is the prelude to the final journey to the Father's house: when its meaning as the *sacramentum exeuntium* is particularly evident (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1523).⁶ An essential feature of support for the inalienable right to life, from conception to natural death, is the effort to provide legal protection for the unborn, the handicapped, the elderly, and those suffering from terminal illness. As Bishops, you must continue to draw attention to the relationship of the moral law to constitutional and positive law in your society: "Laws which legitimize the direct killing of innocent human beings...are in complete opposition to the inviolable right to life proper to every individual; they thus deny the equality of everyone before the law" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 72). What is at stake here is nothing less than the indivisible truth about the human person on which the Founding Fathers staked your nation's claim to independence. The life of a country is much more than its material development and its power in the world. A nation needs a "soul". It needs the wisdom and courage to overcome the moral ills and spiritual temptations inherent in its

march through history. In union with all those who favor a "culture of life" over a "culture of death", Catholics, and especially Catholic legislators, must continue to make their voices heard in the formulation of cultural, economic, political and legislative projects which, "with respect for all and in keeping with democratic principles, will contribute to the building of a society in which the dignity of each person is recognized and the lives of all are defended and enhanced"

(*Evangelium Vitae*, 90). Democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 70). In defending life you are defending an original and vital part of the vision on which your country was built. America must become, again, a hospitable society, in which every unborn child and every handicapped or terminally ill person is cherished and enjoys the protection of the law.⁷ Dear Brother Bishops, Catholic moral teaching is an essential part of our heritage of faith; we must see to it that it is faithfully transmitted, and take appropriate measures to guard the faithful from the deceit of opinions which dissent from it (cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 26 and 113). Although the Church often appears as a sign of contradiction, in defending the whole moral law firmly and humbly she is upholding truths which are indispensable for the good of humanity and for the safeguarding of civilization itself. Our teaching must be clear; it must recognize the drama of the human condition, in which we all struggle with sin and in which we must all strive, with the help of grace, to embrace the good (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 13). Our task as teachers is to "show the inviting splendor of that truth which is Jesus Christ himself" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 83). Living the moral life involves holding fast to the very person of Jesus, partaking of his life and destiny, sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father. May your fidelity to the Lord and the responsibility for his Church which he has given you make you personally vigilant to ensure that only sound doctrine of faith and morals is presented as Catholic teaching. Invoking the intercession of Our Lady upon your ministry, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to the priests, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana