

POPE JOHN PAUL II ON CONFRONTING THE LANGUAGE OF THE CULTURE OF DEATH

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John Paul II's challenge to the culture of death contributes a thoroughgoing exposé of the linguistic distortions constructed by today's anti-life propagandists, especially the sanitized medical euphemisms designed to cleanse the sordid business of medicalized killing and the appropriation of legal verbiage and elitist, relativistic ideologies as a foundation for the denial of fundamental rights to individuals rendered expendable. The Holy Father's use of sometimes graphic but always authentic language in calling things by their proper name furnishes a compelling mode of discourse for exposing the vocabulary of duplicity powering the death culture and replacing it with a life-affirming lexicon of intrinsic dignity and worth.

The power of language to color one's view of reality is profound. Words can serve as a vehicle for justice or a weapon of oppression, an instrument of enlightenment or a source of darkness. Pope John Paul II has communicated a longstanding and perceptive awareness of how influential cultural forces—particularly medicine, law, and ideology—have been employed to construct both life-affirming and life-denying definitions of the most vulnerable individuals in today's postmodern, technologically driven, hedonistic, and nihilistic world. Building on the legacy of Pope Leo XIII in Rerum Novarum, an encyclical Pius XI dubbed the “Magna Charta of the social order,”¹ John Paul calls upon the rich heritage of Catholic social doctrine as a moral compass for exposing the linguistic distortions fueling the numerous injustices afflicting the human condition, always informed by a core principle of the Church's social teaching: “The origin, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person.”²

The Significance of Culture

George Wiegel's biography of John Paul emphasizes the importance the Holy Father ascribes to culture—not politics or economics—as the engine driving history.³ The Pope views culture as an indispensable framework for apprehending the exchanges and complexities involved in the interaction between human beings and the multiplicity of social structures and circumstances they encounter. Recently, he characterized culture “as a conscious mentality, as convictions and actions, as the social structures that support it” and stressed the widespread impact of culture on “not only the behavior of individuals but also legislative and political decisions, which in turn facilitate cultural trends.”⁴

Despite the enormous power of culture to shape, influence, or even determine human behavior and institutions, John Paul rejects one of today's most pervasive orthodoxies—cultural relativism. He acknowledges, “Man always exists in a particular culture” but emphasizes, “Man is not exhaustively defined by that same culture.” What's more, the Pontiff points out, “the very progress of cultures demonstrates that there is something in man which transcends those cultures.” This “something” he identifies as “precisely human nature: this nature is itself the measure of culture and the condition ensuring that man does not become the prisoner of any of his cultures, but asserts his personal dignity by living in accordance with the profound truth of his being.”⁵

The Burgeoning Culture of Death

In *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope identifies the enormous scope of the culture of death and its dire consequences for all individuals: “In addition to the ancient scourges of poverty, hunger, endemic diseases, violence and war, new threats are emerging on an

alarmingly vast scale.” This “extraordinary increase and gravity of threats to the life of individuals and peoples” is most evident “where life is weak and defenseless.”

Especially distressing to the Holy Father is “not only how extensively attacks are spreading but also their unheard-of numerical proportion, and the fact that they receive widespread and powerful support from a broad consensus on the part of society, from widespread legal approval and the involvement of certain sectors of health-care personnel.”⁶

Besides the myriad forms of devastation brought about by the death culture, the Pope singles out another casualty—the death of conscience itself. Through the manipulation of euphemisms and other verbal gymnastics, the forces of death have been highly successful in numbing the moral sensibilities of many to the horror of what is actually taking place. John Paul refers to this as “an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense” in which conscience is rendered increasingly blind, indifferent, and therefore impotent in the face of the evil being perpetrated.⁷

Rather than applaud John Paul for his perceptive, comprehensive, and incisive perspectives on the culture of death endangering modern society, critics—some within his own communion—take him to task for using terminology which, they contend, is too extreme, negative, harsh, offensive, and counterproductive to have any meaningful impact. Some who criticize the Pope for the bluntness of his language may be either surreptitiously promoting what he is exposing, or else have their heads buried in the sand regarding the perils of a culture of death running roughshod over truth, human lives, and the capacity to distinguish right from wrong and good from evil.

Ironically, in striking contrast to the dissident voices in some Catholic intellectual circles, a few excerpts from an article in Newsweek reveal how well they grasp Evangelium Vitae's true significance: "A bold declaration . . . the clearest, most impassioned and most commanding encyclical of his 16-year reign . . . signs of an encroaching 'culture of death' that threatens human dignity and freedom . . . a sweeping evangelical plea for the creation of an alternative 'culture of life' that respects human dignity from conception to the moment of death . . . a comprehensive and insistent vision . . . a passionate exposition of a countercultural gospel of life."⁸

The Power of the Word

John Paul has chosen language—a basic component of culture—as a major vehicle for challenging the horrendous reality of violence and destruction spawned by an encroaching culture of death. This continues a legacy of opposing power with the truth employed by other popes through the centuries.

Winston Churchill expressed an authoritative recognition of such transcendent truth telling during a conference attended by the Allied leaders after Germany's defeat in World War II. To Stalin's scornful question, "How many divisions has the Pope?" Churchill replied, "The fact they could not be measured in military terms did not mean they did not exist."⁹

Time magazine's issue naming Pope John Paul II its 1994 "Man of the Year" captured the distinctive papal influence that Churchill referred to:

His power rests in the word, not the sword. As he has demonstrated throughout the 16 years of his papacy, John Paul needs no

divisions. He is an army of one, and his empire is both as ethereal and as ubiquitous as the soul. . . . John Paul has presented himself, the defender of Roman Catholic doctrine, as a moral compass for believers and nonbelievers alike. He spread through every means at his disposal a message not of expedience or compromise but of right and wrong; amid so much fear of the future, John Paul dared to speak of hope.¹⁰

The Pope, fluent in eight languages, has proven to be consummately adept at utilizing language in giving testimony to the truth about the inalienable dignity of the human person at all stages of development and exposing the horrors directed against innocent persons by a pervasive culture of death. In *Evangelium Vitae*, he set forth a mode of discourse for confronting the terminology powering the death culture: “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.” Direct, undisguised language, he states, is urgently needed; “especially in the case of abortion there is a widespread use of ambiguous terminology . . . which tends to hide abortion’s true nature and to attenuate its seriousness in public opinion.”¹¹

John Paul’s framing of the conflict afflicting humankind as a monumental struggle between a culture of death and a culture of life is indeed a fitting way of characterizing what is at stake. He challenges the death culture with a powerful ally—the truth bolstered by a masterful synthesis of Sacred Scripture, tradition, theology, history, science, philosophy, natural law, anthropology, and sociology. “Faith and reason,” the Pontiff asserts in summing up this synthesis, “are like two wings on which the spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.”¹² Several examples of how he goes about this process

reveal the authenticity of his language in speaking the truth to power in the crucial areas of medicine, law, and ideology.

The Medicalization of Destruction: Killing as Healing

Much of the terminology powering today's culture of death has a pronounced antiseptic medical coloration. The Pope emphasizes that this "is evident in the tendency to disguise certain crimes against life in its early or final stages by using innocuous medical terms which distract attention from the fact that what is involved is the right to life of an actual human person."¹³ One of his most telling challenges to the language promoting medicalized destruction involves exposing how the phrase "biological material" functions as a pervasive semantic device for transforming the killing of the unborn into a minor surgical procedure consisting of the removal of insignificant matter. Regarding the fate of the overabundance of human embryos resulting from the techniques of artificial reproduction, John points out that "these so-called 'spare embryos' are then destroyed or used for research which, under the pretext of scientific or medical progress, in fact reduces human life to the level of simple 'biological material' to be freely disposed of."¹⁴

The portrayal of abortion as the extraction of nondescript material from the womb is a longstanding staple of pro-abortion rhetoric. An instructional tract published by Planned Parenthood of New York City equates abortion with the removal of "fetal and placental material" and assures women that they do not have "to see the material that has been removed."¹⁵ At a medical center in Oregon, the dismembered remains from abortions are called "suctioned or curetted material," "cellular material" and "material

removed from the uterus.”¹⁶ Swedish fetal researcher Arne Andersson resorted to the expression “hysterotomy material” in referring to the heads severed from the bodies of 12 humans (from 12 to 21 weeks gestation) aborted by hysterotomy and hooked up to a machine for the purpose of studying fetal brain metabolism.¹⁷

John Paul has also underscored how the reduction of individuals to illnesses serves as a rationalization for transforming their annihilation into a legitimate type of health service: “Even in important policy documents motherhood itself is regarded as a burden and illness, thus creating the pretext, in the name of health and quality of life, for the justification of contraception, sterilization, abortion and even euthanasia.”¹⁸

The contemporary medicalization of destruction—killing portrayed as medical treatment designed to eradicate individuals defined as disease entities—has become a deeply entrenched form of discourse dominating scientific conferences and leading medical journals. A mind-boggling example of the abortion-as-treatment and pregnancy-as-disease imperatives can be found in a paper titled “Abortion as a Treatment for Unwanted Pregnancy: The Number Two Sexually Transmitted ‘Disease.’” The authors identified gonorrhea as the number one venereal disease, with unwanted pregnancy holding down the second slot. They characterized abortion as “10 times more effective for treating unwanted pregnancy than is penicillin for treating gonorrhea” and concluded that “unwanted pregnancy should be considered a sexually-transmitted condition of epidemic proportion and, moreover, legal abortion is an effective, safe, and curative treatment for the condition.”¹⁹

Such an extreme distortion of language and reality is antithetical to the life-affirming mission of medicine itself. “Causing death,” the Pope insists, “can never be

considered a form of medical treatment, even when the intention is solely to comply with the patient's request. Rather, it runs completely counter to the health-care profession, which is meant to be an impassioned and unflinching affirmation of life."²⁰

Another insidious use of disease analogies equates the unborn with a "parasitic growth." According to abortionist Dr. Warren Hern, the action of the "fetoplacental unit" is tantamount to the "local invasion" of a "parasite" whose "aggressive mechanisms" pose a serious threat to the health and life of the woman.²¹ Astronomer Carl Sagan's support for abortion is based in part on a depiction of the fetus as "a kind of parasite" that "destroys tissue in its path" and "sucks blood from capillaries."²²

John Paul challenges the absurdity rooted in the notion of the preborn human as a dangerous parasitic aggressor: "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."²³

The most positive spin on medical killing consists of avoiding any specific mention of the victims and focusing exclusively on abortion and euthanasia as strictly noble and humane medical services performed by idealistic compassionate, and caring providers. In those rare instances when the death of the victim is touched upon, the word "death" is invariably paired with the word "dignity," and the individual is described as being "released" or "delivered" from intractable suffering.

Humanitarian medical terminology has been a longstanding feature of pro-abortion semantics. Psychiatrist Zigmund Lebensohn calls abortion "the practice of humanitarian medicine at its very best."²⁴ According to nurse Charlotte Schuster's

magnanimous vocabulary, “both the patient with the unwanted pregnancy and the unwanted product of her conception deserve the release of abortion and the dignity of decent care.”²⁵ Before a joint U.S. House and Senate Judiciary Committee, the leaders of four pro-abortion organizations resorted to a heavy dose of benevolent medicalese in defense of partial-birth abortion: “medical service,” “a continuum of good health care,” and “the best possible medical care in a atmosphere of dignity and respect.”²⁶

Like its lethal cousin abortion, the American euthanasia movement is saturated with identical rhetoric dressed up in idyllic images of killing as a humane, compassionate, and merciful deliverance from incurable, unbearable suffering. In 1995, George Delury relied on compassionate rhetoric to justify spoon-feeding a deadly dose of water, honey, and antidepressants to his wife. He claimed he was simply administering “the only cure available,” “the method and means of her exit” and “the last anesthetic.” Afterwards he wrote a book in which he admitted smothering his wife with two plastic bags because the original concoction was not working fast enough to ensure a fatal outcome before the home health aide came on duty.²⁷

In euthanasia circles, smothering—also commonly known as “the bag technique”—is among the methods covered under the reassuring classification “deliverance from suffering.” Before the Denver Hemlock Society in 1996, Hemlock founder Derek Humphry provided detailed instructions on the use of the bag technique as a back-up method of “self-deliverance” when other methods fail.²⁸

The Holy Father offers a profound observation on true compassion as opposed to the false mercy so prevalent in the rhetoric of today’s euthanasia proponents: “True ‘compassion’ leads to sharing another’s pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering

we cannot bear.”²⁹ He cites the Hippocratic Oath as providing indispensable ethical guidance for health care professionals “to be guardians and servants of human life” and to resist the strong temptation “to become manipulators of life, or even agents of death.”³⁰ Addressing a health care conference late in 1995, the Pope forged a perceptive link between the Hippocratic Oath and the parable of the Good Samaritan: “This double reference could summarize the entire history of medicine. . . . From Hippocrates to the Good Samaritan, from conscience guided by reason to reason enlightened by faith, the proclamation of the Gospel of life must be the same.”³¹

John Paul’s insistence on the importance of the Hippocratic Oath for today’s health care professionals is in close accord with its genuine historical meaning and contemporary relevance. When Hippocrates came on the historical scene more than 2,500 years ago, it was a primitive world dominated by ignorance and superstition. The physician in the role of the sorcerer was both a killer and a healer. Hippocrates’s code of medical ethics marked a turning point in the history of medicine. It was the first time there was a complete separation effectuated between killing and healing. From then on physicians were never again to be killers, but preeminently healers of human lives.³²

Instead of abandoning their destructive practices, many of today’s physicians have decided to attack and discredit the Oath. Their efforts are motivated by a need to rationalize participation in the modern slaughter of the unborn and the escalating assaults against the unwanted after birth. Because of its explicit condemnation of medical involvement in killing before and after birth, the Oath has been subjected to relentless assaults by abortion and euthanasia proponents alike.

The Legalization of Oppression: Relegation to Nonpersons

“What is legal is moral” is an intractable slogan invoked to defend all kinds of iniquities throughout history. Today, legality furnishes a prime motivation for rationalizing the destruction and growing experimental expropriation of preborn human lives and promoting violence against individuals after birth as well.

John Paul has repeatedly spoken out against the insidious nature of such legal distortions: “One of the specific characteristics of present-day attacks on human life . . . consists in the trend to demand a legal justification for them, as if they were rights which the state, at least under certain circumstances, must acknowledge.” He refers to this widespread practice as “the tragic caricature of legality” and “a corruption of the law.”³³

A key semantic device contrived to justify the denial of basic rights to vulnerable individuals is to define them as nonpersons before the law. Roe v. Wade ushered in the modern era of legal nonpersonhood in the United States by declaring “the unborn have never been recognized in the law as persons in the whole sense” and ruling that “the word ‘person,’ as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn.”³⁴

Philosopher Mary Anne Warren maintains that “even a fully developed fetus” is “considerably less person-like than is the average mature mammal” or the “average fish” and therefore “cannot be said to have any more right to life than, let us say, a newborn guppy.”³⁵ A Manhattan jury convicted Dr. Abu Hayat of four counts of assault for performing a botched late-term abortion on a child whose arm was severed during the assault. He appealed the ruling, claiming, “The fetus is not a person and therefore cannot be assaulted.”³⁶

A wide range of victims after birth are likewise being targeted for extinction because they lack the prescribed physical, cognitive, social, and psychological capacities considered necessary for full-fledged entrance into the moral community of persons. Although the disabled and other vulnerable groups have yet to be officially defined as legal nonpersons, there are ominous signs that philosophers, physicians, bioethicists, attorneys, and like-minded ideologues are working toward this very goal.

To philosopher Michael Tooley, “new-born humans are neither persons nor even quasi-persons, and their destruction is in no way intrinsically wrong.”³⁷ Implacable animal rights defender Peter Singer asserts that newborn infants do not qualify as legitimate persons because they “are neither rational nor self-conscious.” This pernicious definition provides him with a rationalization for the morality of infanticide, especially in the cases of children born with congenital abnormalities: “Killing a disabled infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person. Very often it is not wrong at all.”³⁸

Contemporary abortion and euthanasia advocates persist in placing the best possible face on their consignment of individuals to the category of nonpersons. What they invariably fail to mention is the dark history of nonpersonhood; that is, the nonperson designation powering today’s legalization of abortion, euthanasia, and physician-assisted suicide is the very same construct invoked to justify the legalization of violence against some of history’s most oppressed groups.

According to papal biographer George Wiegel, John Paul has remained steadfast in the fundamental conviction that “the horrors of late twentieth-century life, whether Nazi, communist, racist, nationalist, or utilitarian in expression, are the products of defective concepts of the human person.”³⁹ During a visit to St. Louis, Missouri, John

Paul drew an arresting parallel between the plight of black slaves resulting from the U.S. Supreme Court Dred Scott decision of 1857 and the legal status of the unwanted unborn and born in contemporary American society. At the heart of his comparison lies the specter of legal nonpersonhood—the relegation of human beings to the status of nonentities deprived of protection under the law.⁴⁰

An examination of the similarities between Dred Scott and Roe v. Wade reveals how much on target is the Holy Father in linking the terminology bolstering injustices of the past and the present. The Roe assertion that “the word ‘person,’ as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn”⁴¹ closely parallels the Dred Scott declaration that black people “are not included . . . under the word ‘citizens’ in the Constitution.”⁴² Furthermore, just as Roe did not recognize unborn humans “in the law as persons in the whole sense,”⁴³ Dred Scott failed to regard black people “as part of the people or citizens of the State.”⁴⁴ Similarly, within a year after Dred Scott, the Virginia Supreme Court ruled that “in the eyes of the law, so far certainly as civil rights and relations are concerned, the slave is not a person, but a thing.”⁴⁵

The Pope makes an invaluable contribution to raising public awareness about how extensively the perpetration of horrendous atrocities depends upon deficient perceptions of the human person. This message is all the more pertinent for today’s world in which the reduction of the unwanted to the status of nonpersons outside the protection of the law continues to run roughshod over a huge number of victims—born and unborn.

In contrast to those who are attempting to impose a restrictive, exclusive, and elitist notion of human personhood, the papal view of personhood is a truly expansive vision for welcoming and protecting all human beings throughout the lifespan: “Society

as a whole must respect, defend and promote the dignity of every human person, at every moment and in every condition of that person's life."⁴⁶ John Paul, the pilgrim pope, has been tireless in articulating this message wherever he speaks.

Ideological Foundations of Verbal Duplicity

Now, as in the past, lying has been an essential component of killing. And killing—particularly large-scale destruction over a prolonged period—depends upon a steady diet of lies, falsehoods, and untruths for ongoing sustenance. To illustrate the strong co-dependence between lying and killing, the Pontiff cites the biblical account of the first murder, Cain's slaying of Abel: "Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. The Lord said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?'" From this the Pope concludes: "Cain tries to cover up his crime with a lie." John Paul indicates further that the act of lying in the service of killing begun by Cain "is a page rewritten daily, with inexorable and degrading frequency, in the book of human history." He also uses the story of the first murder to illustrate how closely lying is associated with ideologies that bolster such reprehensible actions: "This was and still is the case, when all kinds of ideologies try to justify and disguise the most atrocious crimes against human beings."⁴⁷

The Holy Father has repeatedly warned about the pernicious effects of "today's widespread tendencies towards subjectivism, utilitarianism and relativism." They are not merely "pragmatic attitudes or patterns of behavior." Their danger, rather, emanates from "having a basis in theory and claiming full cultural and social legitimacy."⁴⁸ John Paul views the ideology of moral relativism, in particular, as leading inevitably to a

culture in which “the saving power of the truth is contested, and freedom alone, uprooted from any objectivity, is left to decide by itself what is good and what is evil.”

Consequently, “according to some, it appears one no longer need acknowledge the enduring absoluteness of any moral value. All around us, we encounter contempt for human life after conception and before birth; the ongoing violation of basic rights of the person; the unjust destruction of goods minimally necessary for a human life.”⁴⁹

His focus on the relationship between draconian ideologies and large-scale oppression provides an important insight into understanding how it is possible for so many physicians and scientists to justify doing away with unwanted human beings before as well as after birth. One of the most forthright and prophetic pronouncements on record—an editorial, “A New Ethic for Medicine and Society,” published in a 1970 issue of *California Medicine*—incorporates all of the rhetorical ingredients the Pope identifies as essential for the justification of killing in the name of healing: an elitist, relativistic ideology bolstered by outlandish lying and disseminated under the auspices of prestigious medical purveyors.⁵⁰

The editorial begins by acknowledging that the widespread approval of abortion is greatly dependent upon eroding and destroying the Judeo-Christian ethic of “intrinsic and equal value for every human life regardless of its stage, condition, or status” and replacing it with a quality-of-life ethic which confers “relative rather than absolute values on such things as human lives.” Next, it proposes a strategy of extreme linguistic duplicity—fittingly dubbed “semantic gymnastics”—as a device for furthering abortion. It admits that “very considerable semantic gymnastics” are required to justify abortion and suggests “this schizophrenic sort of subterfuge is necessary because while a new

ethic is being accepted the old one has not yet been rejected.” In addition, the editorial specifies two fundamental principles for implementing semantic gymnastics—(1) “Avoidance of the scientific fact, which every one really knows, that human life begins at conception” and (2) “Separating the idea of abortion from the idea of killing.”

Finally, the editorial reveals how lying bordering on a psychiatric disorder can become so convincing—“the very considerable semantic gymnastics which are required to rationalize abortion as anything but taking a human life would be ludicrous if they were not often put forth under socially impeccable auspices.” In conformity with the tenets of semantic gymnastics, however, when such patent nonsense is circulated under that most socially impeccable auspice—organized medicine—it becomes an incontestable truth.

The quality-of-life mentality propounded admittedly possesses decided draconian implications for doing away with vulnerable individuals after as well as before birth. The editorial states that “changing attitudes toward abortion may well be a prototype of what is to occur. . . . One may anticipate further development of these roles as the problems of birth control and birth selection are extended inevitably to death selection and death control.” In a manner reminiscent of Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, physicians are urged “to examine this new ethic” and “prepare to apply it in a rational development for the fulfillment and betterment of mankind in what is almost certain to be a biologically oriented world society.”

Ever since the 1970 CMA editorial, the assaults on the Judeo-Christian ethic and on unwanted human lives have skyrocketed. Philosophers, ethicists, and others have furnished the theoretical rationale and academic respectability for advancing the massive

culture of death and destruction. One of its most relentless promoters has been situation ethics founder Joseph Fletcher, a highly influential biomedical ethicist, theologian, and abortion-fetal experimentation-euthanasia apologist. His defense of fetal research is based on a definition of the unborn as merely “an object, not a subject” and on an ethic of “quality, not quantity, with the value judgment that sometimes ‘life is not worth living.’”⁵¹

Another avid advocate of the quality-of-life ideology as a basis for justifying abortion, euthanasia, infanticide, and physician-assisted suicide is the seemingly ubiquitous Australian philosopher Peter Singer. His attempts to undermine the Judeo-Christian sanctity-of-life ethic are unremitting. Singer’s book—Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics—is replete with disparaging references to the Judeo-Christian sanctity-of-life ethic: “A tragic farce”; “the constraints of religious conformity”; “paradoxical, incoherent, and dependent on pretence”; “sheer absurdity.”⁵²

Singer and colleague Helga Kuhse are particularly enamored of philosopher Michael Tooley’s “continuing self” requirement that “only beings with a degree of self-awareness and sense of the future can have a right to life.”⁵³

John Paul rejects the criterion of worth that “recognizes as a subject of rights only the person who enjoys full or at least incipient autonomy” and “tends to equate personal dignity with the capacity for verbal and explicit, or at least perceptible communication.”

The effects of this mentality, he warns, are devastating:

It is clear that on the basis of these presuppositions there is no place in the world for anyone who, like the unborn and the dying, is a weak element in the social structure, or for anyone who appears completely at the mercy of

others and radically dependent on them, and can only communicate through the silent language of a profound sharing of affection. In this case it is force which becomes the criterion for choice and action in interpersonal relations and in social life.⁵⁴

The quality-of-life mindset has long since been put into practice as a basis for endowing hospital infanticide with theoretical credibility. A multi-disciplinary health care committee actually employed a quality-of-life formula— $QL = N \times (H + S)$ —devised by pediatric surgeon Anthony Shaw⁵⁵ to determine which children born with spina bifida at the Oklahoma Children's Memorial Hospital would be denied life sustaining treatment. Twenty-four infants who flunked the pseudo-mathematical jumble of physiological, cognitive, and socioeconomic criteria for survival were dispatched to a children's shelter where they "died between 1 to 189 days of age (mean 37 days)."⁵⁶

A 1997 study found that most of the 165 infant deaths at the University of California's (San Francisco) intensive care nursery "resulted from neonatologists' decisions to limit life-sustaining treatment," with a considerable number of them "based only on quality-of-life concerns."⁵⁷

Building an Inclusive Language and Culture of Life

It is not enough to curse the darkness by exposing the false, pernicious, euphemistic, and degrading expressions and ideologies powering the death culture. At the close of their conference in March 2001, the Pope told members of the Pontifical Academy of Life that "to expose and denounce the lethal effects of the culture of death" is necessary but not alone sufficient to ensure the triumph of the culture of life.⁵⁸ One

must also focus on the light that shines in the darkness. And this light is nothing less than the light of the truth about the transcendent dignity and worth of the human person, a theme at the very core of the new and enduring culture of life so faithfully and compellingly taught by the Holy Father.

No one has articulated a more inclusive and noble vision of humanity than John Paul II. “In an age when so many people forget who the person is, whence he comes and where he is going, there is an imperative need to arouse in people an even greater sense of wonder at and gratitude for the greatness of every human life, even of a person who is infirm,” he urges. “Especially those in places where this fact is obscured by the pressures of secularization are in need of help to reflect on the fact that every life is a priceless resource, because it is a unique, unrepeatable gift from the Lord, the giver of life.”⁵⁹

Evangelium Vitae contains a sampling of the uplifting and eloquent expressions regularly voiced by the Pope in his numerous affirmations of human life: “this marvelous process of the unfolding of life”; “right from fertilization the adventure of a human life begins”; “despite its hardships, its hidden mysteries, its suffering and its inevitable frailty, this mortal life is a most beautiful thing, a marvel ever new and moving, an event worthy of being exalted in joy and glory”; “in every child which is born and in every person who lives or dies we see the image of God’s glory”; “the incomparable and inviolable worth of every human life.”⁶⁰

The Holy Father has created an indispensable linguistic framework—calling things by their proper name—for exposing the language powering the culture of death and replacing it with a vocabulary of humanization and divinization. The challenge

remains for us to become conversant with and apply his rich and profound discourse of truth telling in the monumental task of evangelizing culture during the third millennium.

NOTES

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26. For details regarding the testimony submitted and the ensuing discussion and debate, see "Partial-Birth Abortion: The Truth," Joint Hearing before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary and the House Committee on the Judiciary, 105th congress, 1st sess., March 11, 1997 (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 1-170.
27. George E. Delury, But What if She Wants to Die? A Husband's Diary (Secaucus, New Jersey: A Birch Lane Press Book, Carol Publishing Group, 1997), p. 130.
28. Diane M. Gianelli, "Inside a Hemlock 'How to Do It' Session." American Medical News, December 9, 1996, p. 25.
29. John Paul II, Gospel of Life, n. 66, n. 67.
30. *Ibid.*, n. 89.
31. "To 10th Health-Care Conference," L'Osservatore Romano, January 10, 1996, p. 6.

32. Anthropologist Margaret Mead furnished an authoritative perspective on the historical and current importance of the Hippocratic Oath: “With the Greeks the distinction was made clear. One profession, the followers of Asclepius, were to be dedicated completely to life under all circumstances regardless of rank, age, or intellect—the life of a slave, the life of the Emperor, the life of a foreign man, the life of a defective child.” This, in her assessment, is “a priceless possession which we cannot afford to tarnish,” especially since “society always is attempting to make the physician into a killer—to kill the defective child at birth, to leave sleeping pills beside the bed of a cancer patient.” Mead’s observations are published in Maurice Levine, Psychiatry and Ethics (New York: George Braziller, 1972), pp. 324-25.

33. John Paul II, Gospel of Life, n. 68, n. 20, n. 72.

34. Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 162, 158 (1973).

35. Mary Anne Warren, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion,” The Monist 57 (January 1973): 47, 58.

36. Richard Perez-Pena, “Doctor in Abortion Case To Appeal Assault Count,” New York Times, March 7, 1993, p. A41.

37. Michael Tooley, Abortion and Infanticide (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 411.

38. Peter Singer, Practical Ethics, Second Edition (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 191.

39. Wiegel, Witness to Hope, p. 8.

40. “The Pope in America: Arrival in St. Louis,” L’Osservatore Romano, February 3, 1999, p. 6.

41. Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 158 (1973).

42. Dred Scott v. Sanford, 19 Howard 404 (1857).

43. Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 162 (1973).

44. Dred Scott v. Sanford, 19 Howard 411-12 (1857).

45. Bailey & als. v. Poindexter’s Ex’or, 14 Grattan 432 (1858).

46. John Paul II, Gospel of Life, n. 81.

47. *Ibid.*, n. 7, n. 8.

48. John Paul II, Splendor of Truth, n. 106.

49. *Ibid.*, n. 84.

50. "A New Ethic for Medicine and Society," California Medicine 113 (September 1970): 67-68.
51. Joseph Fletcher, "Fetal Research: An Ethical Appraisal," Appendix: Research on the Fetus (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, DHEW Publication No. (OS), 1976), pp. 3-8, 3-12.
52. Peter Singer, Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethic (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 3, 189, 191-92.
53. Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer, Should the Baby Live? The Problem of Handicapped Infants (Oxford, New York, and Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 120.
54. John Paul II, Gospel of Life, n. 19.
55. According to this formula, "(QL) represents the quality of life and (NE) represents the patient's natural endowment (physical and intellectual)," while "(H) represents the contributions made to that individual by his home and family and (S) represents the contributions made to that individual by society." See Anthony Shaw, "Defining the Quality of Life," Hastings Center Report 7 (October 1977): 91-92.
56. Richard H. Gross et al., "Early Management and Decision Making for the Treatment of Myelomeningocele," Pediatrics 72 (October 1983): 450, 452-53.
57. Stephen N. Wall and John Colin Partridge, "Death in the Intensive Care Nursery: Physician Practice of Withdrawing and Withholding Life Support," Pediatrics 99 (January 1997): 66.
58. "Holy Father Renews His Appeal for a Culture of Life," L'Osservatore Romano, March 14, 2001, p. 7.
59. "Address to 150 National Directors of the Pro-Life Movement," L'Osservatore Romano, November 18, 1991, p. 1.
60. John Paul II, Gospel of Life, n. 44, n. 60, n. 95.