



The Gospel of Life

*Small Group Study Guide to
Pope Saint John Paul II's Encyclical
Evangelium Vitae*



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*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Cor Ecclesiae Series*

The Gospel of Life

*Small Group Study Guide to
Pope Saint John Paul II's Encyclical
Evangelium Vitae*

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The *Cor Ecclesiae* Series

The *Cor Ecclesiae* Series provides study and discussion guides for essential and timely Church documents so that individuals and groups can grow closer to Jesus Christ in the heart of the Church (*Cor Ecclesiae*). The Church passes on what she has received, and, as both teacher and mother, offers to the faithful authentic teaching and guidance for living in the world today. In a particular way, the writings of the popes, endowed with the authority of Christ, teach us the faith which is to be believed and put into practice. This series will offer you the opportunity to read, discuss, and pray with texts that the Church has given us to better understand our faith, ourselves, and the world around us. It is our hope that the *Cor Ecclesiae* Series will draw you to a greater understanding of the Catholic faith passed down to us through the Church and ultimately lead you to encounter the heart of Jesus.

How To Use This Series

The *Cor Ecclesiae* Series is meant to be used by any group that is hoping to grow in their faith while developing the bonds of community. This series is designed in particular for use during Knights of Columbus *Cor*, but each discussion guide is suitable for various settings, ministries, and groups. This study can even be done by an individual, but it will be most effective in the environment of community. Authentic friendships support us in our spiritual growth just as they do in other aspects of our lives.

Before your group dives in, choose a facilitator. This facilitator should be a member of the group. The facilitator can alternate each meeting, or it can stay the same throughout. If you are the facilitator, please review the “How to Lead a Small Group” section before your first meeting. Depending on which study you are doing, there may be some sessions that will require additional coordination and planning (e.g. coordinating with a priest or deacon if available). Make sure the facilitator looks through those sections and plans accordingly.

Keep in mind, this study alone cannot build your faith community. The *Cor Ecclesiae* Series will offer opportunities for firmer bonds to be created, but it is up to your group to openly share and support one another as you navigate the study. To create a welcoming environment, your meeting should include more than this study. Provide hospitality (coffee, a meal, snacks,

recreation time) at every meeting and allow the main part of your meeting to be centered around one of the guides from the *Cor Ecclesiae* Series. Plan to set aside 30-45 minutes to complete one full session during your meeting, with 20-30 minutes of fellowship before or after the study.

In this Evangelium Vitae Study Guide you will find an outline for 12 sessions.

Each session contains seven parts to be done together as a group:

- 1. Opening Prayer:** The study portion of your meeting should open in prayer. We have provided a prayer for your group to say together, but feel free to have someone lead and pray aloud from their heart.
- 2. Scripture Passage:** This section features a passage from the Bible that is either referenced in the encyclical or relates to its content. Here, you can either designate a reader or take turns reading the passage aloud. Remember that every passage from the Bible is the sacred Word of God and should be read reverently.
- 3. Read:** This section introduces the main text for the session's lesson. As with the Scripture passage, you can either designate a reader or take turns reading each paragraph aloud. Feel free to "read with your pen" by taking notes or underlining phrases or points that strike you. The study focuses on the main points

and unpacks them to make them applicable to your everyday life, but it only provides selections of the full text. **The selections in this study include approximately 27% of the text from Pope St. John Paul II's encyclical.** You can read this section ahead of time to familiarize yourself with the text. **If you would like to read the entire document, visit vatican.va or visit kofc.org/shopcfc to purchase the full text in a separate booklet.**

4. **The Crux:** This section unpacks the selected readings and applies them to everyday life. The goal is to take the new concepts that you are addressing and implement actionable steps that will help you grow in your faith. Like the previous section, you can either designate a reader or take turns reading aloud.
5. **Conversation Starters:** Here your group will find questions that are meant to be a starting point for discussion. Your group may not get through all of the questions, and that is not a problem. The aim is to get your group openly and authentically sharing about how the text is impacting them. Your group has the freedom to discuss other parts of the text that may not be mentioned in the questions as well.
6. **Call to Action:** Each session will challenge your group to take on a spiritual practice or devotion together. These are concrete applications that are intended to build up your faith and the community you are creating.

- 7. Closing Prayer:** Each meeting will end with prayer. Once everyone's intentions are said, we provide you with a closing prayer.

What is an encyclical?

The word “encyclical” comes from the Greek word *enkuklios*, meaning “circular.” The name reflects the intended audience of this type of papal letter, which is the entire globe. Encyclicals usually focus on a specific issue, devotion, or moral question that the Holy Father wishes to raise. The teachings communicated in an encyclical are considered part of the Church’s ordinary magisterium. Therefore, they deserve our respect and acceptance.

In *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope St. John Paul II makes his intended audience and subject matter very clear, writing at the beginning, “To the Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, Men and Women Religious, Lay Faithful, and All People of Good Will on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life.”

Introduction



The Gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus' message. Lovingly received day after day by the Church, it is to be preached with dauntless fidelity as “good news” to the people of every age and culture.

At the dawn of salvation, it is the Birth of a Child which is proclaimed as joyful news: “I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:10-11). The source of this “great joy” is the Birth of the Savior; but Christmas also reveals the full meaning of every human birth, and the joy which accompanies the Birth of the Messiah is thus seen to be the foundation and fulfilment of joy at every child born into the world (cf. Jn 16:21).

When he presents the heart of his redemptive mission, Jesus says: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). In truth, he is referring to that “new” and “eternal” life which consists in communion with the Father, to which every person is freely called in the Son by the power of the Sanctifying Spirit. It is precisely in this “life” that all the aspects and stages of human life achieve their full significance.

— St. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1

Pope St. John Paul II's encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, was released on March 25th, 1995, at a time when modern society, supported by new technological developments and false ideas of freedom, was creating a culture hostile to life – what St. John Paul named a “culture of death.” In this encyclical, the Holy Father diagnosed the

roots of this Culture of Death while also offering the answer – proclaiming the Gospel of Life, the Good News of Life that Jesus proclaimed in his own life and throughout the history of the Church.

In the decades since *Evangelium Vitae* was released, in many ways, the message of St. John Paul II has not been heeded. We face today a world just as entrenched in a Culture of Death – a culture that disregards human life at all stages of development if it stands in the way of profit or personal “freedom.” There is still a need today for us to proclaim the Gospel of Life and to remind our hearts and the hearts of our neighbors of the “new” and ‘eternal’ life” to which we are all called.

The twelve sessions of this study guide will give you and your group the opportunity to dive into the mind of St. John Paul II and learn what it means to receive and promote the Gospel of Life – what St. John Paul II calls the “heart of Jesus’ message.” Please keep in mind that this study guide will only address certain key sections of *Evangelium Vitae* and should not be regarded as an exhaustive summary. You are encouraged to read the entire document separately.

Each session will unpack an excerpt from St. John Paul II’s encyclical and then provide you with prompts to facilitate discussions. We pray that the Holy Spirit sets your heart aflame with love for God’s people and respect for human life, and that you leave this study eager to bring Jesus to everyone you encounter.

-Vivat Jesus

Session 1: The Culture of Death

Opening Prayer *Evangelium Vitae, 105*

O Mary,

Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,

To you do we entrust the cause of life.

Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers

Of babies not allowed to be born,

Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,

Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,

Of the elderly and the sick killed

By indifference or out of misguided mercy.

Grant that all who believe in your Son

May proclaim the Gospel of life

With honesty and love to the people of our time.

Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel

As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude

Throughout their lives

And the courage to bear witness to it

Resolutely, in order to build,

Together with all people of good will,

The civilization of truth and love,

To the praise and glory of God,

The Creator and lover of life.

R. Amen.

(Take a quiet moment)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Genesis 4:1-16



Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.” And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought some of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

Cain said to Abel his brother, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” And the LORD said,

“What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.

And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me this day away from the ground; and from your face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me.” Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Read

Evangelium Vitae, 7, 8, 11, 17, 21, 22, 23



The Gospel of life, proclaimed in the beginning when man was created in the image of God for a destiny of full and perfect life (cf. Gen 2:7; Wis 9:2-3), is contradicted by the painful experience of death which enters the world and casts its shadow of meaninglessness over man’s entire existence. Death came into the world as a result of the devil’s envy (cf. Gen 3:1,4-5) and the sin of our first parents (cf. Gen 2:17,

3:17-19). And death entered it in a violent way, through the killing of Abel by his brother Cain.

Brother kills brother. Like the first fratricide, every murder is a violation of the “spiritual” kinship uniting mankind in one great family, in which all share the same fundamental good: equal personal dignity. Not infrequently the kinship “of flesh and blood” is also violated; for example when threats to life arise within the relationship between parents and children, such as happens in abortion or when, in the wider context of family or kinship, euthanasia is encouraged or practiced.

After the crime, God intervenes to avenge the one killed. Before God, who asks him about the fate of Abel, Cain, instead of showing remorse and apologizing, arrogantly eludes the question: “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9). “I do not know”: Cain tries to cover up his crime with a lie. This was and still is the case, when all kinds of ideologies try to justify and disguise the most atrocious crimes against human beings. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”: Cain does not wish to think about his brother and refuses to accept the responsibility which every person has towards others. We cannot think of today’s tendency for people to refuse to accept responsibility for their brothers and sisters. Symptoms of this trend include the lack of solidarity towards society’s weakest members – such as the elderly, the infirm, immigrants, children – and the indifference frequently found in relations between the world’s

peoples even when basic values such as survival, freedom, and peace are involved.

How did such a situation come about? Many different factors have to be taken into account. In the background there is the profound crisis of culture, which generates skepticism in relation to the very foundations of knowledge and ethics, and which makes it increasingly difficult to grasp clearly the meaning of what man is, the meaning of his rights and his duties. Then there are all kinds of existential and interpersonal difficulties, made worse by the complexity of a society in which individuals, couples, and families are often left alone with their problems. There are situations of acute poverty, anxiety or frustration in which the struggle to make ends meet, the presence of unbearable pain, or instances of violence, especially against women, make the choice to defend and promote life so demanding as sometimes to reach the point of heroism.

Nor can it be denied that the mass media are often implicated in this conspiracy, by lending credit to that culture which presents recourse to contraception, sterilization, abortion and even euthanasia as a mark of progress and a victory of freedom, while depicting as enemies of freedom and progress those positions which are unreservedly pro-life.

In seeking the deepest roots of the struggle between the “culture of life” and the “culture of death,” we ... have to go to the heart of the tragedy being experienced by modern man: the eclipse of the sense of God and of

man, typical of a social and cultural climate dominated by secularism, which, with its ubiquitous tentacles, succeeds at times in putting Christian communities themselves to the test. Those who allow themselves to be influenced by this climate easily fall into a sad vicious circle: when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life; in turn, the systematic violation of the moral law, especially in the serious matter of respect for human life and its dignity, produces a kind of progressive darkening of the capacity to discern God's living and saving presence.

Consequently, when the sense of God is lost, the sense of man is also threatened and poisoned, as the Second Vatican Council concisely states: "Without the Creator the creature would disappear ... But when God is forgotten the creature itself grows unintelligible."¹ Man is no longer able to see himself as "mysteriously different" from other earthly creatures; he regards himself merely as one more living being, as an organism which, at most, has reached a very high stage of perfection ... He no longer considers life as a splendid gift of God, something "sacred" entrusted to his responsibility and thus also to his loving care and "veneration." Life itself becomes a mere "thing," which man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation.

¹ See appendix for the definition of these terms.

The eclipse of the sense of God and of man inevitably leads to a practical materialism, which breeds individualism, utilitarianism and hedonism¹. Here too we see the permanent validity of the words of the Apostle: “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct” (Rom 1:28). The values of being are replaced by those of having. The only goal which counts is the pursuit of one’s own material well-being. The so-called “quality of life” is interpreted primarily or exclusively as economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure, to the neglect of the more profound dimensions—interpersonal, spiritual and religious—of existence.

Consequently, sexuality too is depersonalized and exploited: from being the sign, place and language of love, that is, of the gift of self and acceptance of another, in all the other’s richness as a person, it increasingly becomes the occasion and instrument for self-assertion and the selfish satisfaction of personal desires and instincts. Thus the original import of human sexuality is distorted and falsified, and the two meanings, unitive and procreative, inherent in the very nature of the conjugal act, are artificially separated: in this way the marriage union is betrayed and its fruitfulness is subjected to the caprice of the couple. Procreation then becomes the “enemy” to be avoided in sexual activity: if it is welcomed, this is only because it expresses a desire, or indeed the intention, to have a child “at all costs,” and not because it signifies the complete

acceptance of the other and therefore an openness to the richness of life which the child represents.

In the materialistic perspective described so far, interpersonal relations are seriously impoverished. The first to be harmed are women, children, the sick or suffering, and the elderly. The criterion of personal dignity—which demands respect, generosity and service—is replaced by the criterion of efficiency, functionality and usefulness: others are considered not for what they “are,” but for what they “have, do, and produce.” This is the supremacy of the strong over the weak.

The Crux



God created humanity in his “image” and “likeness” to lead a perfect eternal life with him (cf. Gen. 1:26). This joyous existence was interrupted when sin and death entered the world through the rebellion of our first parents, Adam and Eve. This rebellion was initiated by the deception of the Devil who out of jealousy turned humanity against its Creator. Violence and sin further spiraled out of control following the first murder, when Cain, the eldest son of Adam and Eve, murdered his younger brother, Abel – once again, motivated by jealousy (cf. Gen. 4:1-16).

Every human shares an equal dignity because we are made in God’s image and likeness. Through our baptism, we become adopted sons and daughters of

God the Father. Therefore, every murder that occurs is, in a spiritual sense, a form of sibling-murder, just as Cain killed Abel. St. John Paul II highlights various types of this violence that are prevalent in today's society: abortion, euthanasia, unjust wars, genocides, poverty, and starvation caused by economic inequality, and even an intentional disregard for the environment.

When God confronted Cain about his crime, Cain downplayed his responsibility and arrogantly claimed ignorance about what he had done. When humanity ignores the murders and crimes against human rights that occur in our contemporary world, we share in Cain's arrogance and shirking of duty.

Why do such terrible crimes happen? Some responsibility lies with an ongoing cultural crisis. Skepticism and moral relativism have taken over – people no longer believe in objective truths and universal human rights. Part of this cultural crisis stems from the isolation in which many people live, with very little support to navigate hardship. Modern media is also to blame as it actively promotes anti-life policies under the guise of freedom and choice.

But St. John Paul II points to something deeper that is at the heart of the “culture of death” – the “eclipse of the sense of God and man.” When humans lose their ability to see God in the world around them, we lose a sense of who we are and who we are meant to be. We no longer recognize our great dignity as children of God, nor do we see our lives as gifts that prepare us for an

even greater eternal life, but rather an absurd and pointless existence, full of struggle against suffering and pain that must be either endured or overcome.

The unborn, the elderly, and the dying are easy targets for neglect in this cultural situation. They lack a voice and, in a cold-hearted cost-benefit calculation, are not productive or profitable. A growing obsession with mere economic efficiency and utility violates the fundamental teachings of Christianity and universal human rights, which hold that every life is equally valuable and worthy of protection, regardless of socioeconomic output, circumstances, or developmental stage. Often, the voiceless become victims of those who do have a voice, who selfishly prioritize their own rights and desired lifestyle choices over those who cannot respond.

St. John Paul II and the Church stand in opposition to this culture of death and choose instead to build a culture of life, grounded in the natural law and the teachings of Christ. By recognizing God as Creator and loving Father, we can understand that every human person has an incredible dignity – not because we are capable of great things, but simply because we are human. With this foundation, the moral questions of today can be answered, whether they are concerning technology, geopolitics, or sex. The Church is able to navigate the moral issues of any age because we are given a clear understanding of who the human person is, who created us, and what we were created for.

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. St. John Paul II gives a detailed list of all the evils that oppose a “culture of life” and instead support a “culture of death.” What crimes against life stand out to you from that list? Are there others that could be added to this list in the decades since *Evangelium Vitae* was released?
2. What ways do you see the Catholic Church defending life against the evils of a culture of death? How have you encountered these evils? In what ways can you personally fight against these?
3. How does the culture of death fail to respect human dignity, which all humans enjoy as a result of being made in God’s “image and likeness”?
4. How does failing to take personal responsibility for one’s sins – like Cain did – help create a culture of death?
5. St. John Paul II begins his encyclical with a lengthy reflection on the first crime, Cain’s murder of his brother Abel. Why do you think St. John Paul II chooses to include this story? How does it shape our conversation on the culture of death?

Call to Action

We begin this study by focusing on the ways society fails to uphold human dignity as God intended. Discussing in depth these crimes against life may feel overwhelming.

But we must always have hope and know that it is never too late to begin embracing the positive vision of a culture of life. You can start by dedicating yourself to reciting the *Prayer to Saint Joseph* each morning for the remainder of this study. This prayer was written by Pope Leo XIII to be recited at the end of the Rosary, following the *Salve Regina*:

Closing Prayer

Let us pray to recognize the culture of death in our society and take active steps to combat it through our Christian witness.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 2: God's Vision for Life

Opening Prayer *Evangelium Vitae, 105*

O Mary,

Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,

To you do we entrust the cause of life.

Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers

Of babies not allowed to be born,

Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,

Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,

Of the elderly and the sick killed

By indifference or out of misguided mercy.

Grant that all who believe in your Son

May proclaim the Gospel of life

With honesty and love to the people of our time.

Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel

As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude

Throughout their lives

And the courage to bear witness to it

Resolutely, in order to build,

Together with all people of good will,

The civilization of truth and love,

To the praise and glory of God,

The Creator and lover of life.

R. Amen.

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Genesis 1:26-28



Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

Read

Evangelium Vitae, 34, 36, 53



Life is always a good. This is an instinctive perception and a fact of experience, and man is called to grasp the profound reason why this is so.

Why is life a good? This question is found everywhere in the Bible, and from the very first pages it receives a powerful and amazing answer. The life which God gives man is quite different from the life of all other living creatures, inasmuch as man, although formed from the dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7, 3:19; Job 34:15; Ps 103:14; 104:29), is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory (cf. Gen 1:26-27; Ps 8:6). This is what Saint Irenaeus of Lyons wanted to emphasize in his celebrated definition: “Man, living man, is the glory of God.”² Man has been given a sublime dignity, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator: in man there shines forth a reflection of God himself.

The Book of Genesis affirms this when, in the first account of creation, it places man at the summit of God’s creative activity, as its crown, at the culmination of a process which leads from indistinct chaos to the most perfect of creatures. Everything in creation is ordered to man and everything is made subject to him: “Fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over ... every living thing” (1:28); this is God’s command to the man and the woman. A similar message is found also in the other account of creation: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). We see here a clear affirmation of the primacy of man over things; these are made subject to him and entrusted to his responsible care, whereas for no reason can he be made subject to other men and almost reduced to the level of a thing.

In the biblical narrative, the difference between man and other creatures is shown above all by the fact that only the creation of man is presented as the result of a special decision on the part of God, a deliberation to establish a particular and specific bond with the Creator: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26). The life which God offers to man is a gift by which God shares something of himself with his creature.

Israel would ponder at length the meaning of this particular bond between man and God. The Book of Sirach too recognizes that God, in creating human beings, “endowed them with strength like his own, and made them in his own image” (17:3). The biblical author sees as part of this image not only man’s dominion over the world but also those spiritual faculties which are distinctively human, such as reason, discernment between good and evil, and free will ... Man alone, among all visible creatures, is “capable of knowing and loving his Creator.”³ The life which God bestows upon man is much more than mere existence in time. It is a drive towards fullness of life; it is the seed of an existence which transcends the very limits of time: “For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity” (Wis 2:23).

Unfortunately, God’s marvelous plan was marred by the appearance of sin in history. Through sin, man rebels against his Creator and ends up by worshipping creatures: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than

the Creator" (Rom 1:25). As a result man not only deforms the image of God in his own person, but is tempted to offences against it in others as well, replacing relationships of communion by attitudes of distrust, indifference, hostility and even murderous hatred. When God is not acknowledged as God, the profound meaning of man is betrayed and communion between people is compromised.

In the life of man, God's image shines forth anew and is again revealed in all its fullness at the coming of the Son of God in human flesh. "Christ is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), he "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Heb 1:3). He is the perfect image of the Father.

God proclaims that he is absolute Lord of the life of man, who is formed in his image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26-28). Human life is thus given a sacred and inviolable character, which reflects the inviolability of the Creator himself. Precisely for this reason God will severely judge every violation of the commandment "You shall not kill", the commandment which is at the basis of all life together in society.

The Crux



What makes human life different from other living creatures? Made in the image and likeness of God, humanity is a sign of God's presence in the world and

“shines forth a reflection of God himself.” Elsewhere, John Paul II writes that being made in the image of God means being in a “unique, exclusive, and unrepeatable relationship with God.”⁴ We also see in Scripture that God bestowed on humanity the unique responsibility of stewardship: guarding and caring for the natural world, including its creatures and resources. Humanity first receives this responsibility in Eden, when God gives Adam “dominion” over the rest of creation (Gen 1:26,28), with the right to “subdue it” (Gen 1:28) and the responsibility “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). Additionally, God delegates to Adam the power to name all the living creatures (Gen 2:19). Eve is meant to share in this work of stewardship, which is why she is called Adam’s “helper” (Gen 2:18). Thus, from the very beginning humanity is created for a purpose not shared with other creatures: to fulfill God’s will on Earth by protecting and nourishing creation.

While making humans stewards of creation, God also invites us to become co-creators who share in his divine work. This is a special mission given to us, the pinnacle of his creation. We know we are the pinnacle of his creation because it is only after God creates humanity on the sixth day that he finally rests on the seventh (Gen 2:2). As already stated, mankind is the only creature made in God’s “image” and “likeness,” “a creature who bears even in his body the signs that he is called to a free, exclusive, fruitful and faithful gift of himself to another.”⁵ Other animals fall under our care, but they are not the climax. They may share our five senses, but they

lack rational souls and free will. They are not capable of sin and therefore do not need a savior to redeem them.

Because all humans are made in God's image and likeness, and because Jesus Christ – the perfect image of God the Father and his divine will – died out of a desire that all humans could be saved (cf. 1 Timothy 2:3-4), we know that all humans have equal worth and dignity. Jesus came to save all types of people, from the unborn child growing in a mother's womb, to the disabled person adjusting to a new way of interacting with the world, to an elderly person who is looking back on his or her life with gratitude and prayerfully preparing to meet God face-to-face. All human life is valuable. God values human life so much that he went so far as to protect Cain, the first murderer, from being killed out of a false sense of vigilante justice (cf. Gen. 4:13-15).

Looking at humanity's long, tragic history, it does not take long to see God's wonderful plan for humanity rejected again and again. Every sin is a form of idolatry, because when we sin we are replacing God's will with our own. When we harm – or worse, kill – another person, we deny God's lordship in a most extreme way. We do not just fail as stewards of creation. We fail as stewards of the truth about human dignity. We fail to see God's beautiful vision for life.

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. What was God's initial plan for humanity, and how did sin damage that plan?
2. Have you ever considered what it means to be made in God's "image and likeness"? What do we share with God that we don't share with other creatures?
3. Where do you see humanity failing or succeeding in its mission of stewardship? How does stewardship connect to the culture of death and culture of life?
4. Where do you see idolatry present in the culture of death? What does our society put in the place of God? Why does idolatry become more prevalent in a secularized, atheistic society?
5. How is every act of violence against a fellow human being a rejection of God's moral authority? What are the implications of this as we strive to build a culture of life?

Call to Action

Spend at least 15 minutes each day this week praying in front of an icon of Christ. Reflect on humanity's sacred responsibility to steward the natural world, which you share, primarily as a husband, father, son, and citizen. How can you be a better steward, starting in your own home? Ask the Lord to give you a heart like his that loves what he loves and wants what he wants.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray to see the human dignity in every person we encounter, to cultivate a daily prayer life where we can speak lovingly with Christ, and to make choices each day that cultivate a culture of life.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 3: Jesus, the Word of Life

Opening Prayer Evangelium Vitae, 105

O Mary,

*Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,
To you do we entrust the cause of life.*

*Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers
Of babies not allowed to be born,
Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,
Of the elderly and the sick killed
By indifference or out of misguided mercy.*

*Grant that all who believe in your Son
May proclaim the Gospel of life
With honesty and love to the people of our time.*

*Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel
As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
Throughout their lives
And the courage to bear witness to it
Resolutely, in order to build,
Together with all people of good will,
The civilization of truth and love,
To the praise and glory of God,
The Creator and lover of life.
R. Amen.*

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading #1

Matthew 26:26-28



Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a chalice, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Scripture Reading #2

Hebrews 12:22-24



But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.



The blood of Christ, while it reveals the grandeur of the Father's love, shows how precious man is in God's eyes and how priceless the value of his life. The Apostle Peter reminds us of this: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pt 1:18-19). Precisely by contemplating the precious blood of Christ, the sign of his self-giving love (cf. Jn 13:1), the believer learns to recognize and appreciate the almost divine dignity of every human being.

The unconditional choice for life reaches its full religious and moral meaning when it flows from, is formed by and nourished by faith in Christ. Nothing helps us so much to face positively the conflict between death and life in which we are engaged as faith in the Son of God who became man and dwelt among men so "that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). It is a matter of faith in the Risen Lord, who has conquered death; faith in the blood of Christ "that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel" (Heb 12:24).

With the light and strength of this faith, therefore, in facing the challenges of the present situation, the Church is becoming more aware of the grace and responsibility which come to her from her Lord of proclaiming, celebrating and serving the Gospel of life.

Faced with the countless grave threats to life present in the modern world, one could feel overwhelmed by sheer powerlessness: good can never be powerful enough to triumph over evil!

At such times the People of God, and this includes every believer, is called to profess with humility and courage its faith in Jesus Christ, “the Word of life” (1 Jn 1:1). The Gospel of life is not simply a reflection, however new and profound, on human life. Nor is it merely a commandment aimed at raising awareness and bringing about significant changes in society. Still less is it an illusory promise of a better future. The Gospel of life is something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of the very person of Jesus. Jesus made himself known to the Apostle Thomas, and in him to every person, with the words: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). This is also how he spoke of himself to Martha, the sister of Lazarus: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn 11:25-26). Jesus is the Son who from all eternity receives life from the Father (cf. Jn 5:26), and who has come among men to make them sharers in this gift: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

Through the words, the actions and the very person of Jesus, man is given the possibility of “knowing” the complete truth concerning the value of human life. From this “source” he receives, in particular, the capacity to

“accomplish” this truth perfectly (cf. Jn 3:21), that is, to accept and fulfil completely the responsibility of loving and serving, of defending and promoting human life.

The commandment “You shall not kill”, included and more fully expressed in the positive command of love for one’s neighbor, is reaffirmed in all its force by the Lord Jesus. To the rich young man who asks him: “Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?”, Jesus replies: “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:16,17). And he quotes, as the first of these: “You shall not kill” (Mt 19:18). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus demands from his disciples a righteousness which surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees, also with regard to respect for life: “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment’. But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:21-22).

By his words and actions Jesus further unveils the positive requirements of the commandment regarding the inviolability of life. These requirements were already present in the Old Testament, where legislation dealt with protecting and defending life when it was weak and threatened: in the case of foreigners, widows, orphans, the sick and the poor in general, including children in the womb (cf. Ex 21:22; 22:20-26). With Jesus these positive requirements assume new force and urgency, and are revealed in all their breadth and depth: they range from caring for the life of one’s brother (whether

a blood brother, someone belonging to the same people, or a foreigner living in the land of Israel) to showing concern for the stranger, even to the point of loving one's enemy.

By his death, Jesus sheds light on the meaning of the life and death of every human being. Before he dies, Jesus prays to the Father, asking forgiveness for his persecutors (cf. Lk 23:34), and to the criminal who asks him to remember him in his kingdom he replies: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43). After his death "the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (Mt 27:52). The salvation wrought by Jesus is the bestowal of life and resurrection. Throughout his earthly life, Jesus had indeed bestowed salvation by healing and doing good to all (cf. Acts 10:38). But his miracles, healings and even his raising of the dead were signs of another salvation, a salvation which consists in the forgiveness of sins, that is, in setting man free from his greatest sickness and in raising him to the very life of God.

The Crux



Reflecting on the image of the Blood of Christ helps us appreciate the significance of Christ's suffering and death. God chose to become human to save humanity from sin. This reality must never be underappreciated or taken for granted. God considers us and our salvation with the utmost seriousness.

The blood that Christ shed for us is more powerful than the blood shed in the first murder committed by Cain. The blood of Christ is more powerful than all sin combined – past, present, and future. It is more powerful precisely because of whose blood it is – God's. Only an infinite being could pay an infinite debt. Only a divine being could pay a debt so egregious and terrible as the sum of all humanity's sins.

Considering this, when we talk about sharing the Gospel, we mean quite literally sharing “the good news.” Our modern word *Gospel* comes from the Old English word “godspel,” meaning “good news.” But what exactly is that good news? It is the fact that despite all the evil that exists, God is more powerful. To the Christian, “awareness of sin is not a reason to despair. The Gospel is Good News. It is a message of mercy.”⁶ Though humanity deserved to die because of its sins, God chose to save us. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17). Because of sin, humanity was destined for eternal death, but God intervened so that humanity might have the chance of eternal life with Him forever.

What message is more important or joyful? The Gospel is a gospel of life! As baptized Christians, we share in Christ's authority as priest, prophet, and king. Sharing in his authority as prophet means that we are obliged to

share the Gospel message with others. Furthermore, if the Gospel is a pro-life Gospel, the “Gospel of Life,” then we are obliged to pass along a message of life and its goodness. If we are authentically Christian, missionary disciples walking alongside our Lord, this task will feel less like an obligation and more of a joyful experience and a part of the natural fabric of our spiritual lives.

The Gospel message of life never stops challenging us. Living the Gospel means caring for those who are particularly vulnerable, who lack access to power and resources, such as foreigners, widows, orphans, the ill, the poor, and the unborn.

Jesus’ public ministry reflects this positive, active mission of doing good works. Christ healed countless people, performing miracles wherever he went. We share in his healing work, which never ends, by sharing the Gospel of life through our actions and our words.

Finally, if the power of Jesus’ sacrifice is more powerful than the forces of evil, then the culture of life will triumph over the culture of death. No matter how much the culture of death may seem to reign in our world, we know that God will have the last word. Reflecting on this truth should give us comfort as we continue to fight for life. We do not go forward into battle alone, but Christ goes before us.

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. If someone watched you live your life, would they say that your life reflects a belief that good will triumph over evil? Would they come away thinking that you are a Christian who has hope that the culture of life will defeat the culture of death? If the answer is “no,” what could you do to have greater confidence in the law and maintain a spirit of hope?
2. How did Jesus model a culture of life through his public ministry? How does his Passion and Resurrection offer the hope of healing for all those mired within the culture of death?
3. Who are the vulnerable members in your family and in your community? How can you provide authentic Christ-like care for them and fulfil their needs?
4. To be truly pro-life we need to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. How would you describe your relationship with Jesus? Have you seen positive changes? How could it be better, and what can you do to improve?
5. How comfortable are you sharing the Gospel message through your words, not just through your actions? What stigma do you have about talking about your Catholic Faith with others?

Call to Action

Prayerfully read the account of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection in Jn 18-21. How does this account reveal Jesus as committed to the truth, even to death? How does he model commitment to the Gospel message and urge his apostles to do the same? Consider how Jesus is calling you to be more committed to the Gospel message.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray to remain close to Jesus every day through consistent prayer and to see him in the people around us, especially in the most vulnerable members of society.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 4: The Value of Human Life

Opening Prayer Evangelium Vitae, 105

O Mary,

*Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,
To you do we entrust the cause of life.*

*Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers
Of babies not allowed to be born,
Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,
Of the elderly and the sick killed
By indifference or out of misguided mercy.*

*Grant that all who believe in your Son
May proclaim the Gospel of life
With honesty and love to the people of our time.*

*Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel
As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
Throughout their lives
And the courage to bear witness to it
Resolutely, in order to build,
Together with all people of good will,
The civilization of truth and love,
To the praise and glory of God,
The Creator and lover of life.
R. Amen.*

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Jeremiah 1:4-5



Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.”

Read

Evangelium Vitae, 43, 44, 45



A certain sharing by man in God's lordship is also evident in the specific responsibility which he is given for human life as such. It is a responsibility which reaches its highest point in the giving of life through procreation by man and woman in marriage. As the Second Vatican Council teaches: “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’ (Mt 19:4), wished to share with man a certain special participation in his own creative work. Thus he blessed male and female saying: ‘Increase and multiply’ (Gen 1:28).”⁷

By speaking of “a certain special participation” of man and woman in the “creative work” of God, the Council wishes to point out that having a child is an event which is deeply human and full of religious meaning, insofar as it involves both the spouses, who form “one flesh” (Gen 2:24), and God who makes himself present. As I wrote in my Letter to Families: “When a new person is born of the conjugal union of the two, he brings with him into the world a particular image and likeness of God himself: the genealogy of the person is inscribed in the very biology of generation. In affirming that the spouses, as parents, cooperate with God the Creator in conceiving and giving birth to a new human being, we are not speaking merely with reference to the laws of biology. Instead, we wish to emphasize that God himself is present in human fatherhood and motherhood quite differently than he is present in all other instances of begetting ‘on earth’. Indeed, God alone is the source of that ‘image and likeness’ which is proper to the human being, as it was received at Creation. Begetting is the continuation of Creation.”⁸

This is what the Bible teaches in direct and eloquent language when it reports the joyful cry of the first woman, “the mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20). Aware that God has intervened, Eve exclaims: “I have begotten a man with the help of the Lord” (Gen 4:1). In procreation therefore, through the communication of life from parents to child, God’s own image and likeness is transmitted, thanks to the creation of the immortal soul ... It is precisely in their role as co-workers with God who

transmits his image to the new creature that we see the greatness of couples who are ready “to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior, who through them will enlarge and enrich his own family day by day.”⁹ This is why the Bishop Amphilochius extolled “holy matrimony, chosen and elevated above all other earthly gifts” as “the begetter of humanity, the creator of images of God.”¹⁰

Thus, a man and woman joined in matrimony become partners in a divine undertaking: through the act of procreation, God’s gift is accepted and a new life opens to the future.

Human life finds itself most vulnerable when it enters the world and when it leaves the realm of time to embark upon eternity. The word of God frequently repeats the call to show care and respect, above all where life is undermined by sickness and old age. Although there are no direct and explicit calls to protect human life at its very beginning, specifically life not yet born, and life nearing its end, this can easily be explained by the fact that the mere possibility of harming, attacking, or actually denying life in these circumstances is completely foreign to the religious and cultural way of thinking of the People of God.

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer 1:5): the life of every individual, from its very beginning, is part of God’s plan. Job, from the depth of his pain, stops to contemplate the work of God who miraculously formed

his body in his mother's womb. Here he finds reason for trust, and he expresses his belief that there is a divine plan for his life: "You have fashioned and made me; will you then turn and destroy me? Remember that you have made me of clay; and will you turn me to dust again? Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese? You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and steadfast love; and your care has preserved my spirit" (Job 10:8-12). Expressions of awe and wonder at God's intervention in the life of a child in its mother's womb occur again and again in the Psalms.

How can anyone think that even a single moment of this marvelous process of the unfolding of life could be separated from the wise and loving work of the Creator, and left prey to human caprice? Certainly the mother of the seven brothers did not think so; she professes her faith in God, both the source and guarantee of life from its very conception, and the foundation of the hope of new life beyond death: "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws" (2 Mac 7:22-23).

The New Testament revelation confirms the indisputable recognition of the value of life from its very beginning.

The exaltation of fruitfulness and the eager expectation of life resound in the words with which Elizabeth rejoices in her pregnancy: “The Lord has looked on me ... to take away my reproach among men” (Lk 1:25). And even more so, the value of the person from the moment of conception is celebrated in the meeting between the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth, and between the two children whom they are carrying in the womb. It is precisely the children who reveal the advent of the Messianic age: in their meeting, the redemptive power of the presence of the Son of God among men first becomes operative. As Saint Ambrose writes: “The arrival of Mary and the blessings of the Lord’s presence are also speedily declared ... Elizabeth was the first to hear the voice; but John was the first to experience grace. She heard according to the order of nature; he leaped because of the mystery. She recognized the arrival of Mary; he the arrival of the Lord. The woman recognized the woman’s arrival; the child, that of the child. The women speak of grace; the babies make it effective from within to the advantage of their mothers who, by a double miracle, prophesy under the inspiration of their children. The infant leaped, the mother was filled with the Spirit. The mother was not filled before the son, but after the son was filled with the Holy Spirit, he filled his mother too.”¹¹



Life is always a gift from God himself. The man and woman participate in the creative work, but it is God who creates the human soul and gives life. This fundamental truth should help us understand the sacred quality of human life, which is in the image and likeness of its Creator. It should also help us recognize the great dignity of marriage, sex, and parenthood. As the man and woman give themselves fully and faithfully to each other, God gives the gift of life itself. God has given this great responsibility and privilege to cooperate in the act of procreation in a unique way to humanity which bears and hands on the image and likeness of God.

That responsibility carries over to how we treat all human life. All human life is a gift from God and should be respected, protected, and loved. This applies most especially to the most vulnerable human lives. Sacred Scripture repeatedly recognizes the dignity of life prior to birth, and St. John Paul II explains several passages that speak of the child in the womb. Modern science only reaffirms what God revealed and what our hearts know to be true – from the moment of conception a unique human life has begun.

But today's world does not want to or know how to believe this. We live in a culture that is desperate for the Good News of Life – the Gospel of Life – but it is necessary to start from the beginning. It is difficult to

begin to change someone's mind or heart about the moral issues of today if we start the conversation with the moral issue itself. What the Church teaches about abortion, IVF, contraception, euthanasia, or any other issue begins first with our understanding of the human person and our relationship with God. The moral demands of our faith flow from that foundation.

The goodness and beauty of human life – all human life! – can draw a person away from polemical arguments about political issues and toward conversations about humanity and our responsibility to love and protect human life. If that foundation can be a starting point, then the difficult cases can be addressed together rather than in opposition. Sharing the Gospel of Life should begin with the goodness of life.

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. How does our culture fail to understand God's vision for marriage? How does an improper understanding, or complete lack thereof, lead people down the road to accepting crimes like abortion?
2. Why can we say that human life is sacred, not just a biological reality?
3. How does modern science confirm that human life begins at conception, not birth?

4. How does our understanding about the Culture of Life stem not from the moral issue itself but from our understanding of who we are and our relationship to God?
5. Where do conversations about Culture of Life-related issues go off-track, and how can we make them more respectful and productive?
6. How have you experienced the gift of new life through infants?
7. Though children are always gifts, parenthood can be challenging. What are some ways we can support new parents and especially young parents as they receive new children into their lives?

Call to Action

If you have a wife and children, do something nice for them this week. If possible, go someplace fun that you can all enjoy. If you are struggling as a parent, find some quiet time to pray with the Lord and open up about what is going on, or reach out to a trusted friend or family member. If you do not have children, or are not married, call a parent or an adult you respect and thank them for their impact on your life; share some good memories you have with them.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray to see infants as gifts and parenthood as a blessing. May we see the beauty of God's vision for holy matrimony between a man and a woman. May parents

who are struggling with their many responsibilities feel Christ's closeness in their daily lives and know that their efforts will bear eternal fruit.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 5: The Tragedy of Abortion

Opening Prayer Evangelium Vitae, 105

O Mary,

*Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,
To you do we entrust the cause of life.*

*Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers
Of babies not allowed to be born,
Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,
Of the elderly and the sick killed
By indifference or out of misguided mercy.*

*Grant that all who believe in your Son
May proclaim the Gospel of life
With honesty and love to the people of our time.*

*Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel
As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
Throughout their lives
And the courage to bear witness to it
Resolutely, in order to build,
Together with all people of good will,
The civilization of truth and love,
To the praise and glory of God,
The Creator and lover of life.
R. Amen.*

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Psalm 139:13-14



For you formed my inward parts,
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am wondrously made.
Wonderful are your works!

Read

Evangelium Vitae, 54, 58-59, 60, 61, 62



From the beginning, the living Tradition of the Church – as shown by the Didache, the most ancient non-biblical Christian writing – categorically repeated the commandment “You shall not kill”: “There are two ways, a way of life and a way of death; there is a great difference between them... In accordance with the precept of the teaching: you shall not kill ... you shall not put a child to death by abortion nor kill it once it is born ... The way of death is this: ... they show no compassion for the poor, they do not suffer with the suffering, they do not acknowledge their Creator, they kill their children and by abortion cause God's creatures to perish; they

drive away the needy, oppress the suffering, they are advocates of the rich and unjust judges of the poor; they are filled with every sin. May you be able to stay ever apart, o children, from all these sins!"

Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable. The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an "unspeakable crime".¹²

But today, in many people's consciences, the perception of its gravity has become progressively obscured. The acceptance of abortion in the popular mind, in behavior and even in law itself, is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, even when the fundamental right to life is at stake. Given such a grave situation, we need now more than ever to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name, without yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation of self-deception. In this regard the reproach of the Prophet is extremely straightforward: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness" (Isaiah 5:20). Especially in the case of abortion there is a widespread use of ambiguous terminology, such as "interruption of pregnancy", which tends to hide abortion's true nature and to attenuate its seriousness in public opinion. Perhaps this linguistic phenomenon is itself a symptom

of an uneasiness of conscience. But no word has the power to change the reality of things: procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth.

The moral gravity of procured abortion is apparent in all its truth if we recognize that we are dealing with murder and, in particular, when we consider the specific elements involved. The one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life. No one more absolutely innocent could be imagined. In no way could this human being ever be considered an aggressor, much less an unjust aggressor! He or she is weak, defenseless, even to the point of lacking that minimal form of defense consisting in the poignant power of a newborn baby's cries and tears. The unborn child is totally entrusted to the protection and care of the woman carrying him or her in the womb. And yet sometimes it is precisely the mother herself who makes the decision and asks for the child to be eliminated, and who then goes about having it done.

It is true that the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as the decision to rid herself of the fruit of conception is not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it

would be better if the birth did not take place. Nevertheless, these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.

As well as the mother, there are often other people too who decide upon the death of the child in the womb. In the first place, the father of the child may be to blame, not only when he directly pressures the woman to have an abortion, but also when he indirectly encourages such a decision on her part by leaving her alone to face the problems of pregnancy: in this way the family is thus mortally wounded and profaned in its nature as a community of love and in its vocation to be the "sanctuary of life." Nor can one overlook the pressures which sometimes come from the wider family circle and from friends. Sometimes the woman is subjected to such strong pressure that she feels psychologically forced to have an abortion: certainly in this case moral responsibility lies particularly with those who have directly or indirectly obliged her to have an abortion. Doctors and nurses are also responsible, when they place at the service of death skills which were acquired for promoting life.

But responsibility likewise falls on the legislators who have promoted and approved abortion laws, and, to the extent that they have a say in the matter, on the administrators of the health-care centers where abortions are performed. A general and no less serious responsibility lies with those who have encouraged the

spread of an attitude of sexual permissiveness and a lack of esteem for motherhood, and with those who should have ensured—but did not—effective family and social policies in support of families, especially larger families and those with particular financial and educational needs. Finally, one cannot overlook the network of complicity which reaches out to include international institutions, foundations and associations which systematically campaign for the legalization and spread of abortion in the world. In this sense abortion goes beyond the responsibility of individuals and beyond the harm done to them, and takes on a distinctly social dimension. It is a most serious wound inflicted on society and its culture by the very people who ought to be society's promoters and defenders. As I wrote in my Letter to Families, “we are facing an immense threat to life: not only to the life of individuals but also to that of civilization itself”. We are facing what can be called a “structure of sin” which opposes human life not yet born.

Some people try to justify abortion by claiming that the result of conception, at least up to a certain number of days, cannot yet be considered a personal human life. But in fact, “from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. This has always been clear, and ... modern genetic science offers clear confirmation. It has demonstrated that from the first instant there is established the program of what this living being will be:

a person, this individual person with his characteristic aspects already well determined. Right from fertilization the adventure of a human life begins, and each of its capacities requires time—a rather lengthy time—to find its place and to be in a position to act.”¹³

Human life is sacred and inviolable at every moment of existence, including the initial phase which precedes birth. All human beings, from their mothers' womb, belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow whose days are numbered and whose vocation is even now written in the “book of life” (cf. Ps 139: 1, 13-16).

Christian Tradition—as the Declaration issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith points out so well¹⁴—is clear and unanimous, from the beginning up to our own day, in describing abortion as a particularly grave moral disorder. Throughout Christianity’s two-thousand-year history, this same doctrine has been constantly taught by the Fathers of the Church and by her Pastors and Doctors. Even scientific and philosophical discussions about the precise moment of the infusion of the spiritual soul have never given rise to any hesitation about the moral condemnation of abortion.

The more recent Papal Magisterium has vigorously reaffirmed this common doctrine. Pius XI in particular, in

his Encyclical *Casti Connubii*, rejected the specious justifications of abortion. Pius XII excluded all direct abortion, i.e., every act tending directly to destroy human life in the womb “whether such destruction is intended as an end or only as a means to an end.”¹⁵ John XXIII reaffirmed that human life is sacred because “from its very beginning it directly involves God’s creative activity.”¹⁶ The Second Vatican Council, as mentioned earlier, sternly condemned abortion: “From the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care, while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes.”¹⁷

Given such unanimity in the doctrinal and disciplinary tradition of the Church, Paul VI was able to declare that this tradition is unchanged and unchangeable.¹⁸ Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops — who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine — I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church’s Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.¹⁹

No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church.

The Crux



St. John Paul II does not shy away from shining a light on the act of abortion itself and speaking clearly that this is murder – the killing of an innocent human life. The gravity of this act is not an open question, and John Paul clearly declares it to always be “intrinsically illicit,” contrary to the natural law written on our hearts and contrary to the teachings of the Church.

The Church’s position opposing abortion is not new. On the contrary, it has been remarkably consistent over the Church’s over 2,000-year history. We can read about opposition to abortion in the ***Didache***, the oldest collection of Christian theological writing, written in modern-day Egypt or Syria in the late 1st century or early 2nd century. Contemporary writers Athenagoras (c. 133-190 AD) and Tertullian (155-220 AD) also affirm an unwavering anti-abortion stance.

In this section of *Evangelium Vitae*, St. John Paul II traces the teachings of the Church on abortion from the first centuries to today. It has been unchanging despite cultural pressures. In fact, the sound teaching that life

begins at conception has only been reinforced by scientific discoveries about human development. In the years since *Evangelium Vitae* was written, the Church's position on abortion has remained steadfast. Pope Benedict XVI (r. 2005-2013) stated, "Children truly are the family's greatest treasure and most precious good. Consequently, everyone must be helped to become aware of the intrinsic evil of the crime of abortion."²⁰ Pope Francis (r. 2013-2025) said, "Institutions, social and political, have the fundamental duty to protect and promote the dignity of every human being, offering to women, the bearers of life, the necessary conditions to be able to welcome the gift of life and assure their children of a worthy existence."²¹ The current pontiff, Pope Leo XIV, has already added his voice to the Church's prolife legacy: "In addition, no one is exempted from striving to ensure respect for the dignity of every person, especially the most frail and vulnerable, from the unborn to the elderly, from the sick to the unemployed, citizens and immigrants alike."²²

When faced with the tragedy of abortion, the Church stands firm, speaking the truth in charity. While holding to that truth, we are also called to take up charity and change the circumstances and beliefs that lead to abortions. As John Paul II outlines, often the society, legislatures, familial pressures, or other lived realities create systems or structures of sin that we can call the Culture of Death. This culture has normalized abortion to the point that so many people see nothing wrong with it, going against the natural law written on their hearts.

We all have the responsibility to change this into a Culture of Life that supports, defends, and loves life at all stages, especially the most vulnerable in the womb.

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. St. John Paul II believes that every person, whether they are a Christian or not, can recognize the value of human life based on the natural law. What is the Natural Law? How might this be a helpful place to start conversations about life in a society that tends to reject Christian moral teaching? (If necessary, consult the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1954-1960).
2. What are the Catholic Church's major arguments against abortion, using faith and reason?
3. Why is it important for St. John Paul II to point out that the Church has always stood for life from the moment of conception?
4. How has the Church's teaching about abortion remained consistent over its two-millennium history? Is there anything you learned from this week's session that surprised you or stands out to you?
5. When asked, "When does life begin?", Planned Parenthood states, "Questions about when life begins are personal, and it's just not that simple.

For some it's based on faith; for others, it's a matter of science or medicine. There is no general consensus." How would you respond to this answer?

Call to Action

Research what initiatives your parish community provides for young mothers or women who are in unplanned pregnancies. Consider supporting one of these initiatives and encourage at least one person to join you.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray that pregnant mothers will choose life for their children; that pregnant women who are pressured to choose abortion by their partner or family members will stand courageously on the side of life, and that all will experience a conversion of heart; for repentance and healing for all women who have chosen abortion; and for governmental policies to be adopted that support families, particularly those in financial need.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 6: The Contraceptive Mindset

Opening Prayer Evangelium Vitae, 105

O Mary,

*Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,
To you do we entrust the cause of life.*

*Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers
Of babies not allowed to be born,
Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,
Of the elderly and the sick killed
By indifference or out of misguided mercy.*

*Grant that all who believe in your Son
May proclaim the Gospel of life
With honesty and love to the people of our time.*

*Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel
As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
Throughout their lives
And the courage to bear witness to it
Resolutely, in order to build,
Together with all people of good will,
The civilization of truth and love,
To the praise and glory of God,
The Creator and lover of life.
R. Amen.*

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:39-45



In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the child leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

Read

Evangelium Vitae, 13-14, 63, 97



It is frequently asserted that contraception, if made safe and available to all, is the most effective remedy against abortion. The Catholic Church is then accused of

actually promoting abortion, because she obstinately continues to teach the moral unlawfulness of contraception. When looked at carefully, this objection is clearly unfounded. It may be that many people use contraception with a view to excluding the subsequent temptation of abortion. But the negative values inherent in the “contraceptive mentality” – which is very different from responsible parenthood, lived in respect for the full truth of the conjugal act – are such that they in fact strengthen this temptation when an unwanted life is conceived. Indeed, the pro-abortion culture is especially strong precisely where the Church’s teaching on contraception is rejected. Certainly, from the moral point of view contraception and abortion are specifically different evils: the former contradicts the full truth of the sexual act as the proper expression of conjugal love, while the latter destroys the life of a human being; the former is opposed to the virtue of chastity in marriage, the latter is opposed to the virtue of justice and directly violates the divine commandment “You shall not kill.”

But despite their differences of nature and moral gravity, contraception and abortion are often closely connected, as fruits of the same tree. It is true that in many cases contraception and even abortion are practiced under the pressure of real-life difficulties, which nonetheless can never exonerate from striving to observe God’s law fully. Still, in very many other instances such practices are rooted in a hedonistic mentality unwilling to accept responsibility in matters of sexuality, and they imply a self-centered concept of freedom, which regards

procreation as an obstacle to personal fulfilment. The life which could result from a sexual encounter thus becomes an enemy to be avoided at all costs, and abortion becomes the only possible decisive response to failed contraception.

The close connection which exists, in mentality, between the practice of contraception and that of abortion is becoming increasingly obvious. It is being demonstrated in an alarming way by the development of chemical products, intrauterine devices and vaccines which, distributed with the same ease as contraceptives, really act as abortifacients in the very early stages of the development of the life of the new human being.

The various techniques of artificial reproduction, which would seem to be at the service of life and which are frequently used with this intention, actually open the door to new threats against life. Apart from the fact that they are morally unacceptable, since they separate procreation from the fully human context of the conjugal act, these techniques have a high rate of failure: not just failure in relation to fertilization but with regard to the subsequent development of the embryo, which is exposed to the risk of death, generally within a very short space of time.

Prenatal diagnosis, which presents no moral objections if carried out in order to identify the medical treatment which may be needed by the child in the womb, all too often becomes an opportunity for proposing and procuring an abortion. This is eugenic abortion, justified

in public opinion on the basis of a mentality – mistakenly held to be consistent with the demands of “therapeutic interventions” – which accepts life only under certain conditions and rejects it when it is affected by any limitation, handicap or illness.

This evaluation of the morality of abortion is to be applied also to the recent forms of intervention on human embryos which, although carried out for purposes legitimate in themselves, inevitably involve the killing of those embryos. This is the case with experimentation on embryos, which is becoming increasingly widespread in the field of biomedical research and is legally permitted in some countries.

This moral condemnation also regards procedures that exploit living human embryos and fetuses—sometimes specifically “produced” for this purpose by in vitro fertilization—either to be used as “biological material” or as providers of organs or tissue for transplants in the treatment of certain diseases. The killing of innocent human creatures, even if carried out to help others, constitutes an absolutely unacceptable act.

Special attention must be given to evaluating the morality of prenatal diagnostic techniques which enable the early detection of possible anomalies in the unborn child. In view of the complexity of these techniques, an accurate and systematic moral judgment is necessary. When they do not involve disproportionate risks for the child and the mother, and are meant to make possible early therapy or even to favor a serene and informed

acceptance of the child not yet born, these techniques are morally licit. But since the possibilities of prenatal therapy are today still limited, it not infrequently happens that these techniques are used with a eugenic intention which accepts selective abortion in order to prevent the birth of children affected by various types of anomalies. Such an attitude is shameful and utterly reprehensible, since it presumes to measure the value of a human life only within the parameters of “normality” and physical well-being, thus opening the way to legitimizing infanticide and euthanasia as well.

The work of educating in the service of life involves the training of married couples in responsible procreation. In its true meaning, responsible procreation requires couples to be obedient to the Lord’s call and to act as faithful interpreters of his plan. This happens when the family is generously open to new lives, and when couples maintain an attitude of openness and service to life, even if, for serious reasons and in respect for the moral law, they choose to avoid a new birth for the time being or indefinitely.

The Crux



Critics of the Catholic Church’s stance on contraception argue that artificial contraception will lead to fewer abortions. As the argument goes, “if people are encouraged not to use artificial contraceptives, then unplanned pregnancies are more likely to occur, which

will then result in a higher number of abortions. If only the Catholic Church allowed the lesser evil of artificial contraception, the greater evil of abortion would be rarer.”

John Paul II rejects such arguments, countering that the mentality that leads to the use of artificial contraception and the mentality that leads to abortion are connected and flawed. They are two fruits of the same tree. The culture of death that pushes for greater access to abortion is strongest where contraception is embraced. A 2014 study by the American pro-abortion Guttmacher Institute revealed that 51% of women seeking abortion reported having used contraception during the month they conceived.²³

Once again, the Church’s position and teaching only make sense if we are grounded in the Church’s understanding of the human person and sex. Artificial contraception reveals a rejection of the Christian vision for sex as a beautiful sacramental act between a man and a woman that is both *unitive and procreative*. The sexual act brings the husband and wife together in greater unity (physically, spiritually, and emotionally) **and** demonstrates an openness to receiving the gift of human life through children. When a husband and a wife use contraception, it is “like [they are] saying to one another: ‘I give you all of myself, except for that profound mystery in me, my capacity to become a father or a mother. In other words, I don’t give you all of myself.’”²⁴ Both the unitive and procreative aspects are part of

God's vision for human sexuality, and when either is attacked, ignored, or not present, sexual intimacy falls short into the realm of sin.

This understanding of sex – that it is both unitive and procreative – provides the foundation for why the Church rejects both artificial contraception and artificial reproduction – in-vitro fertilization (IVF). Both deliberately separate the unitive from the procreative aspects of sex so that one can be had without the other. Children, then, are commodified. If a child is not wanted, then the couple uses contraception, and if the contraception fails, abortion is the next choice. If a child is wanted, but the couple is faced with infertility, then IVF is used, regardless of how many embryos – human lives! – are destroyed or frozen in the process.

John Paul II recognizes the real suffering of infertility that many couples face. This cross is not light and is often one that a couple bears alone in silence. The moral guidance that the Church gives, though, is a guidance based on the Gospel of Life which challenges us but also leads to life and goodness, even if we are not able to see it now.²

The other issues brought up in this section point to other temptations that our technological age present. Today, there are only more pre-natal tests available and even

² For more information about the Church's position on IVF, please see the booklet published by the Catholic Information Center (CIS), *The Child: Begotten Not Manmade* available at www.kofc.org/cis.

screenings that allow couples to make genetic choices among embryos through IVF. More than ever, the child has become a product or commodity. St. John Paul II's cautions from the mid 1990s hold true today. While some pre-natal tests can be helpful for a couple to prepare for the birth of the baby, often they are used to decide whether or not to have an abortion.

Today more than ever, we as a society desire control – control over our own bodies, control over reproduction. When we grasp for that control, however, we ignore the plans and designs that God has put in place. The Church instead offers a different vision of the human person, created by God, created for goodness.

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. How does the Church's understanding of the human person and our relationship with God influence its position on issues like artificial contraception?
2. How does artificial contraception – and a contraceptive mindset more broadly – undermine the sacramental nature of Holy Matrimony?
3. Why is the Church concerned that artificial contraception and IVF risk turning children into “commodities”?

4. How could advance prenatal screenings be misused? What ethical dilemmas could result?
5. How can the Gospel of Life be a source of comfort for couples who struggle with fertility issues?

Call to Action

This week's session covers some heavy topics that may be deeply personal. Spend some time in prayer this week asking the Lord to grant wisdom and understanding to all those who are struggling with Church teaching. May they feel the peace and support of their faith community as they continue their discipleship journey with Christ.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray that God may grant us the humility, courage, and wisdom to preach the Gospel and defend human life and God's plan for marriage.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 7: Euthanasia & End-of-Life Care

Opening Prayer *Evangelium Vitae, 105*

O Mary,

*Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,
To you do we entrust the cause of life.*

*Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers
Of babies not allowed to be born,
Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,
Of the elderly and the sick killed
By indifference or out of misguided mercy.*

*Grant that all who believe in your Son
May proclaim the Gospel of life
With honesty and love to the people of our time.*

*Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel
As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
Throughout their lives
And the courage to bear witness to it
Resolutely, in order to build,
Together with all people of good will,
The civilization of truth and love,
To the praise and glory of God,
The Creator and lover of life.
R. Amen.*

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Psalm 71:1-6, 8-9



In you, O LORD, I take refuge;
 let me never be put to shame!
In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
 incline your ear to me, and save me!
Be to me a rock of refuge,
 a strong fortress, to save me,
 for you are my rock and my fortress.

Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
 from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man.
For you, O Lord, are my hope,
 my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
 from my mother's womb, you have been my
 strength.

My praise is continually of you.

My mouth is filled with your praise,
 and with your glory all the day.
Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
 forsake me not when my strength is spent.



Threats which are no less serious hang over the incurably ill and the dying. In a social and cultural context which makes it more difficult to face and accept suffering, the temptation becomes all the greater to resolve the problem of suffering by eliminating it at the root, by hastening death so that it occurs at the moment considered most suitable.

Various considerations usually contribute to such a decision, all of which converge in the same terrible outcome. In the sick person the sense of anguish, of severe discomfort, and even of desperation brought on by intense and prolonged suffering can be a decisive factor. Such a situation can threaten the already fragile equilibrium of an individual's personal and family life, with the result that, on the one hand, the sick person, despite the help of increasingly effective medical and social assistance, risks feeling overwhelmed by his or her own frailty; and on the other hand, those close to the sick person can be moved by an understandable even if misplaced compassion. All this is aggravated by a cultural climate which fails to perceive any meaning or value in suffering, but rather considers suffering the epitome of evil, to be eliminated at all costs. This is especially the case in the absence of a religious outlook which could help to provide a positive understanding of the mystery of suffering.

Old age is characterized by dignity and surrounded with reverence (cf. 2 Mac 6:23). The just man does not seek to be delivered from old age and its burden; on the contrary his prayer is this: “You, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth ... so even to old age and grey hairs, O God, do not forsake me, till I proclaim your might to all the generations to come” (Ps 71:5, 18). The ideal of the Messianic age is presented as a time when “no more shall there be ... an old man who does not fill out his days” (Is 65:20).

In old age, how should one face the inevitable decline of life? How should one act in the face of death? The believer knows that his life is in the hands of God: “You, O Lord, hold my lot” (cf. Ps 16:5), and he accepts from God the need to die: “This is the decree from the Lord for all flesh, and how can you reject the good pleasure of the Most High?” (Sir 41:3-4). Man is not the master of life, nor is he the master of death. In life and in death, he has to entrust himself completely to the “good pleasure of the Most High,” to his loving plan.

At the other end of life’s spectrum, men and women find themselves facing the mystery of death. Today, as a result of advances in medicine and in a cultural context frequently closed to the transcendent, the experience of dying is marked by new features. When the prevailing tendency is to value life only to the extent that it brings pleasure and well-being, suffering seems like an unbearable setback, something from which one must be freed at all costs. Death is considered “senseless” if it

suddenly interrupts a life still open to a future of new and interesting experiences. But it becomes a “rightful liberation” once life is held to be no longer meaningful because it is filled with pain and inexorably doomed to even greater suffering.

Furthermore, when he denies or neglects his fundamental relationship to God, man thinks he is his own rule and measure, with the right to demand that society should guarantee him the ways and means of deciding what to do with his life in full and complete autonomy.

In this context the temptation grows to have recourse to euthanasia, that is, to take control of death and bring it about before its time, “gently” ending one’s own life or the life of others. In reality, what might seem logical and humane, when looked at more closely is seen to be senseless and inhumane. Here we are faced with one of the more alarming symptoms of the “culture of death,” which is advancing above all in prosperous societies, marked by an attitude of excessive preoccupation with efficiency and which sees the growing number of elderly and disabled people as intolerable and too burdensome. These people are very often isolated by their families and by society, which are organized almost exclusively on the basis of criteria of productive efficiency, according to which a hopelessly impaired life no longer has any value.

Euthanasia must be distinguished from the decision to forego so-called “aggressive medical treatment,” in

other words, medical procedures which no longer correspond to the real situation of the patient, either because they are by now disproportionate to any expected results or because they impose an excessive burden on the patient and his family. In such situations, when death is clearly imminent and inevitable, one can in conscience “refuse forms of treatment that would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted.”²⁵ ... 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.²⁶

Taking into account these distinctions, in harmony with the Magisterium of my Predecessors²⁷ and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God, is transmitted by the Church’s Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.²⁸

The Crux



We face a temptation in our culture to want to eliminate suffering at all costs. For the elderly, suffering may be a

severe trial as their bodies age and decline, and they approach the end of their earthly lives. For others, physical suffering can come from a chronic illness or a terminal diagnosis. Many factors can lead a person to feel overwhelmed and want to end their suffering on their own terms. Our world today allows and even encourages euthanasia for people facing physical or mental suffering to an even greater extent than in 1995 when this encyclical was published.

The details and technicalities surrounding euthanasia and other end-of-life issues can be complicated, but St. John Paul II provides us with the clarity of the Church's perennial teaching. Once again, this teaching is grounded in our understanding of the human person, our understanding of suffering, and the clear and consistent revelation of Sacred Scripture and Tradition that "in [God's] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind" (Job 12:10).

As humans, whose time on Earth is short, we must spiritually prepare ourselves for our inevitable death. We must look towards our death with humility and a spirit of repentance, not taking for granted Christ's sacrifice on the cross. However, this does not mean we should live in anxiety and fear. Earthly death is the last necessary chapter before we see Jesus Christ face to face. How we approach death is our last trial.

Our Christian Faith tells us that Jesus Christ has power over sin and death. When we recite the Nicene Creed, we confidently proclaim that Jesus "will come again in

glory to judge the living and the dead, and His Kingdom will have no end.” We conclude the Creed by saying, “I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” We do not begrudgingly accept death and the passing to new life: we “look forward” to it with eagerness and trust. Even the most beautiful aspects of earthly existence are a mere foretaste of Heaven, not Heaven itself. As St. Therese of Lisieux reminds us, “The world is thy ship and not thy home.”

As much as we fear death in our modern world, we fear suffering even more. Experiencing pain or watching a loved one undergo pain are some of the most difficult things in life; however, suffering has been conquered by Christ on the cross. There is a salvific meaning of suffering that we can only see through the lens of Christ crucified. Suffering does not diminish the human person; rather, we become sharers in Christ’s sufferings.

Old age and terminal or chronic illness brings about another reality that is even worse than suffering or death in the eyes of our world today: loss of control. The realization that I do not have control over what happens next as I face death or pain or prolonged treatment is difficult for anyone to face. As we have seen with other issues around life, if science or technology offers a way to take back control, our modern world jumps to do so without asking if it is right.

St. John Paul II himself is a model for how to heroically face chronic suffering, old age, and death. An athlete who enjoyed hiking, skiing, and swimming, he began

suffering from Parkinson's disease in the early 1990's. His physical decline and suffering were evident to the public long before his official diagnosis was made known in 2001. The man who visited over 120 countries as pope, who had jogged in the Vatican gardens and once led kayaking trips throughout the Polish countryside was now bent over and confined to a wheelchair. In a TIME magazine article published February 2, 2005, two months before his death, an Australian high school teacher visiting Rome said this about him: "He is still our spiritual advisor. Now he teaches us how much love and peace and hope can come out of suffering — and that death is not something to be feared."²⁹

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. What is a common fear that people have about getting older?
2. How can we remind the older people in our lives that they have inherent self-worth? How can we support them as their capabilities and needs change?
3. How does Jesus' crucifixion transform our view on aging and suffering?
4. How was Pope St. John Paul II a faithful witness to his own teachings about aging and facing death? How did he practice what he preached?

5. How can society better integrate older people into their communities, where they can share their decades of wisdom and insight?

Call to Action

This week, spend intentional time with an older family member. If they live close to you, visit them or share a meal with them. If distance is an issue, call them to let them know how much they matter to you.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray that God gives us a heart like his own that sees the value of the elderly, and may God grant us the courage to love and support those who need us to walk with them in their aging or times of suffering.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 8: The Death Penalty

Opening Prayer Evangelium Vitae, 105

O Mary,

*Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,
To you do we entrust the cause of life.*

*Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers
Of babies not allowed to be born,
Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,
Of the elderly and the sick killed
By indifference or out of misguided mercy.*

*Grant that all who believe in your Son
May proclaim the Gospel of life
With honesty and love to the people of our time.*

*Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel
As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
Throughout their lives
And the courage to bear witness to it
Resolutely, in order to build,
Together with all people of good will,
The civilization of truth and love,
To the praise and glory of God,
The Creator and lover of life.
R. Amen.*

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Romans 13:9-10



The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Read

Evangelium Vitae, 55-56



This should not cause surprise: to kill a human being, in whom the image of God is present, is a particularly serious sin. Only God is the master of life! Yet from the beginning, faced with the many and often tragic cases which occur in the life of individuals and society, Christian reflection has sought a fuller and deeper understanding of what God’s commandment prohibits and prescribes. There are in fact situations in which values proposed by God’s Law seem to involve a genuine paradox. This happens for example in the case

of legitimate defense, in which the right to protect one's own life and the duty not to harm someone else's life are difficult to reconcile in practice. Certainly, the intrinsic value of life and the duty to love oneself no less than others are the basis of a true right to self-defense. The demanding commandment of love of neighbor, set forth in the Old Testament and confirmed by Jesus, itself presupposes love of oneself as the basis of comparison: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mk 12:31). Consequently, no one can renounce the right to self-defense out of lack of love for life or for self. This can only be done in virtue of a heroic love which deepens and transfigures the love of self into a radical self-offering, according to the spirit of the Gospel Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5:38-40). The sublime example of this self-offering is the Lord Jesus himself.

Moreover, "legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another's life, the common good of the family or of the State."³⁰ Unfortunately it happens that the need to render the aggressor incapable of causing harm sometimes involves taking his life. In this case, the fatal outcome is attributable to the aggressor whose action brought it about, even though he may not be morally responsible because of a lack of the use of reason.³¹

This is the context in which to place the problem of the death penalty. On this matter there is a growing tendency, both in the Church and in civil society, to demand that it be applied in a very limited way or even

that it be abolished completely. The problem must be viewed in the context of a system of penal justice ever more in line with human dignity and thus, in the end, with God's plan for man and society. The primary purpose of the punishment which society inflicts is "to redress the disorder caused by the offense."³² Public authority must redress the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender an adequate punishment for the crime, as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom. In this way authority also fulfils the purpose of defending public order and ensuring people's safety, while at the same time offering the offender an incentive and help to change his or her behavior and be rehabilitated.³³

It is clear that, for these purposes to be achieved, the nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent.

The Crux



Killing a fellow human being is an exceptionally serious action that is only allowed under very specific circumstances. Legitimate defense or self-defense is

one such circumstance, to prevent an aggressor from harming someone else.

Concerning the death penalty – or State-sponsored execution, by which a government puts a citizen to death – he writes that it can only be allowed “in a very limited way” and likely should “be abolished completely” in our modern society. To explain his rationale prioritizing imprisonment over executions, he cites the improved technology and improved resources that allow a violent criminal to be effectively separated from society and thus neutralized as a threat. Methods of rehabilitation also give a criminal, even one guilty of a heinous crime, the chance to repent – even if that chance to repent is part of a life-long sentence.

Church teaching about the death penalty is not a matter of dogma but rather an application of the moral law. Therefore, the teaching can develop – and has – over time. In 2018, Pope Francis expanded upon John Paul II’s teaching on the death penalty by revising paragraph 2267 of the Catechism. The new passage reads:

Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good.

Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new

understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.

Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that “the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person,”³⁴ and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide.

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. What was Pope Francis' explanation for revising the Catechism's teaching about the death penalty? How does it show a natural development from Pope John Paul II's writing in *Evangelium Vitae*?
2. What is the Church's teaching about killing in self-defense?
3. Embracing a culture of life sometimes means defending the rights of people who we may dislike, or in the context of this conversation, those who have committed awful crimes. One important aspect of the Church teaching on the death penalty is the importance of giving a criminal the

opportunity to repent. What can we learn from the Gospels about Jesus' treatment of sinners to better appreciate the Church's teaching on the death penalty?

4. Fr. Michael McGivney, the founder of the Knights of Columbus, recognized what the Catechism today says—"that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes." He ministered to "Chip" Smith while he was preparing to be executed for murdering a police officer. Fr. McGivney led Chip to repentance and conversion before his death. What can we learn from Fr. McGivney's example? Do you think it is possible to lose your human dignity and the rights that it provides? Even outside of the death penalty, how can we better minister to those in prison? *For more information about Bl. McGivney and Chip Smith, see the Appendix.*

Call to Action

This week in prayer, think about the people in your life whom you find hard to forgive. Ask God to open their eyes to repent from their sins and turn towards him. Ask God to give you the capability to forgive, knowing that when we forgive another person we are not pretending as if the hurt never occurred, we are giving ourselves the ability to move on and heal. This may be a good week to commit to praying the Divine Mercy Chaplet daily.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray that those who are guilty of terrible crimes may sincerely repent and cast themselves at the feet of God's mercy. Let us additionally pray for those who have hurt us, that they too may repent and that we will find healing and peace.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 9: The Culture of Life

Opening Prayer Evangelium Vitae, 105

O Mary,

*Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,
To you do we entrust the cause of life.*

*Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers
Of babies not allowed to be born,
Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,
Of the elderly and the sick killed
By indifference or out of misguided mercy.*

*Grant that all who believe in your Son
May proclaim the Gospel of life
With honesty and love to the people of our time.*

*Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel
As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
Throughout their lives
And the courage to bear witness to it
Resolutely, in order to build,
Together with all people of good will,
The civilization of truth and love,
To the praise and glory of God,
The Creator and lover of life.
R. Amen.*

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Ephesians 5:8-9



For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true).

Read

Evangelium Vitae, 24, 26, 27, 88, 98



[A]ll the conditioning and efforts to enforce silence fail to stifle the voice of the Lord echoing in the conscience of every individual: it is always from this intimate sanctuary of the conscience that a new journey of love, openness and service to human life can begin.

It would therefore be to give a one-sided picture, which could lead to sterile discouragement, if the condemnation of the threats to life were not accompanied by the presentation of the positive signs at work in humanity's present situation.

There are still many married couples who, with a generous sense of responsibility, are ready to accept

children as “the supreme gift of marriage.”³⁵ Nor is there a lack of families which, over and above their everyday service to life, are willing to accept abandoned children, boys and girls and teenagers in difficulty, handicapped persons, elderly men and women who have been left alone. Many centers in support of life, or similar institutions, are sponsored by individuals and groups which, with admirable dedication and sacrifice, offer moral and material support to mothers who are in difficulty and are tempted to have recourse to abortion. Increasingly, there are appearing in many places groups of volunteers prepared to offer hospitality to persons without a family, who find themselves in conditions of particular distress or who need a supportive environment to help them to overcome destructive habits and discover anew the meaning of life.

Furthermore, how can we fail to mention all those daily gestures of openness, sacrifice and unselfish care which countless people lovingly make in families, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly and other centers or communities which defend life? Allowing herself to be guided by the example of Jesus the “Good Samaritan” (cf. Lk 10:29-37) and upheld by his strength, the Church has always been in the front line in providing charitable help: so many of her sons and daughters, especially men and women Religious, in traditional and ever new forms, have consecrated and continue to consecrate their lives to God, freely giving of themselves out of love for their neighbor, especially for the weak and needy. These deeds strengthen the bases of the “civilization of

love and life,” without which the life of individuals and of society itself loses its most genuinely human quality. Even if they go unnoticed and remain hidden to most people, faith assures us that the Father “who sees in secret” (Mt 6:6) not only will reward these actions but already here and now makes them produce lasting fruit for the good of all.

At the first stage of life, centers for natural methods of regulating fertility should be promoted as a valuable help to responsible parenthood, in which all individuals, and in the first place the child, are recognized and respected in their own right, and where every decision is guided by the ideal of the sincere gift of self. Marriage and family counseling agencies by their specific work of guidance and prevention, carried out in accordance with an anthropology consistent with the Christian vision of the person, of the couple and of sexuality, also offer valuable help in rediscovering the meaning of love and life, and in supporting and accompanying every family in its mission as the “sanctuary of life.” Newborn life is also served by centers of assistance and homes or centers where new life receives a welcome. Thanks to the work of such centers, many unmarried mothers and couples in difficulty discover new hope and find assistance and support in overcoming hardship and the fear of accepting a newly conceived life or life which has just come into the world.

And when earthly existence draws to a close, it is again charity which finds the most appropriate means for

enabling the elderly, especially those who can no longer look after themselves, and the terminally ill to enjoy genuinely humane assistance and to receive an adequate response to their needs, in particular their anxiety and their loneliness. In these cases the role of families is indispensable; yet families can receive much help from social welfare agencies and, if necessary, from recourse to palliative care, taking advantage of suitable medical and social services available in public institutions or in the home.

In a word, we can say that the cultural change which we are calling for 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 a correct scale of values: the primacy of being over having,³⁶ of the person over things.³⁷ This renewed lifestyle involves a passing from indifference to concern for others, from rejection to acceptance of them. Other people are not rivals from whom we must defend ourselves, but brothers and sisters to be supported. They are to be loved for their own sakes, and they enrich us by their very presence.

The Crux



The culture of death's efforts to silence or deaden the natural law written on every person's heart cannot stop God from speaking truth to people through their own

conscience. And despite the threats to life around the world, there are reasons for hope.

Numerous pro-life organizations have formed on a local, national, and international level. The Knights of Columbus leads and supports many pro-life initiatives, such as building pregnancy resource centers, funding ultrasound machines, and supporting the annual March for Life and LIFE FEST in Washington, D.C.³

Building a culture of life is accomplished not only in big ways, but through small, often unseen or unreported acts each day. Many Catholic couples have rediscovered God's vision for marriage. Others have heroically accepted children with handicaps or disabilities, or have supported other families in doing so. Individuals and nonprofit groups financially support women who find themselves in unplanned pregnancies, giving them the freedom to choose life for their unborn child, sometimes over immense pressure to the contrary by their families and partners. Catholic marriage and family counseling services guide parents and families through their pregnancies and then as they raise their children. Volunteers visit the elderly in nursing homes or provide meals to shut-ins. Charities raise funds and resources for the underprivileged, the elderly, the homebound, and those dealing with chronic illness, among many others.

³ You can learn more about the Knights' prolife work at www.kofc.org/life.

John Paul II highlights consecrated religious communities who dedicate themselves to building a “civilization of love and life.” In the United States, the Sisters of Life were founded in New York in 1991 to “protect and enhance the sacredness of human life.”³⁸ They currently serve seven dioceses in the United States and in Toronto, Canada. They compassionately serve pregnant women who have no one else to turn to as well as bring Christ’s healing words to post-abortive women.

To effectively build a culture of life, we must first change hearts and minds. We must learn to create a society that values “the person over things,” a society that prioritizes being a virtuous person more than living a luxurious lifestyle and having material wealth. Pope Francis warned against a “throwaway culture”³⁹ that discards unwanted people like trash. While he was a college student, the future Pope Leo XIV was an original member of Villanova University’s first pro-life student group. In May 2025, as pontiff, he encouraged governments to create a culture of life “by investing in the family, founded upon the stable union between a man and a woman.” He added, “no one is exempted from striving to ensure respect for the dignity of every person, especially the most frail and vulnerable, from the unborn to the elderly, from the sick to the unemployed, citizens and immigrants alike.”⁴⁰ The timeless wisdom of Holy Mother Church continues to proclaim a culture of life from conception to natural death.

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. What does Pope St. John Paul II identify as hopeful trends towards creating a culture of life? In the 30 years since he wrote *Evangelium Vitae*, what do you believe are recent positive trends?
2. How have you witnessed a commitment to a culture of life in small, little-known ways? Who are people you have known, or know, who embody the culture of life?
3. What does it mean to have a culture of “being” rather than “having”? How can you work towards the cultural changes that John Paul II envisions?
4. Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV have expounded upon Pope John Paul II’s teachings concerning the culture of life. How do their teachings add to what we have discussed?
5. How are the Knights of Columbus committed to building a culture of life? What do you think could be done better?

Call to Action

Do some research about pro-life initiatives in your area that seek to create the culture of life that Pope St. John Paul II envisioned.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray that we are joyful witnesses to hope in a cynical, often joyless world, remembering that God has made us his hands and feet to foster change in our society.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 10: Promoting the Culture of Life

Opening Prayer *Evangelium Vitae, 105*

O Mary,

*Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,
To you do we entrust the cause of life.*

*Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers
Of babies not allowed to be born,
Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,
Of the elderly and the sick killed
By indifference or out of misguided mercy.*

*Grant that all who believe in your Son
May proclaim the Gospel of life
With honesty and love to the people of our time.*

*Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel
As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
Throughout their lives
And the courage to bear witness to it
Resolutely, in order to build,
Together with all people of good will,
The civilization of truth and love,
To the praise and glory of God,
The Creator and lover of life.
R. Amen.*

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

1 John 1:1-2



That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

Read

Evangelium Vitae, 28, 48, 78, 82



This 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 find ourselves not only “faced with” but necessarily “in the midst of” this conflict: we are all involved and we all share in it, with the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life.

For us too Moses’ invitation rings out loud and clear: “See, I have set before you this day life and good, death

and evil. ... I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Dt 30:15, 19). This invitation is very appropriate for us who are called day by day to the duty of choosing between the "culture of life" and the "culture of death." But the call of Deuteronomy goes even deeper, for it urges us to make a choice which is properly religious and moral. It is a question of giving our own existence a basic orientation and living the law of the Lord faithfully and consistently: "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live ... therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days" (30:16,19-20).

The unconditional choice for life reaches its full religious and moral meaning when it flows from, is formed by and nourished by faith in Christ. Nothing helps us so much to face positively the conflict between death and life in which we are engaged as faith in the Son of God who became man and dwelt among men so "that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). It is a matter of faith in the Risen Lord, who has conquered death; faith in the blood of Christ "that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel" (Heb 12:24).

With the light and strength of this faith, therefore, in facing the challenges of the present situation, the Church is becoming more aware of the grace and responsibility which come to her from her Lord of proclaiming, celebrating and serving the Gospel of life.

Life is indelibly marked by a truth of its own. By accepting God's gift, man is obliged to maintain life in this truth which is essential to it. To detach oneself from this truth is to condemn oneself to meaninglessness and unhappiness, and possibly to become a threat to the existence of others, since the barriers guaranteeing respect for life and the defense of life, in every circumstance, have been broken down.

The Church has received the Gospel as a proclamation and a source of joy and salvation. She has received it as a gift from Jesus, sent by the Father "to preach good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18). She has received it through the Apostles, sent by Christ to the whole world (cf. Mk 16:15; Mt 28:19-20). Born from this evangelizing activity, the Church hears every day the echo of Saint Paul's words of warning: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16).

Evangelization is an all-embracing, progressive activity through which the Church participates in the prophetic, priestly and royal mission of the Lord Jesus. It is therefore inextricably linked to preaching, celebration and the service of charity.

This is also the case with regard to the proclamation of the Gospel of life, an integral part of that Gospel which is Jesus Christ himself. We are at the service of this Gospel, sustained by the awareness that we have received it as a gift and are sent to preach it to all humanity, “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). With humility and gratitude we know that we are the people of life and for life, and this is how we present ourselves to everyone.

To be truly a people at the service of life we must propose these truths constantly and courageously from the very first proclamation of the Gospel, and thereafter in catechesis, in the various forms of preaching, in personal dialogue and in all educational activity. Teachers, catechists and theologians have the task of emphasizing the anthropological reasons upon which respect for every human life is based. In this way, by making the newness of the Gospel of life shine forth, we can also help everyone discover in the light of reason and of personal experience how the Christian message fully reveals what man is and the meaning of his being and existence. We shall find important points of contact and dialogue also with non-believers, in our common commitment to the establishment of a new culture of life.

The Crux



Every Christian through his or her baptism is obligated to share the “Gospel of Life.” The word commonly used

to mean “sharing the Gospel” is *evangelization*. This term finds its origin in Ancient Greece and Rome, where *evangelion* meant proclaiming a military or political victory. Christians adopted the term to mean proclaiming the ultimate victory – the victory over sin and death. Whereas Romans idolatrously deified their emperors, claiming that a mortal man was God, the Christians of the first and second centuries proclaimed a different message, of a God who humbly became man to save us from our sins and to show us the path of virtuous living.

Christians have been fighting the culture of death ever since Ancient Rome. The fight is not just a physical battle, but a spiritual one. As far back as the Book of Exodus, Moses spoke about the choice that followers of God face between “life and death, blessing and curse” (Dt 30:15). Promoting a culture of life begins by orienting our own hearts towards God, the “Author of life” (Acts 3:15). It means obeying God’s commandments, remaining close to him in prayer, and saying “yes” to a daily journey with him, as a disciple would apprentice under his spiritual master.

A culture that is truly pro-life is rooted in the person of Jesus Christ, through whom and for whom the universe was made, and who laid down his life so that humanity would be freed from sin and death.

Shortly before his Ascension, Jesus gave what is called the Great Commission – the great “sending forth” – to his apostles: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of

the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:19-20). St. Luke provides a different perspective of this event, which nevertheless shares a common message. In Acts, Jesus tells his apostles that they "shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses ... to the end of the earth" (1:8).

Pope St. Paul VI wrote that "evangelization is the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize."⁴¹ Everyone in the Church shares in this mission: the pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, consecrated religious, and the laity. No one is exempt!

Promoting a culture of life is more than opposing something; it is about building something new. John Paul II urges teachers and catechists to communicate good Christ-centered anthropology (meaning, in this case, "theology dealing with the origin, nature, and destiny of human beings"⁴²) so students know that Christianity can answer their toughest questions and give meaning to their lives. Pope Leo XIV has spoken of a "Christian humanism" through which humanity can be the best version of itself. In July 2025, he told a mostly young adult crowd gathered for the Jubilee of Digital Missionaries and Catholic Influencers, "Today more than ever, we need missionary disciples who convey the gift of the risen Lord to the world." He continued, "Nothing that comes from man and his creativity should be used

to undermine the dignity of others. Our mission – your mission – is to nurture a culture of Christian humanism and to do so together ... the Church has never remained passive; she has always sought to illuminate every age with the light and hope of Christ by discerning good from evil and what was good from what needed to be changed, transformed, and purified.”⁴³

Whether in the first century or the twenty-first, the Church’s mission to proclaim light where there is darkness, charity where there is selfishness, hope where there is despair, truth where there are lies, remains evergreen.

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. For decades, many people wrongly believed that the work of evangelization is the responsibility of priests alone, when it is really the responsibility of all baptized Christians. Where have you seen this misunderstanding, and what can be done to change it?
2. When is the last time that you engaged in some pro-life activity? What was your experience like?
3. Why is it important to lead with charity and rely on God’s grace in our work as advocates for life?

4. What do you think holds people back from sharing their faith with others? What can be done to overcome these fears?
5. What do you think Pope Leo XIV means by “Christian humanism,” and how does it connect to the culture of life?

Call to Action

Our commitment to building a culture of life must be rooted in prayer to Jesus Christ. Reflect on your daily prayer life. Brainstorm two specific, attainable goals to improve your prayer life this week.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray that we will enthusiastically proclaim the Gospel of life, in our words and in our actions, and that we will stay intimately linked to Jesus Christ through a commitment to daily prayer.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 11:

Humanity's Responsibility for Life: Civil Law & Moral Law

Opening Prayer

Evangelium Vitae, 105

O Mary,

Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,

To you do we entrust the cause of life.

Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers

Of babies not allowed to be born,

Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,

Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,

Of the elderly and the sick killed

By indifference or out of misguided mercy.

Grant that all who believe in your Son

May proclaim the Gospel of life

With honesty and love to the people of our time.

Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel

As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude

Throughout their lives

And the courage to bear witness to it

Resolutely, in order to build,

Together with all people of good will,

The civilization of truth and love,

To the praise and glory of God,

The Creator and lover of life.

R. Amen.

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Acts 5:17, 21, 27-29



But the high priest rose up and all who were with him, that is, the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the common prison.

Now the high priest came and those who were with him and called together the council and all the senate of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.

And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name [Jesus’ name], yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man’s blood [Jesus’] upon us.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.”



One of the specific characteristics of present-day attacks on human life – as has already been said several times – consists in the trend to demand a legal justification for them, as if they were rights which the State, at least under certain conditions, must acknowledge as belonging to citizens. Consequently, there is a tendency to claim that it should be possible to exercise these rights with the safe and free assistance of doctors and medical personnel.

It is often claimed that the life of an unborn child or a seriously disabled person is only a relative good: according to a proportionalist approach, or one of sheer calculation, this good should be compared with and balanced against other goods. It is even maintained that only someone present and personally involved in a concrete situation can correctly judge the goods at stake: consequently, only that person would be able to decide on the morality of his choice. The State therefore, in the interest of civil coexistence and social harmony, should respect this choice, even to the point of permitting abortion and euthanasia.

At other times, it is claimed that civil law cannot demand that all citizens should live according to moral standards higher than what all citizens themselves acknowledge and share. Hence the law should always express the opinion and will of the majority of citizens and recognize

that they have, at least in certain extreme cases, the right even to abortion and euthanasia.

Finally, the more radical views go so far as to maintain that in a modern and pluralistic society people should be allowed complete freedom to dispose of their own lives as well as of the lives of the unborn: it is asserted that it is not the task of the law to choose between different moral opinions, and still less can the law claim to impose one particular opinion to the detriment of others.

In any case, in the democratic culture of our time it is commonly held that the legal system of any society should limit itself to taking account of and accepting the convictions of the majority. It should therefore be based solely upon what the majority itself considers moral and actually practices ... Consequently, when establishing those norms which are absolutely necessary for social coexistence, the only determining factor should be the will of the majority, whatever this may be. Hence every politician, in his or her activity, should clearly separate the realm of private conscience from that of public conduct.

At the basis of all these tendencies lies the ethical relativism which characterizes much of present-day culture. There are those who consider such relativism an essential condition of democracy, inasmuch as it alone is held to guarantee tolerance, mutual respect between people and acceptance of the decisions of the majority, whereas moral norms considered to be

objective and binding are held to lead to authoritarianism and intolerance.

But it is precisely the issue of respect for life which shows what misunderstandings and contradictions, accompanied by terrible practical consequences, are concealed in this position.

Democracy cannot be idolized to the point of making it a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality. Fundamentally, democracy is a “system” and as such is a means and not an end. Its “moral” value is not automatic, but depends on conformity to the moral law to which it, like every other form of human behavior, must be subject. ... But the value of democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes. Of course, values such as the dignity of every human person, respect for inviolable and inalienable human rights, and the adoption of the “common good” as the end and criterion regulating political life are certainly fundamental and not to be ignored.

Some might think that even this function, in the absence of anything better, should be valued for the sake of peace in society. While one acknowledges some element of truth in this point of view, it is easy to see that without an objective moral grounding not even democracy is capable of ensuring a stable peace, especially since peace which is not built upon the values of the dignity of every individual and of solidarity between all people frequently proves to be illusory. Even in participatory systems of government, the

regulation of interests often occurs to the advantage of the most powerful, since they are the ones most capable of maneuvering not only the levers of power but also of shaping the formation of consensus. In such a situation, democracy easily becomes an empty word.

It is therefore urgently necessary, for the future of society and the development of a sound democracy, to rediscover those essential and innate human and moral values which flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person: values which no individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy, but must only acknowledge, respect and promote.

Certainly the purpose of civil law is different and more limited in scope than that of the moral law. But “in no sphere of life can the civil law take the place of conscience or dictate norms concerning things which are outside its competence,”⁴⁴ which is that of ensuring the common good of people through the recognition and defense of their fundamental rights, and the promotion of peace and of public morality.⁴⁵ The real purpose of civil law is to guarantee an ordered social coexistence in true justice, so that all may “lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way” (1 Tim 2:2). Precisely for this reason, civil law must ensure that all members of society enjoy respect for certain fundamental rights which innately belong to the person... First and fundamental among these is the inviolable right to life of every innocent human being.

While public authority can sometimes choose not to put a stop to something which—were it prohibited—would cause more serious harm,⁴⁶ it can never presume to legitimize as a right of individuals—even if they are the majority of the members of society—an offense against other persons caused by the disregard of so fundamental a right as the right to life. The legal toleration of abortion or of euthanasia can in no way claim to be based on respect for the conscience of others, precisely because society has the right and the duty to protect itself against the abuses which can occur in the name of conscience and under the pretext of freedom.⁴⁷

The doctrine on the necessary conformity of civil law with the moral law is in continuity with the whole tradition of the Church. This is clear ... from [Pope St.] John XXIII's Encyclical [*Pacem in Terris*]: "Authority is a postulate of the moral order and derives from God. Consequently, laws and decrees enacted in contravention of the moral order, and hence of the divine will, can have no binding force in conscience...; indeed, the passing of such laws undermines the very nature of authority and results in shameful abuse."⁴⁸ This is the clear teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who writes that "human law is law inasmuch as it is in conformity with right reason and thus derives from the eternal law. But when a law is contrary to reason, it is called an unjust law; but in this case it ceases to be a law and becomes instead an act of violence."⁴⁹ And again: "Every law made by man can be called a law

insofar as it derives from the natural law. But if it is somehow opposed to the natural law, then it is not really a law but rather a corruption of the law.”⁵⁰

Now the first and most immediate application of this teaching concerns a human law which disregards the fundamental right and source of all other rights which is the right to life, a right belonging to every individual. Consequently, laws which legitimize the direct killing of innocent human beings through abortion or euthanasia are in complete opposition to the inviolable right to life proper to every individual; they thus deny the equality of everyone before the law. It might be objected that such is not the case in euthanasia, when it is requested with full awareness by the person involved. But any State which made such a request legitimate and authorized it to be carried out would be legalizing a case of suicide-murder, contrary to the fundamental principles of absolute respect for life and of the protection of every innocent life. In this way the State contributes to lessening respect for life and opens the door to ways of acting which are destructive of trust in relations between people. Laws which authorize and promote abortion and euthanasia are therefore radically opposed not only to the good of the individual but also to the common good; as such they are completely lacking in authentic juridical validity. Disregard for the right to life, precisely because it leads to the killing of the person whom society exists to serve, is what most directly conflicts with the possibility of achieving the common good. Consequently, a civil law authorizing abortion or

euthanasia ceases by that very fact to be a true, morally binding civil law.

To refuse to take part in committing an injustice is not only a moral duty; it is also a basic human right.

The Crux



In the decades since St. John Paul II wrote these words, more and more countries have established legal justifications and protections for abortion and euthanasia. In the United States, while *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned, each State is now a battleground for abortion. Euthanasia, meanwhile, has taken on the euphemistic phrase of “right to die” and is becoming prevalent in shocking ways as governments have allowed it by law.

St. John Paul II, however, outlines how our modern society’s laws, untethered to the natural moral law, are rooted instead in ethical relativism. Objective moral norms are seen as a threat to democracy, where everyone is entitled to their own “truth.” To claim, as John Paul II and the Church does, that certain actions are wrong always and everywhere, is to put a limit on a person’s or a society’s sense of freedom. We who advocate for a culture of life may find ourselves fighting for justice against our own citizens and members of our own government. In a democratic republic like the United States, what is legal is what 50% of the

representatives in a legislative body, plus one, votes is legal (and, if there is a Supreme Court, what a majority of the members of the court rules is legal). Therefore, just because an action is deemed legal does not mean it is morally right, only that it is – or once was – popular.

John Paul II is not arguing for civil rebellion against governments who promote immoral actions. But he acknowledges that sometimes peaceful civil disobedience is necessary when civil law egregiously violates moral law. For example, in the American South in the 1960s, many Catholics joined Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights movement and peacefully protested segregation despite threats and outright attacks. We can look to India where Mahatma Gandhi, though not Christian himself but inspired by the teachings of Jesus Christ, peacefully marched to oppose British imperial rule.

Look also to the early Church and the Apostles who preached the Gospel of Life, cared for widows and orphans, and saved unwanted babies who were exposed to die, all while under threat of death by the State. Centuries later, the Roman Empire has long since fallen into the dust bin of history, whereas the Successor of St. Peter continues to reign in Rome, and Jesus reigns eternally from the throne of God.

Healthy democratic societies are ones whose citizens care about the truth, not what is comfortable, and seek to build society upon natural law aimed towards the common good of all – not just the good of those with

power, money, or the loudest voice. True human rights are unalienable, given by God, not by the government. As the United States Declaration of Independence states, “We hold these Truths to be self-evident [meaning, they speak for themselves], that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” But in a secularized, atheistic society like many in the late 20th and now 21st centuries, there is no belief in a Creator who endows rights, merely a government who can conjure up rights or deny them as it sees fit.

Christians are not required to obey unjust civil laws, because such laws would be a violation of the higher moral law and the even higher divine law (in a perfect society, all three would agree). John Paul II argues for a type of conscientious objector status to be given to doctors and other healthcare workers who refuse to perform an abortion or other practices that violate their sincerely held religious beliefs.

St. Thomas More is a model for those who respect the civil law but respect the moral law even more. As Lord Chancellor of England under King Henry VIII, he enjoyed incredible wealth and influence. That was until Henry sought to divorce his wife, Queen Catherine of Aragon. When the pope refused to grant the divorce, Henry renounced the papacy and the Catholic Church, established the Church of England with himself as the head, set fire to monasteries and convents throughout

England, and killed whoever refused to convert. St. Thomas More declined to go along with this scheme, and he paid the ultimate price – with his life. His last words were that he was “the King’s good servant, but God’s first.”

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. How can we maintain respect for civil law while also speaking up when we believe that it contradicts moral law? What advice does John Paul II provide?
2. What is relativism, and how is it dangerous in a democratic society that has lost its moral compass?
3. How are we as Catholics called to advocate for just laws rooted in Christian revelation while most of us live in a multicultural, multi-religious environment?
4. How does St. Thomas More serve as a role model for his commitment to the truth? Why do you think that people in positions of authority and power find it difficult to remain faithful to the Gospel message?

Call to Action

Read about the life of St. Thomas More or another martyr who stood up to his or her ruler in the name of truth. Pray

an additional decade of the rosary each day this week for our elected representatives to respond positively to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray that lawmakers enact laws which reflect timeless Gospel truths, and that we may each have the courageous witness to defend the Gospel against attack.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

Session 12:

The Family as Sanctuary of Life

Opening Prayer

Evangelium Vitae, 105

O Mary,

*Bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living,
To you do we entrust the cause of life.*

*Look down, O Mother, Upon the vast numbers
Of babies not allowed to be born,
Of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
Of men and women who are victims of brutal violence,
Of the elderly and the sick killed
By indifference or out of misguided mercy.*

*Grant that all who believe in your Son
May proclaim the Gospel of life
With honesty and love to the people of our time.*

*Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel
As a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude
Throughout their lives
And the courage to bear witness to it
Resolutely, in order to build,
Together with all people of good will,
The civilization of truth and love,
To the praise and glory of God,
The Creator and lover of life.
R. Amen.*

(Take a quiet moment.)

Holy Spirit, we ask that you enter our conversation and give us the grace to share openly and authentically with one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Psalm 128:3-4



Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.
Behold, thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the Lord.

Read

Evangelium Vitae, 92, 93



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.”⁵¹ 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.⁵²

The family has a special role to play throughout the life of its members, from birth to death. It is truly “the

sanctuary of life: the place in which life – the gift of God – can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth.”⁵³ Consequently, the role of the family in building a culture of life is decisive and irreplaceable.

As the domestic church, the family is summoned to proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life. This is a responsibility which first concerns married couples, called to be givers of life, on the basis of an ever greater awareness of the meaning of procreation as a unique event which clearly reveals that human life is a gift received in order then to be given as a gift. In giving origin to a new life, parents recognize that the child, “as the fruit of their mutual gift of love, is, in turn, a gift for both of them, a gift which flows from them.”⁵⁴

It is above all in raising children that the family fulfils its mission to proclaim the Gospel of life. By word and example, in the daily round of relations and choices, and through concrete actions and signs, parents lead their children to authentic freedom, actualized in the sincere gift of self, and they cultivate in them respect for others, a sense of justice, cordial openness, dialogue, generous service, solidarity and all the other values which help people to live life as a gift. In raising children Christian parents must be concerned about their children’s faith and help them to fulfil the vocation God has given them. The parents’ mission as educators also includes teaching and giving their children an example of the true

meaning of suffering and death. They will be able to do this if they are sensitive to all kinds of suffering around them and, even more, if they succeed in fostering attitudes of closeness, assistance and sharing towards sick or elderly members of the family.

The family celebrates the Gospel of life through daily prayer, both individual prayer and family prayer. The family prays in order to glorify and give thanks to God for the gift of life, and implores his light and strength in order to face times of difficulty and suffering without losing hope. But the celebration which gives meaning to every other form of prayer and worship is found in the family's actual daily life together, if it is a life of love and self-giving.

The Crux



The human family is meant to be a community of life and love, where children first learn how to give and receive love. Family members look after and support each other, upholding and guarding their mutual dignity. It is within the family that a culture of life is first developed and modeled for children.

“The family is the original cell of social life. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of love ... The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honor God, and make

good use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into society" (CCC 2207). Having a good family is therefore essential in the moral development of a child, their ability to properly socialize with others, and to know right from wrong.

The Catechism continues: "The family should live in such a way that its members learn to care and take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped, and the poor. There are many families who are at times incapable of providing this help. It devolves then on other persons, other families, and, in a subsidiary way, society to provide for their needs" (2208). So it is within a family that children first see charity in practice, where their parents, siblings, and other family members look after and help one another without any selfish intent. And when their own family needs help, children can see the families around them and their neighborhood step up and help, providing a wonderful example of the Good Samaritan (cf. Luke 10: 25-37) and how to live out the Corporal Works of Mercy. Some families take the heroic step of adopting children whose biological families cannot care for them. An adopted child does not forget this offer of safety and belonging.

Humans first hear the Gospel proclaimed to them by their parents, in their words, in how they are treated, and how they see their parents treat other people – beginning with one another. As John Paul II elsewhere writes, "the love between the spouses is nothing less

than the visible presence of God's love in the world.”⁵⁵ It is within a family that children cultivate a prayer life for the first time and learn how to sense God within their heart and in the world around them, finding that “the fingerprint God leaves on creation is *love*.”⁵⁶ Of course, this sacred mission can be neglected if parents fail to live up to their mission. If they do so, then their children may find themselves confused, uncertain about their purpose, with closed hearts that lack empathy towards others. Life or death, blessing or curse are first chosen by parents for their children (cf. Dt. 30:15, 19).

Conversation Starters

(Choose from the following to help start your conversation)

1. What does a “sanctuary of life” look like? How can we turn our homes and families into sanctuaries of life?
2. How do you pray together as a family? How could you do better in this area?
3. What are the consequences for a family whose parents fail to model the Gospel of life? Do you see these consequences present in society today?
4. God’s vision for society involves a place where people are responsible for one another. What is holding our society back from being that? What could we do to effect change?

Call to Action

Spend intentional time in prayer with your children/family this week. Make sure you don't rush through the prayer time but instead take a few extra moments to slow down and really rest in the silence. Ask the Lord in humility to reveal to you how you can be a better leader within your household. If you are single, pray with a trusted friend.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray for the intercession of the Holy Family, the perfect witness of family life, particularly that we may be guided by the example of the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph as we seek to make our own homes into sanctuaries of life.

Request intentions from the group and conclude with the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary on page 124.

In Conclusion

Evangelium Vitae, 102, 105

At the end of this Encyclical, we naturally look again to the Lord Jesus, 'the Child born for us' (cf. Is 9:6), that in him we may contemplate 'the Life' which 'was made manifest' (1 Jn 1:2). In the mystery of Christ's Birth the encounter of God with man takes place and the earthly journey of the Son of God begins, a journey which will culminate in the gift of his life on the Cross. By his death Christ will conquer death and become for all humanity the source of new life.

The one who accepted ‘Life’ in the name of all and for the sake of all was Mary, the Virgin Mother; she is thus most closely and personally associated with the Gospel of life. Mary’s consent at the Annunciation and her motherhood stand at the very beginning of the mystery of life which Christ came to bestow on humanity (cf. Jn 10:10). Through her acceptance and loving care for the life of the Incarnate Word, human life has been rescued from condemnation to final and eternal death.

For this reason, Mary, ‘like the Church of which she is the type, is a mother of all who are reborn to life. She is in fact the mother of the Life by which everyone lives, and when she brought it forth from herself she in some way brought to rebirth all those who were to live by that Life.’⁵⁷

As the Church contemplates Mary’s motherhood, she discovers the meaning of her own motherhood and the way in which she is called to express it. At the same time, the Church’s experience of motherhood leads to a most profound understanding of Mary’s experience as the incomparable model of how life should be welcomed and cared for.

The angel’s Annunciation to Mary is framed by these reassuring words: ‘Do not be afraid, Mary’ and ‘with God nothing will be impossible’ (Lk 1:30, 37). The whole of the Virgin Mother’s life is in fact pervaded by the certainty that God is near to her and that he accompanies her with his providential care. The same is true of the Church, which finds ‘a place prepared by God’ (Rev 12:6) in the desert, the place of trial but also of the manifestation of

God's love for his people (cf. Hos 2:16). Mary is a living word of comfort for the Church in her struggle against death. Showing us the Son, the Church assures us that in him the forces of death have already been defeated: 'Death with life contended: combat strangely ended! Life's own Champion, slain, yet lives to reign.'

The Lamb who was slain is alive, bearing the marks of his Passion in the splendor of the Resurrection. He alone is master of all the events of history: he opens its 'seals' (cf. Rev 5:1-10) and proclaims, in time and beyond, the power of life over death. In the 'new Jerusalem,' that new world towards which human history is travelling, 'death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away' (Rev 21:4).

And as we, the pilgrim people, the people of life and for life, make our way in confidence towards 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1), we look to her who is for us 'a sign of sure hope and solace.'"⁵⁸

Given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on 25 March, the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, in the year 1995, the seventeenth of my Pontificate.

Suggested Group Activities

After your group has completed this study, prayerfully consider how to promote the culture of life. Below are some ideas to consider, including initiatives that the Knights of Columbus offers:

- Pray a rosary as a group outside of an abortion clinic. Many dioceses have existing pro-life ministries that pray outside abortion clinics at regularly scheduled times and can offer support and guidance. Be aware of state laws concerning the physical distance required from the building. In general, those praying outside of an abortion clinic can approach no closer than the sidewalk.
- Pray a novena for life, nine days of sustained prayer, to build up a culture of life in our parishes, homes, and wider community. This can be done both publicly and through private acts of prayer to promote the protection of life. For additional information, visit kofc.org/novenaforlife.
- Support a local pregnancy resource center or maternity home as a volunteer or through donations. If you are a Knight, your council can apply to participate in ASAP (Aid and Support After Pregnancy); for every \$500 your council donates to a pregnancy resource center or maternity home (up to \$2,000), the Supreme Council will donate \$100. For more information, visit kofc.org/support.

- Show public support for the right to life by attending a state or national March for Life. Knights sponsor, promote, and participate in existing local, state, provincial and national marches, and organize bus trips. For more information, visit kofc.org/march.
- Celebrate the intrinsic worth and dignity of every single human being through the Special Olympics. The Knights has a unique relationship with the Special Olympics and has helped disabled athletes train and compete in games. For more information, visit kofc.org/olympics.
- Save lives and help women choose life by giving them the opportunity to view their unborn children on ultrasound machines at pro-life pregnancy centers. If you are a Knight, talk with your local council about participating in K of C's ultrasound initiative. For more information, visit kofc.org/ultrasound.
- Learn about how to help persecuted and at-risk Christians facing genocide around the world, particularly in the Middle East. For more information, visit kofc.org/refugee.

**For more resources to build up your faith,
please visit KofC.org/shopcis**

**For more resources for your faith and fraternity
meetings, please visit KofC.org/cis**

Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary

About this prayer: This beautiful litany is also called the Litany of Loreto because of its prominent use at the Holy House of Loreto, believed to be the home of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus that was miraculously transported to Loreto, Italy. The litany dates to at least 1558 in Germany, and Pope Sixtus V approved it in 1587. Several popes have added titles over the ensuing centuries. It gained popularity in the 17th century, when it began to be prayed in Rome's Basilica of St. Mary Major.

Lord, have mercy.	Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy on us.	
Christ, hear us.	Christ, graciously hear us.
God the Father of Heaven,	have mercy on us.
God the Son, Redeemer of the world,	have mercy on us.
us.	
God the Holy Ghost,	have mercy on us.
Holy Trinity, one God,	have mercy on us.
Holy Mary,	pray for us.
Holy Mother of God,	pray for us.
Holy Virgin of virgins,	pray for us.
Mother of Christ,	pray for us.
Mother of divine grace,	pray for us.
Mother most pure,	pray for us.
Mother most chaste,	pray for us.
Mother inviolate,	pray for us.
Mother undefiled,	pray for us.
Mother most amiable,	pray for us.

Mother most admirable, pray for us.
Mother of good counsel, pray for us.
Mother of our Creator, pray for us.
Mother of our Savior, pray for us.
Virgin most prudent, pray for us.
Virgin most venerable, pray for us.
Virgin most renowned, pray for us.
Virgin most powerful, pray for us.
Virgin most merciful, pray for us.
Virgin most faithful, pray for us.
Mirror of justice, pray for us.
Seat of wisdom, pray for us.
Cause of our joy, pray for us.
Spiritual vessel, pray for us.
Vessel of honor, pray for us.
Singular vessel of devotion, pray for us.
Mystical rose, pray for us.
Tower of David, pray for us.
Tower of ivory, pray for us.
House of gold, pray for us.
Ark of the Covenant, pray for us.
Gate of Heaven, pray for us.
Morning star, pray for us.
Health of the sick, pray for us.
Refuge of sinners, pray for us.
Comforter of the afflicted, pray for us.
Help of Christians, pray for us.
Queen of angels, pray for us.
Queen of patriarchs, pray for us.
Queen of prophets, pray for us.
Queen of apostles, pray for us.

Queen of martyrs, pray for us.
Queen of confessors, pray for us.
Queen of virgins, pray for us.
Queen of all saints, pray for us.
Queen conceived without Original Sin, pray for us.
Queen assumed into Heaven, pray for us.
Queen of the most holy Rosary, pray for us.

Queen of families, pray for us.
Queen of peace, pray for us.

Lamb of God, who takes away
the sins of the world, spare us, O Lord.
Lamb of God, who takes away
the sins of the world, graciously hear us, O Lord.
Lamb of God, who takes away
the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Pray for us, O Holy Mother
of God, that we may be
worthy of the
promises of Christ.

Let us pray.

Grant, we beseech Thee, O Lord God, that we Thy
Servants may enjoy perpetual health of mind and body
and by the glorious intercession of the Blessed Mary,
ever Virgin, be delivered from present sorrow and
enjoy eternal happiness. Through Christ Our Lord.

R. Amen.

Prayer to Saint Joseph

To you, O blessed Joseph, do we come in our tribulation, and having implored the help of your most holy Spouse, we confidently invoke your patronage also.

Through that charity which bound you to the Immaculate Virgin Mother of God and through the paternal love with which you embraced the Child Jesus, we humbly beg you graciously to regard the inheritance which Jesus Christ has purchased by his Blood, and with your power and strength to aid us in our necessities.

O most watchful guardian of the Holy Family, defend the chosen children of Jesus Christ; O most loving father, ward off from us every contagion of error and corrupting influence; O our most mighty protector, be kind to us and from heaven assist us in our struggle with the power of darkness.

As once you rescued the Child Jesus from deadly peril, so now protect God's Holy Church from the snares of the enemy and from all adversity; shield, too, each one of us by your constant protection, so that, supported by your example and your aid, we may be able to live piously, to die in holiness, and to obtain eternal happiness in heaven.

R. Amen.

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How to Lead a Small Group Session

A small group session is an opportunity for a group to gather and discuss their thoughts, questions, and takeaways from a shared conversation that begins and ends with prayer.

The task of a small group leader is to facilitate and direct the conversation, elicit contributions from all willing participants, resolve any conflicts that may arise, and summarize what is discussed.

As a small group leader, you are not asked to teach, but to make sure the conversation stays focused and respectful and includes all participants.

A small group is successful when there is meaningful discussion that helps people connect with each other and apply the concepts and themes to their daily life. You do not have to cover 100 percent of the material or questions. This is a framework for you to build upon that best meets the needs of the group you are leading.

There is no assigned reading to do at home before coming to the group; however, reading the passages beforehand will certainly not hurt the experience of the study.

General Tips to Lead a Small Group Session:

Review and reflect before the session. As the small group discussion leader, make sure you review and reflect on the reading ahead of the session to familiarize yourself with the content.

Bring pens and paper. Consider providing paper and writing implements for the participants.

Ask questions that invite the participants to reflect on their experiences. These small groups are designed for reflection, not a quiz on the content. Avoid yes-or-no questions unless you have a thought-provoking follow-up question. Make it comfortable for people to share their personal stories, but don't try to force them to do so.

Listen well. To facilitate a discussion, a leader must understand what everyone is saying. Sometimes it is easy to begin formulating your own response while another person is speaking, but that can compromise how well you are listening.

Rephrase, repeat, summarize, clarify. Together with listening skills, use these techniques to ensure each contribution to the discussion is heard and understood. Sometimes, rephrasing a participant's idea to a sentence or two will help others in the room better understand his or her contribution. Summarizing the course of the discussion occasionally will also help ensure that everyone processes what has been said as a group and encourages them to take the discussion to the next level.

Include all participants. In any group discussion, some members will speak up willingly, perhaps even dominating the conversation, while others will tend to be quiet. Not everyone processes information the same

way or at the same speed. Some may need you to encourage them to share. Respect those who take time to process and who may not be inclined to share. Though someone may not speak up, the Holy Spirit may still be working on their hearts in a way you cannot see.

Adapt the questions. Be aware that the people in the group might be in diverse vocations or different stages in their lives. In such instances, adapt the question or encourage the participants to adapt their reflections accordingly.

Return to questions later if the answer is not known. If a particular question arises in a session involving Church teaching, and the correct answer is not known, you can simply state that you will ask your chaplain or pastor, or look to the Catechism for clarification, and share the answer during the next session.

Keep emotional discipline and mediate conflict. Some topics can be sensitive, so be prepared to diffuse anger and redirect the discussion in a constructive way. Diffuse the situation and help the disputing members find common ground. If necessary, simply table the issue that is causing the tensions and move on to a new topic.

Know when it's time to advance the discussion. Moving a discussion forward too soon can lead to missing some good observations or contributions, but keeping a discussion going on too long can make the session boring or repetitive. Be mindful of how the

discussion is progressing; when it seems to stall, it's time to move forward.

Seek help when necessary. Sometimes, questions and situations occur that require outside assistance. A participant might have a particularly difficult question, require fraternal correction, or argue against Church teaching. In situations like this, it is best to talk to the participant outside the group setting. Most importantly, remember that it is best to reach out to your pastor for help in a situation you are uncomfortable with.

End with an invitation. If there are more group sessions to come, re-invite the members of the group and remind them of the date and time. These personal invitations offer the small group another opportunity to develop their faith. An invitation is especially important following your last small group gathering.

Appendix

The following are some additional issues and difficulties concerning life that are often raised. This is only a brief selection and summary of relevant topics.

Definitions (Session 1)

1. **Materialism:** “Regards matter as the only reality in the world, which undertakes to explain every event in the universe as resulting from the conditions and activity of matter, and which thus denies the existence of God and the soul” (New Advent)
2. **Individualism:** “The attitude of those persons who refuse to subscribe to definite creeds, or to submit to any external religious authority” (New Advent)
3. **Utilitarianism:** “Teaches that the end of human conduct is happiness, and that consequently the discriminating norm which distinguishes conduct into right and wrong is pleasure and pain” (New Advent)
4. **Hedonism:** “The name given to the group of ethical systems that hold, with various modifications, that feelings of pleasure or happiness are the highest and final aim of conduct; that, consequently those actions which increase the sum of pleasure are thereby constituted right, and, conversely, what increases pain is wrong” (New Advent)

Principle of Double Effect

Moral actions that produce two types of effects – a good, intended effect(s) and a harmful side effect(s) – need to be evaluated through the Catholic understanding of the principle of double effect:

1. The action must be either morally good or at least neutral.
2. The action may produce a bad effect as an unfortunate consequence, but an evil action cannot be done because a good effect may result.
3. The intention must be to only achieve the good effect; the bad effect can in no way be the intended effect and should be avoided when possible.
4. The good effect must be at least proportionally equivalent to the bad effect.

Ectopic Pregnancy

If a mother has an ectopic (“out of place”) pregnancy, the lives of both the child and the mother are at risk because of where the fertilized ovum has implanted. An ectopic pregnancy occurs when the fertilized ovum implants in a fallopian tube or in some other location outside of the uterus. If a fertilized ovum implants outside in these locations, a fallopian tube may rupture imminently and potentially kill both the child and mother.

The principle of double effect can be applied to this scenario:

1. Removing a part of the body (e.g. fallopian tube) that is about to rupture – or has ruptured – and cause the death of the mother and child is a morally good action.
2. The direct intention of the procedure is not to kill the child; the direct intention is to save the mother's life.
3. The death of the child is not intended and would be avoided if possible.
4. The life of the mother is proportionally equal to the life of the child.

Natural Family Planning

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) provides NFP resources available on its website, at www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning.

The Catholic Information Service (CIS) offers additional relevant materials, available at www.shopcatholicinfo.com:

- “God’s Plan for Love and Marriage: John Paul II’s Theology of the Body,” (Edward Sri), *Building the Domestic Church Series*
- “The Sixth and Ninth Commandments: Sexual Morality,” *Luke E. Hart Series*

Chemical Abortion

Information about chemical abortion – its dangers, physical and spiritual consequences, and Catholic

teaching – can be found at www.usccb.org as an educational resource called “Chemical Abortion: Fact Sheets.”

Chemical abortions are not morally permissible when applied to the principle of double effect because the intended action is to kill the child.

Bl. Michael McGivney and James “Chip” Smith

For more information about Fr. McGivney’s ministry to James “Chip” Smith prior to his execution, and to learn about K of C’s prison ministry, read “You Visited Me,” by Aprille Hanson Spivey, at <https://www.kofc.org/en/news-room/columbia/2025/may/you-visited-me.html>.

Euthanasia

The Catholic Information Service (CIS) contains a relevant resource on this subject, which is available at <https://www.kofc.org/en/resources/cis/cis339.pdf>:

- “Freedom to Flourish: A Catholic Analysis of Doctor-Prescribed Suicide and Euthanasia” (Jason B. Negri, JD and Fr. Christopher M. Saliga, O.P., RN), *Veritas Series*

“Faith seeks understanding”: it is intrinsic to faith that a believer desires to know better the One in whom he has put his faith, and to understand better what He has revealed; a more penetrating knowledge will in turn call forth a greater faith, increasingly set afire by love. The grace of faith opens “the eyes of your hearts” to a lively understanding of the contents of Revelation.

– Catechism of the Catholic Church, 158.

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Pope St. John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 5
Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis in our Time

About the Knights of Columbus

The Knights of Columbus, a fraternal benefit society founded in 1882 in New Haven, Connecticut, by Blessed Michael McGivney, is the world's largest lay Catholic organization, with more than 2 million members in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Based on the founding principles of charity, unity and fraternity, the Knights of Columbus is committed to strengthening Catholic families and parishes and to practicing faith in action through service to all in need. To find out more about the Knights of Columbus, visit www.kofc.org.

Whether you have a specific question or desire a broader, deeper knowledge of the Catholic faith, CIS can help. Contact us at:

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