



The Ecumenical Significance of *Evangelium Vitae*

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I.

ONE IMPORTANT BUT OFTEN NEGLECTED CONSEQUENCE OF THE FERMENT IN Roman Catholic moral theology since the close of the Second Vatican Council (1965) has been the gradual displacement of the traditional categories for distinguishing Roman Catholic from protestant approaches to moral matters. While obvious differences still divide “moral theology” and “Christian ethics” (the traditional terms of the distinction), revision and development over the last thirty years in the former discipline have rendered suspect the familiar hooks on which the division has long been thought to hang. For example, the attention which sacred scripture now commands in much Roman Catholic theology makes the once commonplace opposition between a one-sidedly “natural law” approach and a protestant “scriptural” approach to moral questions something of an unhelpful simplification. It would be difficult to assess with any precision the implications of this category displacement on ecumenical dialogue between the churches, especially since the developments on the Roman Catholic side are themselves very much the product of the ecumenical interaction stimulated by Vatican II.¹ Nevertheless, it is safe to say that this evolving relationship makes it both possible and necessary to view the moral statements of the various communions—up to and including the magisterial teachings of the Roman Catholic Church—in an increasingly ecumenical light.

¹See John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 210-218.

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It is in such a light that I propose to consider the most recent official Roman Catholic document devoted to moral questions, John Paul II's encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life"), issued in March of this year. This encyclical, the pope's eleventh, is an especially appropriate candidate for ecumenical scrutiny, and for a number of reasons. First, John Paul II has been a relentless advocate of Christian unity. His frame of reference is essentially that of the Vatican Council's "Decree on Ecumenism" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), sharpened however by a sense that the coming millennium ought in a special way to be informed by the desire for and celebration of unity among Christian churches.² It is worth asking whether and how the specifically moral pronouncements of *Evangelium Vitae* figure in this broader ecumenical framework. Second, *Evangelium Vitae* is immediately flanked by two documents of great ecumenical interest. On one side is John Paul II's long awaited, and now much debated, encyclical on matters of fundamental moral theology, *Veritatis Splendor* ("The Splendor of Truth," promulgated in August 1993); on the other side is his encyclical letter *Ut Unim Sint* ("That They May Be One," promulgated in May 1995), which, among other things, calls for a renewed commitment to ecumenism. While the ecumenical significance of *Ut Unim Sint* is obvious, *Veritatis Splendor* too has provoked interest well beyond the Roman Catholic audience to which it is explicitly addressed. Third, the profoundly important moral issues with which *Evangelium Vitae* deals—abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty—have also been profoundly divisive, particularly in the North American context, where differences of opinion on these matters separate not only individuals but often churches.

After reviewing the contents of *Evangelium Vitae*, I will direct my comments first to those elements in the encyclical likely to be of continuing concern where ecumenical dialogue and Christian unity are in view. I shall then draw attention to aspects of the letter which, in contrast, are likely to contribute to ecumenical dialogue and thus to Christian unity. Finally, I shall say something about those features of the document which are bound to challenge all sides, on the assumption that genuinely ecumenical dialogue ought to be unsettling for everyone involved. If there is an argument in what follows, it is this: that whatever *Evangelium Vitae's* other merits or failings may be, its primary ecumenical significance undoubtedly resides in its capacity to disturb.

II.

Generally speaking, novelty is not among the more prominent features of papal encyclicals, and in most respects *Evangelium Vitae* is no exception to the rule. In fact, on the levels of fundamental norms and principles the encyclical is most profitably read as a forceful restatement of traditional Roman Catholic teaching against the direct and voluntary taking of innocent human life. Indeed, John Paul II explicitly appeals to the authority of his office, the "Papal Magisterium," in confirming both the formal prohibition against such killing and the norms against

²John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 10 November 1994, 34.

the taking of human life in cases of abortion and euthanasia. While these three declarations fall short of being infallible pronouncements, their form is worth noticing at this point, since they clearly raise a question of long-standing ecumenical concern (to which we shall return below), namely, the role of papal (as well as episcopal) authority in defining and deciding moral norms. With respect to abortion, for example, John Paul II concludes:

[B]y the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops—who on various occasions have condemned abortion...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.³

Thus noted, it should immediately be said that of the various attacks on human life condemned by the encyclical, only the formal norm, together with the prohibitions of abortion and euthanasia, are so authoritatively worded.

Abortion and euthanasia are but two of the many assaults on human life that, according to John Paul II, increasingly mark our contemporary culture as a “culture of death” (12). Over its four chapters *Evangelium Vitae* takes up many more: war, the arms trade, the drug trade, pornography and prostitution, poverty, capital punishment, ecological destruction, intervention and experimentation on human embryos (including prenatal diagnostic techniques), artificial forms of contraception, and assisted suicide. The encyclical’s criticism of these at first glance disparate phenomena is unified by a commitment to the fundamentally theological principle which to one extent or another each of them contravenes: the sanctity and inviolability of human life (53-57). “Life is always a good,” writes John Paul II, and though this truth is “an instinctive perception and fact of experience” (34), the sublime heights of human dignity, together with the moral obligation to honor it in each person, can hardly be appreciated apart from the revelation of God’s creative presence to us, preeminently in the person of Jesus Christ (“In Christ the *Gospel of Life* is definitively proclaimed and fully given” [29]). Thus again the encyclical simply reaffirms in both form and content what might be called the elemental principles of official Roman Catholic moral teaching on questions of human life (cf. also 53).

If there is anything new in *Evangelium Vitae*, it is not on these levels of norm and principle, but rather on the levels of method and style (the manner in which norms and principles are both adduced and articulated), neither of which are incidental to the overall argument of the encyclical. At least two things warrant mention here. The first is the thoroughly “evangelical” way in which the document is structured and its argument developed. The second is its insistence that the aforementioned attacks against life be seen in relation to each other as manifestations of a “culture of death.”

In its descriptive, normative, and paranetic modes, *Evangelium Vitae* is vigor-

³*Evangelium Vitae*, 62. Numbered references to official Roman Catholic documents are to sections, not pages, and will henceforth be included in the main text where appropriate. All emphases, unless otherwise indicated, are original.

ously christocentric and decidedly evangelical. Like *Veritatis Splendor*, which for full effect ought to be read alongside it, *Evangelium Vitae* begins with a lengthy meditation on a scriptural passage (in this case Cain's murder of Abel, Gen 4:1-16). John Paul II sees the various present-day attacks on human life as but the reverberations of Cain's primordial assault. "The blood of every other human being who has been killed since Abel is also a voice raised to the Lord" (25). The destruction of human life in each instance is both cause and symptom of a more deadly dynamic: the loss of God's presence and the concomitant "eclipse of the sense of God and of man [sic]" ("Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face" – Gen 4:14 NRSV [cf. 21-24]).

It is Christ's blood – which of all the blood shed since Abel cries out "in an absolutely singular way" – that has proved the unraveling of this dynamic, revealing the "grandeur of the Father's love," the "priceless value" of human life, and the fundamental vocation of the human person to be "the sincere gift of self" (25). Thus in Christ the negative moral precept (Old Testament commandment) "do not kill" is taken up into the new, positive commandment of love, "the absolute imperative to respect, love and promote the life of every brother and sister, in accordance with the requirements of God's bountiful love in Jesus Christ" (77).

The blood of Christ is, finally, the primary source of nourishment for both individuals and the believing community as a whole, each called to proclaim the "gospel of life." Connecting the Christian moral life to the life of worship, the liturgical enactment of the eucharist is singled out as a high point in the church's public witness to the life "which flows from the pierced side of Christ on the Cross" (25, 51).

Because we have been sent into the world as a "people for life," our proclamation must also become a genuine celebration of the Gospel of life. This celebration, with the evocative power of its gestures, symbols and rites, should become a precious and significant setting in which the beauty and grandeur of this Gospel is handed on. (83; cf. also 25, 79)

Given such passages and numerous others, it would not be inappropriate to summarize the entire encyclical as a call to more vigorously proclaim the "very person of Jesus" (29; cf. also 80).

This proclamation takes place against the backdrop of a culture whose attitude to life is often described in the bleakest of terms. While not without signs of hope (e.g., "movements and initiatives to raise social awareness in defence of life," 27), the present age, according to *Evangelium Vitae*, consistently reveals itself in both practice and theory as antithetical to life. A good deal of the initial media reaction to the encyclical focused on this "counter-cultural" tone, an attitude that readers of H. Richard Niebuhr's famous *Christ and Culture* will recognize as exemplifying the "Christ against Culture" type.⁴ Oddly enough, however, few of its initial commentators noted the extraordinarily important point *Evangelium Vitae* is

⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). See *Evangelium Vitae* 82: "We must be in the world but not of the world...drawing our strength from Christ, who by his Death and Resurrection has overcome the world...."

making here, that there exists a deep connection between these enumerated assaults on human life. The link is more visible on the level of theory than of practice (for it is not self-evident what reproductive technologies, capital punishment, and crushing poverty have to do with one another), and expresses what the encyclical takes to be unique about the contemporary degradation of human life, namely its large-scale and systematic character.

While it is by now commonplace to identify as the chief cause of current social and political ills the evanescence of individual conscience, it is in the eclipse of what John Paul II terms the “moral conscience of society” that the full extent of the contemporary threat to human life must be understood:

it [the moral conscience of society] too is responsible, not only because it tolerates or fosters behavior contrary to life, but also because it encourages the “culture of death,” creating and consolidating actual “structures of sin” which go against life. (24)

For *Evangelium Vitae* the preeminent example of such structural sin is abortion, a practice both tolerated and justified on the basis of a philosophy that exalts individual freedom at the expense of every other value. From John Paul II’s perspective, the same philosophy underwrites a variety of other death-dealing practices, many of which already benefit from state-sponsored support, e.g., euthanasia and assisted suicide in the Netherlands. Together, these practices constitute what John Paul II does not hesitate to describe, rather provocatively, as a “conspiracy against life” (12). The gravity of this compounded threat to human life is what lies behind the encyclical’s criticism of capital punishment, the strength and scope of which represents a genuine development of the Roman Catholic position on this subject (cf. 56).

The phrase “culture of death” then describes more than just the cumulatively negative effect on human life and dignity of discrete personal, social, and political practices such as embryo experimentation, assisted suicide, and capital punishment. Death is, of course, the concrete consequence of many of these practices, but for John Paul II it is also, metaphorically, the inevitable result of the distinctively modern tendency to dismantle—at the cost of considerable self-contradiction—what might be called the dialectic of freedom, truth, and love (understood as self-gift). Here *Evangelium Vitae* reiterates what is developed at some length in *Veritatis Splendor*, and readers intrigued by the moral theory underlying *Evangelium Vitae*’s pronouncements are advised to return to that document.⁵ In contrast to the dominant modern notion of freedom, understood primarily as the unimpeachably private possession of the individual, who is sovereign within its sphere, *Evangelium Vitae* proposes that genuine freedom is both gift and charge, an integral component of a life—itsself a gift—whose fruition requires the often painful transformation of freedom into service, if not self-sacrifice. As we have already noted, for *Evangelium Vitae* the truth in whose light this transformation is effected is the very person of Jesus Christ. Hence, the “Gospel of Life” ends with an exhortation to transform the “culture of death” into a “culture of life” by recovering this link

⁵Chapter II in particular.

between freedom, truth, and love, through a contemplative outlook, in liturgical celebration, and in the practical affairs of daily life, but above all by more perfectly proclaiming the singular witness who is the embodiment of all three.

III.

Those familiar with the Roman Catholic moral tradition, be they Roman Catholic or not, may find the unabashedly evangelical temper of *Evangelium Vitae* surprising. At least among those Christians who identify themselves as “evangelicals” there is already evidence that the surprise is a welcome one.⁶ Ecumenical sensitivities are more likely to be raised, however, by a number of other features of the encyclical, among which are the persistence of an emphasis on the capacity of “unaided” reason to discern moral truth, the absolute and exceptionless character of the norms prohibiting the taking of life in cases of abortion and euthanasia, and, not least, the authoritative role assumed by both the papacy and the episcopate in the formulation and declaration of such norms.

The “complete truth concerning the value of human life,” and hence the ultimate basis of the moral obligation to respect and preserve it, is revealed “through the words, the actions and the very person of Jesus.” However, claims *Evangelium Vitae*, “it can also be known in its essential traits by human reason” (29). The humanism implicit in this claim will doubtless strike many protestant readers, evangelicals among them, as theologically, if not empirically, suspect. Nor is the claim likely to be convincing that it is necessary to presume such confidence in the powers of human reason if Christians are to speak to the broadest possible audience; in other words, if they are to remain, in the terms of Ernst Troeltsch’s famous classification, a “church” and not a “sect.” However, I suspect that when ecumenical dialogue over *Evangelium Vitae* turns to this most classic of all disagreements between protestants and Roman Catholics, the issues at stake will not be the traditionally doctrinal ones concerning creation, sin, and the theological anthropologies they presume, but rather ecclesiological ones regarding the appropriate form of Christian witness to an increasingly secular culture. This is not to say that such fundamental theological issues will or ought always to be trumped by questions of strategy, only that the kinds of cultural change over the last two hundred years in the west, in particular the advent of a thoroughgoing philosophical pluralism, have made it incumbent upon Christians—Roman Catholics and protestants alike—to attend more closely to the character of their audience. From this perspective, the “devout” humanism assumed by *Evangelium Vitae* looks increasingly Christian, and the universalism of John Paul II more “sectarian.”⁷

The other two topics of ecumenical concern discussed here are linked by the issues of conscience and individual liberty, and are perhaps less amenable to resolution than the first. *Evangelium Vitae* clearly emphasizes the importance of

⁶Cf. Oliver O’Donovan, “A Summons to Reality,” in *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, ed. John Wilkins (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1994) 41-45.

⁷George H. Williams, “The Ecumenical Intentions of Pope John Paul II,” *Harvard Theological Review* 75/2 (1982) 144.

conscience, both individual and social, as well as the recovery of a genuine freedom (which turns out to be service to God and neighbor) in the process of transforming our “culture of death” into a “culture of life.” These emphases seem undercut by the absolute and exceptionless formulation of the moral norms prohibiting the taking of innocent human life, especially in cases of abortion and euthanasia, and by the authoritative declaration of them by John Paul II in his explicit exercise of “Papal Magisterium.” Fruitful ecumenical dialogue around the first issue will doubtless depend on how persuasive readers find the encyclical’s claim that these commandments, in particular the absolutely formulated negative precepts (“thou shalt not”), are not the last word in Roman Catholic morality, but “the beginning and the first necessary stage of the journey towards freedom” (75).

The latter issue is, of course, an ecclesiological one, the full consideration of which is well beyond the scope of this paper. It might be tempting for non-Roman Catholic readers of *Evangelium Vitae* to dismiss anxieties about the nature and scope of papal authority as distinctively Roman Catholic burdens to bear, or else to wonder about its relevance with respect to moral pronouncements whose truth is presumed to rest, not on papal say-so alone, but on the twin forces of reason and divine revelation. However, I do not think ecumenical debate around this issue need fall into these all too familiar ruts (e.g., authority vs. liberty; law vs. conscience), because there is an extremely important question lurking here to which Christians of every stripe would do well to attend. That question has to do with the *public* character of the church’s witness in matters of faith as well as morals. We might put the matter in the following way: If Christians can agree that the transformation of culture, as understood by *Evangelium Vitae*, is both an individual and an ecclesial task, how will the articulation and defense of that task avoid becoming yet another arbitrary and emotive expression of (merely aggregate) personal desire? In other words, I am suggesting here that the ecumenical dialogue around papal authority should be thought of not in Paul Ramsey’s phrase, “*Who* speaks for the church?” but rather, “*How* ought the church to speak?”⁸

Of those elements within *Evangelium Vitae* likely to contribute to ecumenical dialogue—and, one hopes, to Christian unity—much has already been said. Certainly the primary feature in this context is the encyclical’s forthrightly christocentric character. Despite the persistence of “natural law” terminology, and even the accent on “law” as the primary language of morality, *Evangelium Vitae*’s fundamental outlook, the matrix, so to speak, through which it describes, interprets, and responds to the world and our times, is deeply structured by a sense of Christian life as discipleship. Here again the encyclical picks up a major theme of *Veritatis Splendor*:

It is Jesus himself who takes the initiative and calls people to follow him. His call is addressed first to those to whom he entrusts a particular mission, beginning with the Twelve; but it is also clear that every believer is called to be a follower

⁸On this issue, see Michael Hollerich, “Retrieving a Neglected Critique of Church, Theology and Secularization in Weimar Germany,” *Pro Ecclesia* 2/3 (Summer 1993) 305-332.

of Christ....Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality. (*Veritatis Splendor*, 19.)

This reorientation of Roman Catholic moral theology, it ought to be remembered, is the consequence not only of Vatican II's call for the reformation of that discipline ("whose scientific exposition," the council declared, "should be more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching"⁹) but of the significant amount of ecumenical interaction between protestant and Roman Catholic theologians since then.

There are, finally, aspects of *Evangelium Vitae* which may ruffle everyone's feathers, with the perhaps desirable outcome of actually provoking ecumenical dialogue where it has grown torpid or lax. I do not refer here to the ever controversial statements about artificial contraception, but to the document's accent on witness, which as I have mentioned forms a crucial part of its christocentric and evangelical character. Obviously, the necessity of proclaiming the "Gospel of Life" in the manner *Evangelium Vitae* recommends, even to the point of dramatic self-sacrifice (i.e., witness in its primordial sense of "martyrdom"), will be less urgently felt by those readers of the encyclical who are not persuaded that the nefarious practices it mentions as comprising a "culture of death" are linked in the way it says. Still less will it be persuasive to those who differ with its underlying moral theory. Nevertheless, the insistence that these issues are connected, that to be "pro-life" is to oppose not only abortion and euthanasia, but economic exploitation of the poor, assisted suicide, and capital punishment as well, stands as the first line of challenge in and to a culture where the moral life, even among Christians, is all too often lived in a fragmented and episodic way.

Hence the evangelical call to witness presumes a conception of the unity of the moral life, a life whose center provides the basis for a theoretically and practically consistent response to the sorts of challenges to human life and dignity *Evangelium Vitae* enumerates. In what may be the most provocative feature of the encyclical, John Paul II insists that this center cannot be equated with the essentially subjective realm of individual desire, but is to be found rather in the preeminent form of Christian action itself: the liturgy. Liturgy is at once both public and communal, and thus the moral life whose roots it nourishes is seriously at odds with the dominant modern conception of morality that is intensely private and individual. In this perspective John Paul II's call for genuinely ecumenical celebration among the churches, of both the "Gospel of Life" and of the approaching third millennium, takes on a dramatically new urgency. ⊕

⁹*Optatum Totius* ("Decree on Priestly Formation") 16; in Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (Piscataway, N.J.: New Century, 1966) 452.