

# FAITH AND REASON AND THE CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE

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SUMMARY: I. *Faith and Reason in Evangelium Vitae*. II. *Faith and Reason and the Consistent Ethic of Life*. III. *Conclusion*.

## I. FAITH AND REASON IN *EVANGELIUM VITAE*

In *Evangelium vitae*,<sup>1</sup> Pope St. John Paul II frequently appeals to “all people of good will” (EV 7, 74, 91, 105) to “every upright conscience” (EV 3), and “every person-believer and non-believer alike” (EV 2). The defense of human life is not a sectarian or parochial concern. The Pope writes: “Even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize in the natural law written in the heart (cfr. Rom 2:14-15) the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and can affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree” (EV 2). Near the end of the Encyclical, the saint Pope reemphasizes the theme that not just faith but reason points to the value of the human being,

The Gospel of life is not for believers alone: it is for everyone. The issue of life and its defence and promotion is not a concern of Christians alone. Although faith provides special light and strength, this question arises in every human conscience which seeks the truth and which cares about the future of humanity. Life certainly has a sacred and religious value, but in no way is that value a concern only of believers. The value at stake is one which every human being can grasp by the light of reason; thus it necessarily concerns everyone (EV 101).

The Polish Pope holds that the dignity of every human being and the defense of innocent human life is not only a matter of concern for those who accept divine revelation but also a truth that those who do not enjoy the gift of faith can accept.

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<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium vitae*, 25 March 1995, (EV).

Indeed, he is right. For example, an atheist like the philosopher Don Marquis offers a critique of abortion as ethically wrong on the basis of reasons that makes no appeal whatsoever to faith, revelation, scripture, or religious authority.<sup>2</sup> Marquis begins with asking, why is killing you or me wrong? Killing us here and now does not take away our past, but rather takes away our future. If I were to be killed today, I would miss out on developing friendships with other people, learning important new truths, and enjoying the beauty of the world. Killing you or me deprives us of a future of value. So, one reason (though perhaps not the only reason) killing you or me is wrong is that it deprives us of a future of value. But this same reason applies to killing a newborn baby or a human being *in utero*. Both infanticide and abortion deprive the individual of his or her future like ours. Thus, the same reason that it is wrong to kill you or me applies also to a human being at the beginning of life. This argument against abortion and infanticide does not appeal to faith, religious authority, or revelation. The case for life does not need to rely on religious faith or dogma but can be made on the basis of reason alone. I have offered just such a secular, non-religious case against abortion in my book *The Ethics of Abortion: Women's Rights, Human Life, and the Question of Justice*.<sup>3</sup> In *Evangelium vitae*, the power of reason to know the value of human life is repeatedly emphasized.

Although reason does point to the truths proposed by the Church about the good of human life, Pope St. John Paul II explicates the same truth by means of revelation. The saint explores Biblical stories (such as Cain and Abel) that not all people of good will accept as revelation. In explaining “Why is life a good?,” the pope relies heavily on Genesis as well as on the teaching and example of Jesus. The 124 footnotes of the text refer to quotations from Church Fathers, the Second Vatican Council, saints such as Thomas Aquinas, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but Scripture is by far the most prominent source used in the *Evangelium vitae*. St. John Paul II’s profound reliance on Scripture raises questions.

If St. John Paul II is appealing to *all* people of good will, not just Christian religious believers, why does he rely to such an extent on the biblical stories? Would it not be more effective rhetorically to limit the defense to what reason alone independent of revelation can show? Why appeal to the Bible if the Gospel of Life is for believer and non-believer alike?

*Evangelium vitae* does not provide explicit answers to such questions. One possibility is that a person of good will tries to find truth wherever it can be found. Perhaps, St. John Paul II is using these stories to illustrate themes that “every person sincerely open to truth and goodness” (EV 2) could accept regardless of

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. D. MARQUIS, *Why Abortion Is Immoral*, «Journal of Philosophy» 86/IV (1989) 183-202.

<sup>3</sup> C. KACZOR, *The Ethics of Abortion: Women's Rights, Human Life, and the Question of Justice*, Routledge, New York 2014.<sup>2</sup>

accepting the Bible as *divinely* inspired. Shakespeare's play *King Lear* need not be accorded the status of divine revelation in order to be a source of insight that we should not be deceived by the flattery of family members. So, in a similar way, the Pope's use of Biblical stories may enlighten the mind of those who do not accept the Bible as God's word. As the practice of the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson indicates, people of faith and people without faith alike can profit from learning the lessons embedded in the Biblical stories.<sup>4</sup>

There is perhaps another reason for the Biblical emphasis of *Evangelium vitae*. Contrary to some who try to argue that Christian faith and defense of killing the innocent are compatible, yet another purpose of *Evangelium vitae*'s use of Scripture is to show the utter irreconcilability of Biblical faith and attacks on innocent human life. It is true that there is no specific verse in Scripture that says, "abortion is always wrong" or "never euthanize someone." Should this fact trouble us? Not in the least. There are many actions that are obviously wrong but that are not explicitly condemned by Scripture, such as, "Do not blow up the entire world with nuclear weapons." Catholics do not accept the self-defeating principle of *sola scriptura*. Holding that 'the Bible and the Bible alone is the source of all truth' is not only a proposition found nowhere in the Bible but also is claim contrary to Scripture itself which speaks of the Church as the "pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim 3:15).

Moreover, the grand narrative of Scripture does speak—from Genesis through Revelation—of the value of the human being, particularly the innocent human being. God creates male and female in his image and likeness. God shows his care for the human person by revealing himself to more and more human beings, starting with Abraham, Moses, and the Prophets but coming in the fullness of revelation in the person of Jesus. In the fullness of time, God sends his only Son to save the human race, Jew and Gentile alike, from alienation from God and from each other, and from that eternal alienation called damnation. God continues to care for human beings through his Church, a Church offering Word and Sacrament to all people. The divine concern for human beings is particularly evident in God's concern for the vulnerable. It is those who cannot defend themselves, such

<sup>4</sup> I explore the strengths and weaknesses of this approach in the following essays: *Jordan Peterson on Adam and Eve*, «The Public Discourse», April 4 2018, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/04/21281/>; *Jordan Peterson on Cain and Abel*, «The Public Discourse», 21-06-2018, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/06/21861/>; *Jordan Peterson and the Heroic Patriarch Abraham*, «National Catholic Register», 10-03-2018, <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/guest-blogger/jordan-peterson-and-the-heroic-patriarch-abraham>; *Jordan Peterson Takes on the Tower of Babel*, «National Catholic Register», 9-12-2018, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/guest-blogger/jordan-peterson-takes-on-the-tower-of-babel>; *Jordan Peterson, Noah and the Flood*, «National Catholic Register», 8-01-2018, <https://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/jordan-peterson-noah-and-the-flood>.

as the poor widow, the leper, and the blind, who Jesus looks after with great care and who God calls on us to protect. The human being *in utero* and the human being in the end of his or her life are even more vulnerable than the poor widow, the leper, and the blind who (at least typically) can speak up in their own defense. The human being *in utero* and the unconscious human being at the end of life are utterly defenseless and vulnerable. If we are called to care for the those in need around us, then we are called to nurture, to love, and to protect human beings at the beginning and at the end of life.

## II. FAITH AND REASON AND THE CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE

We see a rich development of the interaction between faith and reason in the ongoing discussion of how various life issues are related to one another. In the 1980s, some people suggested that the Church should ‘broaden’ its understanding of life issues to move beyond an emphasis on abortion and euthanasia. This approach takes various forms and is sometimes called the “seamless garment” or “consistent ethic of life” approach. Abortion, immigration, euthanasia, poverty, education, and the environment are all issues that are important for the flourishing of the human person.<sup>5</sup>

*Evangelium vitae* provides support for *part* of the consistent ethic of life in that the Pope holds that a culture of life is not simply about opposing abortion and euthanasia alone: “As one called to till and look after the garden of the world (cfr. Gen 2:15), man has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which he lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity, of his life, not only for the present but also for future generations” (EV 42). Elsewhere, the broadening view finds support in “how can we fail to consider the violence against life done to millions of human beings, especially children, who are forced into poverty, malnutrition and hunger because of an unjust distribution of resources between peoples and between social classes?” (EV 10).

On the other hand, *Evangelium vitae* does not claim that all issues facing human being are of equal importance. The saint Pope provides reasons for recognizing a preeminent priority in opposing abortion and euthanasia as particular focuses on our efforts (which not denying the importance of other broader life issues, such as poverty or the environment). For example, “human life finds itself most vulnerable when it enters the world and when it leaves the realm of time for eternity” (EV 44). If the followers of Jesus are called to have a special attention to

<sup>5</sup> J. BERNARDIN, *A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American-Catholic Dialogue* (Gannon Lecture, Fordham University, 6 December 1983), «Origins» 13 (1983) 491–494; (1–11). For a critique, see J. FINNIS, *The ‘Consistent Ethic of Life’*, in *Religion and Public Reasons*, Collected Essays, V, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, 291–327.

those in greatest need of mercy, then it seems like the unborn and the dying (who are so weak as to be unable to defend themselves) deserve special focus. “It is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop. A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized. Only respect for life can be the foundation and guarantee of the most precious and essential goods of society, such as democracy and peace” (EV 101). With a similar emphasis, St. John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* wrote: “The common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights—for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture—is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination”.<sup>6</sup> The right to life must be most basic and fundamental because if the right to life is taken away so also is taken away the right to liberty, to vote, or to own property. The dead cannot exercise any of the rights of the living. So killing human beings is simultaneously taking away all their other rights.

This emphasis on the priority of the right to life is developed by the Bishops of the United States in the following passages from their text *Living the Gospel of Life*:

Two temptations in public life can distort the Church’s defense of human life and dignity: The first is a moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity. The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed. The second is the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity. The current and projected extent of environmental degradation has become a moral crisis especially because it poses a risk to humanity in the future and threatens the lives of poor and vulnerable human persons here and now. Racism and other unjust discrimination, the use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, the use of torture, war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or a lack of health care, pornography, redefining civil marriage, compromising religious liberty, or an unjust immigration policy are all serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act. These are not optional concerns which can be dismissed. Catholics are urged to seriously consider Church teaching on these issues. Although choices about how best to respond to these and other compelling threats to human life and dignity are matters

<sup>6</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Ap. Ex. *Christifideles laici*, 30 December 1998, n. 38.

for principled debate and decision, this does not make them optional concerns or permit Catholics to dismiss or ignore Church teaching on these important issues. Clearly not every Catholic can be actively involved on each of these concerns, but we need to support one another as our community of faith defends human life and dignity wherever it is threatened.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, the Bishops hold that not all issues are morally equivalent and yet the Bishops also resist reducing Catholic engagement in the public square to one or two issues. They continue, “This culture of life begins with the preeminent obligation to protect innocent life from direct attack and extends to defending life whenever it is threatened or diminished: Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care. [...] If we understand the human person as the ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’—the living house of God—then these issues fall logically into place as the crossbeams and walls of that house. All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the house’s foundation.”<sup>8</sup> This analysis is fully compatible with the analysis provided in *Evangelium vitae*.

Another relevant point differentiating the preeminent life issues from other important issues hinges on the difference between actions that are intrinsically evil (such as killing the innocent or sexual abuse of minors) and actions that are not intrinsically evil. For example, there is never a situation in which intentionally killing innocent human beings can be justified.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, for example, there are legitimate disagreements among people committed to improving the lot of the poor about the means that will be likely to achieve this goal. Take for example the minimum wage. What exactly should the minimum wage be? Some argue that it would help the poor to substantially raise the minimum wage. Others argue the minimum wage should remain the same or be lowered. Some economists even argue that a minimum wage harms the poorest workers. Economist Thomas Sowell writes, “Unfortunately, the real minimum wage is always zero, regardless of the laws, and that is the wage that many workers receive in the wake of the creation or escalation of a government-mandated minimum wage, because they lose their jobs or fail to find jobs when they enter the labor force.”<sup>10</sup> People of good will agree that the poor should be helped, and yet people of good will may disagree about the best means to help the poor. So, there is an important difference between actions such as intentionally killing the innocent which can

<sup>7</sup> UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, 1998, n. 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 6-VIII-1993, no. 80.

<sup>10</sup> T. SOWELL, *Basic Economics: A Common Sense Guide to Economics*, Basic Books, New York 2015<sup>5</sup>, 221.

never be justified and actions such as raising the minimum wage 15% which may or may not be justified based on prudential considerations. The preeminent life issues arise from actions that are intrinsically evil. Other issues related to quality of life are more obviously subject to prudential considerations.

Another difference is also relevant for our reflections. In some cases, a ‘widening’ of efforts to protect life may in fact just be a ‘watering down’ or even an abnoment of protecting innocent human life. Considering a similar ‘widening’ effort with other issues. Imagine someone saying, “Up to now our group’s efforts to aid immigrants have focused too narrowly on issues such as people trying to enter another country from their native land. We need to ask ourselves today, ‘What is the meaning of ‘immigration’? Our immigration efforts should not narrowly focus just on helping individuals becoming lawful permanent residents in a new land. No. Immigration includes those traveling from one ecclesial community to entering a new ecclesial community. So, in order to facilitate ecclesial immigration, we need to include a focus on evangelization and catechesis in our efforts to aid immigrants. Moreover, how can we neglect the most basic and most important migration that anyone ever does? I am speaking of the migration from *in utero* to *ex utero*, the migration of birth. This migration is prevented by abortion, the most impenetrable ‘wall’ to immigration ever built. So, we will henceforth also focus our efforts on criminalizing abortion. In fact, we will focus all our efforts on criminalizing abortion and evangelization of non-Catholics, without ever in the slightest denying our steadfast commitment to immigration of people from their native land to a new land.” Would not such a “refocus” in fact, be an abolition of the original purpose of groups seeking to aid immigrants?

Pope Francis has not lost focus on the importance of core life issues, while of course not denying the significance of other issues. As a recent news report indicated, “protecting human life is the ‘preeminent’ social and political issue, Pope Francis said, and he asked the head of the U.S. Bishops’ Committee for Pro-Life Activities to convey his support to the pro-life community.” The *Catholic News Service* on Jan. 16 indicated that the pope agreed with the U.S. bishops “identifying the protection of the unborn as a preeminent priority”.<sup>11</sup> When asked whether he agreed that the prolife issue is a preeminent priority, “His [Pope Francis’s] response to that was, ‘Of course, it is. It’s the most fundamental right. [...] He said, ‘This is not first a religious issue; it’s a human rights issue,’ which is so true”.<sup>12</sup> In this, Pope Francis articulates in a new way the insights of Pope St. John Paul II in *Evangelium vitae*. We can know by using reason, believer and unbeliever

<sup>11</sup> CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE, *Pope speaks to U.S. bishops about pro-life issues, transgender ideology*, 16-01-2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-speaks-us-bishops-about-pro-life-issues-transgender-ideology>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

alike can know, that intentionally killing innocent human being is wrong. We can also know that the right to live is the most fundamental of all rights as the foundation and necessary condition of all other rights. Some voices want to reverse this emphasis by giving lip service (at best) to abortion and euthanasia but major attention to the environment, immigration, poverty, etc. These words of Pope Francis, as well as the text of *Evangelium vitae*, does not support this approach.

### III. CONCLUSION

This essay examines Pope St. John Paul II's view that believer and unbeliever alike are called to build a culture of life. Faith and reason, Biblical stories and philosophical reflection, work in harmony pointing to the truth that every human being deserves to be defended by law and welcomed in life, to use the phrase of Richard John Neuhaus. Moreover, faith and reason also suggest priority of the preeminent life issues (abortion and euthanasia) while also pointing to the significance of other issues relevant for the full flourishing of the human person.

### ABSTRACT

The rich text of *Evangelium vitae* raises numerous themes of great importance, perhaps even greater importance now than at the time of its publication in 1995. This reflection looks at the relationship of faith and reason in Pope St. John Paul II's Encyclical, and how both faith and reason help us to understand better the relationship among various issues important to the life and flourishing of the human person.