

LETTER
OF
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO ALL THE WORLD'S BISHOPS
ON COMBATTING ABORTION AND EUTHANASIA

May 19, 1991

The recent extraordinary consistory of cardinals, held April 4-7 in the Vatican, included a broad and detailed discussion on the threat to human life, and concluded with a unanimous vote: The cardinals asked the pope to "solemnly reaffirm in a document (the majority of cardinals proposed an encyclical) the value of human life and its inviolability in the light of present circumstances and the attacks which threaten it today."

As you will note from the summary which will be sent to you by the pro-secretary of state, a striking picture emerged from the reports and the work of the consistory. In the context of the numerous and violent attacks against human life today, especially when it is weakest and most defenseless, statistical data point to a veritable "slaughter of the innocents" on a worldwide scale. A source of particular concern, however, is the fact that people's moral conscience appears frighteningly confused and they find it increasingly difficult to perceive the clear and definite distinction between good and evil in matters concerning the fundamental value of human life.

However serious and disturbing the phenomenon of the widespread destruction of so many human lives, either in the womb or in old age, no less serious and disturbing is the blunting of the moral sensitivity of people's consciences. Laws and civil ordinances not only reflect this confusion but they also contribute to it. When legislative bodies enact laws that authorize putting innocent people to death and states allow their resources and structures to be used for these crimes, individual consciences, often poorly formed, are all the more easily led into error. In order to break this vicious circle, it seems more urgent than ever that we should forcefully reaffirm our common teaching, based on sacred Scripture and tradition, with regard to the inviolability of innocent human life.

The centenary of the encyclical [*Rerum Novarum*](#) which the church is celebrating this year suggests an analogy to which I would like to draw everyone's attention. Just as a century ago it was the working classes which were oppressed in their fundamental rights, and the church courageously came to their defense by proclaiming the sacrosanct rights of that worker as person, so now, when another category of persons is being oppressed in the fundamental right to life, the church feels in duty bound to speak out with the same courage on behalf of those

who have no voice. Hers is always the evangelical cry in defense of the world's poor, those who are threatened and despised and whose human rights are violated.

The church intends not only to reaffirm the right to life—the violation of which is an offense against the human person and against God the Creator and Father, the loving source of all life—but she also intends to devote herself ever more fully to concrete defense and promotion of this right.

The church feels called to this by her Lord. From Christ she receives the "Gospel of life" and feels responsible for its proclamation to every creature. Even at the price of going against the trend, she must proclaim that Gospel courageously and fearlessly, in word and deed, to individuals, peoples and states.

It is precisely this fidelity to Christ the Lord which in this area too is the church's law and her strength. The new evangelization, which is a fundamental pastoral necessity in today's world, cannot neglect the proclamation of the inviolable right to life which belongs to every person from the moment of conception until life's natural end.

At the same time the church also feels called to express, through this proclamation and active witness, her esteem and love for man. She addresses herself to the heart of every person—non-believer as well as believer—because she realized that the gift of life is such a fundamental value that anyone can understand and appreciate its significance, even in the light of reason alone.

In the recent encyclical [*Centesimus Annus*](#), I recalled the church's esteem for the democratic system, which enables all citizens to participate in political life, but I also insisted that a true democracy can only be established on the basis of a consistent recognition of the rights of each individual (cf. 46-47).

Having meditated and prayed to the Lord, I decided to write to you personally, my dear brother bishop, in order to share with you the concern caused by this major problem, and above all in order to ask your help and cooperation, in a spirit of episcopal collegiality, in facing the serious challenge constituted by the present threats and attacks against human life.

All of us, as pastors of the Lord's flock, have a grave responsibility to promote respect for human life in our dioceses. In addition to making public declarations at every opportunity, we must exercise particular vigilance with regard to the teaching being given in our seminaries and in Catholic schools and universities. As pastors we must be watchful in ensuring that practices followed in Catholic hospitals and clinics are fully consonant with the nature of such institutions. As our means permit, we must also support projects such as those which seek to offer practical help to women or families experiencing difficulties or to assist the suffering and especially the dying. Moreover, we must encourage scientific

reflection and legislative or political initiatives which would counter the prevalent "death mentality."

Through the coordinated action of all the bishops and the renewed pastoral commitment which will result, the church intends to contribute, through the civilization of truth and love, to an ever fuller and more radical establishment of that "culture of life" which constitutes the essential prerequisite for the humanization of our society.

May the Holy Spirit, "the Lord and giver of life," fill us with his gifts, and may Mary, the virgin mother who gave birth to the author of life, be at our side in this responsibility.