

# *John Paul II on the Language Empowering the Culture of Death*

William Brennan

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No one has written and spoken more extensively, boldly, and perceptively about the problems encountered by human beings—especially the most vulnerable and marginalized—in today’s postmodern, technologically driven, hedonistic, and nihilistic world than Pope John Paul II. A major theme of his pontificate encompasses wide-ranging reflections on how social, economic, political, historical, philosophical, legal, medical, technological, and media forces enhance or obstruct the advancement of the human condition. He calls upon the rich heritage of Catholic social doctrine as a moral compass for exposing and resolving the numerous injustices afflicting mankind, always informed by a core principle of the Church’s social teaching: “The human person must be the beginning, the subject, and the object of every social organization.”<sup>1</sup>

## **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. Fluent in eight languages, he has proven to be

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<sup>1</sup>Address to members of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, “A Dialogue to Serve the Common Good” (November 25, 1998), *L’Osservatore Romano* (English), December 14, 1994, n. 4.

consummately adept at utilizing words in giving testimony to the truth about the inalienable dignity of the human person at all stages of development and uncovering the horrors directed against innocent persons by a pervasive culture of death. He articulates a compelling 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.”<sup>2</sup>

This is precisely the approach the Holy Father has followed in his longstanding opposition to the indefensible and in defense of the vulnerable. It involves, above all, “speak[ing] the truth clearly, candidly, and boldly, but never with hatred or disrespect for persons.”<sup>3</sup> He does not level personal attacks against those who are obscuring the violence with deceptive rhetoric. Instead, he cuts through the rhetoric itself, exposes the horrendous reality buried beneath the rhetoric, and presents authoritative words, images, and insights regarding the intrinsic worth of human lives before and after birth.

John Paul’s framing of the conflict afflicting mankind 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. His confrontation with the death culture is backed up by 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 human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.”<sup>4</sup> The manner in which he goes about this process reveals the authenticity of his language in speaking the truth to power on several crucial fronts.

### **The Medicalization of Destruction: Killing as Healing**

Much of the terminology powering today’s culture of death has a pronounced antiseptic medical coloration. The real purpose underlying these “innocuous medical terms,” the pope emphasizes, “is to disguise certain crimes against life in its early or final stages,” and therefore, to “distract attention from the fact that what is involved is the right to life of an actual human person.”<sup>5</sup>

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 this can be found in a 1976 paper

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<sup>2</sup>Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life, Evangelium Vitae* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1995), n. 58, original emphasis.

<sup>3</sup>Address to participants in the “Pro-Vita” seminar, “Abortion, Infanticide, Euthanasia, and Contraception Are All Intimately Connected with Church’s Teaching” (March 1, 1986), *L’Osservatore Romano* (English), March 10, 1986, n. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Pope John Paul II, *On the Relationship between Faith and Reason, Fides et Ratio* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1998), intro.

<sup>5</sup>John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, n. 11.

titled “Abortion as a Treatment for Unwanted Pregnancy: The Number Two Sexually Transmitted ‘Disease.’” The authors maintain that abortion is “ten times more effective for treating unwanted pregnancy than is penicillin for treating gonorrhea,” and therefore conclude “unwanted pregnancy should be considered a sexually transmitted condition of epidemic proportion and, moreover, legal abortion is an effective, safe, and curative treatment for that condition.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, 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 services,” “a continuum of good health care,” and “the best possible medical care in an atmosphere of dignity and respect.”<sup>7</sup>

Jack Kevorkian, M.D., has likewise persistently dubbed his destructive activities “medical procedures” and “medical services.” One of the four “assisted” deaths administered by him in August 1996 involved Judith Curren, a forty-two-year-old registered nurse, who was overweight, “suffered from chronic fatigue syndrome,” but had no life-threatening condition. Kevorkian’s attorney, Geoffrey Fieger, called what had been done to Curren “a medical procedure” carried out by “a caring doctor.”<sup>8</sup> At his last trial, Kevorkian defended injecting a lethal chemical into the veins of a fifty-two-year-old man afflicted with Lou Gehrig’s disease as a “medical service.”<sup>9</sup>

The Holy Father brands such extreme distortions of language and reality as antithetical to the life-affirming mission of medicine itself: “‘Causing death’ 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.” Furthermore, he locates “the intrinsic and undeniable ethical dimension” of medicine in “the ancient and still relevant *Hippocratic Oath*, which requires every doctor to commit himself to absolute respect for human life and its sacredness.”<sup>10</sup>

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

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<sup>6</sup>Willard Cates et al., “Abortion as a Treatment for Unwanted Pregnancy: The Number Two Sexually Transmitted ‘Disease.’” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Planned Parenthood Physicians, Miami Beach, FL, November 11, 1976), 7–8.

<sup>7</sup>See, in particular, Renee Chelian, president, National Coalition of Abortion Providers, testimony, 18. For details regarding the testimony submitted by other abortion proponents 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), 1–170.

<sup>8</sup>“No Legal Action Is Anticipated as Kevorkian Suicides Multiply,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 1996, A2.

<sup>9</sup>Pam Belluck, “Kevorkian Stumbles in His Self-Defense,” *New York Times*, March 24, 1999, A20.

<sup>10</sup>John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, n. 89, original emphasis.

noble and humane medical services performed by idealistic and compassionate 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 Zigmond Lebensohn calls abortion “the practice of humanitarian medicine at its very best.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> Dru Carlson, M.D., defines partial-birth abortion as “an extremely humane and rapid” procedure that “provides dignity for all of his patients,” including “the fetuses themselves.”<sup>13</sup>

Like its lethal cousin abortion, euthanasia is inundated with identical rhetoric dressed up in idyllic images of killing as a humane, compassionate, and merciful deliverance from incurable, unbearable suffering. Bioethicist John Lachs recommends “merciful euthanasia” as “the only humane treatment” for such “human-looking shapes” as hydrocephalic children and unconscious patients on life-preserving machines.<sup>14</sup> Pathologist Peter Rosier justified the smothering death of his wife as “a very moral and kind and compassionate thing.”<sup>15</sup> One of the leading organizations responsible for promoting physician-assisted suicide is called “Compassion in Dying.”

In euthanasia circles, smothering—also commonly known as “the bag technique”—is among the methods covered under the reassuring classification “deliverance from suffering.” In an address to 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.<sup>16</sup>

The Holy Father offers an invaluable reflection on genuine compassion in contrast to the spurious mercy so prevalent in the rhetoric of today’s euthanasia proponents: “Euthanasia must be called a *false mercy* and indeed a disturbing ‘per-

<sup>11</sup>Zigmond M. Lebensohn, “Abortion, Psychiatry, and the Quality of Life,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 128.8 (February 1972): 950.

<sup>12</sup>“Letters,” *American Journal of Nursing* 72 (February 1972): 240.

<sup>13</sup>See Dr. Carlson’s letter to Representative Pat Schroeder opposing the legal banning of partial-birth abortion in House Committee on the Judiciary, “Report with Dissenting Views on the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 1995,” 104-267, 104th Cong., 1st sess., September 25, 1995, 31–33. <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/T?&report=hr267&dbname=cp104&>.

<sup>14</sup>John Lachs, “Humane Treatment and the Treatment of Humans,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 294.15 (April 8, 1976): 840.

<sup>15</sup>In actuality, it took three different methods to bring about her death—first, twenty Seconal pills; then, a double dose of morphine; and finally, smothering with a pillow. See “I Helped Her on Her Way,” *Newsweek*, November 7, 1988, 101.

<sup>16</sup>Diane M. Gianelli, “Inside a Hemlock ‘How to Do It’ Session,” *American Medical News*, December 9, 1996, 25.

version' of mercy. True 'compassion' leads to sharing another's pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear." A request for euthanasia, he emphasizes, is "above all a request for companionship, sympathy, and support in the time of trial. It is a plea for help to keep on hoping when all human hopes fail."<sup>17</sup>

### **Experimental Exploitation of Humans Reduced to Research Material**

John Paul underscores another dimension of medicalized killing: the relegation of human embryos and fetuses to the inconsequential status of "biological material" as fodder for research manipulation and mutilation. "Under the pretext of scientific or medical progress," he points out, "... human life [is thus reduced] to the level of simple 'biological material' to be freely disposed of."<sup>18</sup>

Only several years after *Roe v. Wade*, an American bioethical think tank, the Hastings Center, included in its series of case studies a discussion of "The Human Fetus as Useful Research Material."<sup>19</sup> In research carried out at the Oregon Health Services University, a method was designed for identifying the remains of induced abortions. The dismembered body parts were labeled "suctioned or curetted material," "cellular material," "abortion material" and "material removed from the uterus."<sup>20</sup> At a European conference on the use of human embryos for therapeutic, scientific, industrial, and commercial purposes, Swedish fetal researcher Arne Anderson was asked "about the Finnish use for scientific purposes of fetuses of twenty-one weeks gestation aborted by hysterotomy where they cut off their heads." He referred to the severed heads as "hysterotomy material" and defended the experiments, maintaining that "the research people" had nothing to do with "the choice of abortion technique," but just took advantage of "the opportunity to use this material."<sup>21</sup>

A variation on the definition of the unborn as research material is derived from the destruction of cloned human embryos and the harvesting of their stem cells for experimentation. In this process, the embryos are characterized as mere cells or cellular entities both before and after dismemberment. On November 26, 2001, the Massachusetts biotech firm Advanced Cell Technology (ACT) claimed to have

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<sup>17</sup>John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, nn. 66, 67, original emphasis.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, n. 14.

<sup>19</sup>Robert S. Morison and Sumner B. Twiss Jr., "The Human Fetus as Useful Research Material," *Hastings Center Report* 3.2 (April 1973): 8–10.

<sup>20</sup>Eric S. Jacobson and Martha Goetsch, "Cytologic Identification of Trophoblastic Epithelium in Products of First-Trimester Abortion," *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 66.1 (July 1985): 124–26.

<sup>21</sup>Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, "Joint Hearing of the Legal Affairs Committee, the Sub-Committee on Bio-Ethics of the Committee on Social and Health Questions, and the Committee on Science and Technology: Hearing on the Use of Human Embryos for Therapeutic, Scientific, Industrial and Commercial Purposes," *Human Reproduction* 1.7 (November 1986): 489. For a detailed account of this experiment, see Peter A.J. Adam et al., "Oxidation of Glucose and D-B-Oh-Butyrate by the Early Human Fetal Brain," *Acta Paediatrica Scandinavica* 64.1 (January 1975): 17–24.

successfully cloned human embryos. Acutely aware of the close connection between “embryo” and “human being” in the minds of many people, ACT verbal engineers had previously engaged in an extended debate over the search for a “less inflammatory” designation than the word “embryo.”<sup>22</sup> Among the concepts proposed were: “activated egg,” “ovasome,” “cellular thing,” and “constructs.”<sup>23</sup> Advanced Cell Technology CEO Michael West maintained, “We’re not talking about a human life,” but simply “cellular life ... reproductive cells, blank cells.”<sup>24</sup>

In response, the Vatican issued a statement asserting “beyond doubt” that “here we find ourselves facing human embryos and not cells, as some would have us believe.” Although the creation of new life can be most readily understood “in the ‘human’ method of insemination between egg and sperm,” the statement urges that “we must learn to recognize it also in the face of an ‘inhuman’ method, such as that of the reprogramming of a somatic nucleus in an egg cell,” and this new life possesses the same dignity “as that of every human life brought into existence.”<sup>25</sup>

The Holy See’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has long emphatically declared: “*It is immoral to produce human embryos destined to be exploited as disposable ‘biological material’*” since “human embryos obtained in vitro are human beings and subjects with rights [whose] dignity and right to life must be respected from the first moment of their existence.”<sup>26</sup>

More recently, another egregious outpouring of linguistic gymnastics—the reduction of cloned human embryos to cell material—accompanied the announcement of Stanford University’s plans establishing an institute to create human stem-cell lines for disease research. The *Wall Street Journal* described Dr. Irving Weissman, the Stanford cancer biology professor who will direct the institute, as having “campaign[ed] in scientific journal editorials and through the National Academy of Sciences for a separate label to distinguish such work from cloning.” “We don’t experiment on humans,” he declared. “We call it nuclear transplantation to produce embryonic stem-cell lines. We don’t call it cloning.” University of Pennsylvania medical ethics professor Glenn McGee characterized the products of nuclear transfer as “involving human reproductive material.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Rick Weiss, “Firm Aims to Clone Embryos for Stem Cells,” *Washington Post*, July 12, 2001, A12.

<sup>23</sup>Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Company Using Cloning to Yield Stem Cells,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2001, A13; Rick Weiss, “Changing Conceptions,” *Washington Post*, July 15, 2001, B2; *CNN Sunday*, Cable News Network, November 26, 2001, transcript #112506CN.V36.

<sup>24</sup>*Today*, National Broadcasting Company, November 26, 2001, transcript, 4.

<sup>25</sup>A copy of the complete text is available online at <http://zenit.org/english/visualiza.phtml?sid=13193> or at [http://www.americancatholic.org/news/cloning/vatican\\_cloning.asp](http://www.americancatholic.org/news/cloning/vatican_cloning.asp).

<sup>26</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origins and On the Dignity of Procreation: Replies to Certain Questions of the Day* (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1987), I, 5, original emphasis.

<sup>27</sup>Marilyn Chase and Antonio Regalado, “Full Disclosure: Stanford Unveils Stem-Cell Plans,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2002, B1, B2.

The Vatican news agency Zenit took these statements on cell techniques to task under the heading, “By Any Name, Human Cloning Is Planned at Stanford.” It quotes the words of Stanford professor and Nobel laureate Paul Berg who, when asked if nuclear transfer and cloning were the same, answered with the two-word reply: “It is.” Zenit also included comments by Father Joseph Howard of the American Bioethics Advisory Commission echoing Berg’s view. “Dr. Weissman’s claim that somatic cell transfer is not cloning is simply false,” Father Howard said. “Finding treatments and studying diseases is noble, but not on the backs of human embryos, who are living human beings that deserve to be protected by law.”<sup>28</sup>

In addition, John Paul has persistently insisted: “The use of human embryos or fetuses as an object of experimentation constitutes a crime against their dignity as human beings who have a right to the same respect owed to a child once born, just as to every person.”<sup>29</sup> He had previously furnished the basic rationale for opposition to this reprehensible form of exploitation:

A person cannot be reduced to the status of a means or a tool of others.... A person may never be disposed of in order to make life easier for others. *Every person must be treated as an end in himself or herself.* This is a fundamental principle for all human activity.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Legalization of Oppression: Relegation to Nonpersons**

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

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 conditions, must acknowledge as belonging to citizens.” He refers to this widespread practice as “the tragic caricature of legality” and “a corruption of the law.”<sup>31</sup>

A key semantic device contrived to rationalize 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.”<sup>32</sup> Philosopher Mary Anne Warren maintains that “even a fully

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<sup>28</sup>This coverage can be obtained online at <http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=29018>.

<sup>29</sup>John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, n. 63.

<sup>30</sup>Address to the Swedish university community, “Human Dignity Can Be Protected Only If the Person Is Considered Inviolable from Conception until Natural Death” (June 9, 1989), *L’Osservatore Romano* (English), June 19, 1989, n. 5, original emphasis.

<sup>31</sup>John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, n. 68; see also nn. 20, 72.

<sup>32</sup>*Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113, 162, 158 (1973).

developed fetus” is “considerably less person-like than is the average mature mammal” or “average fish” and therefore “cannot be said to have any more right to life than, let us say, a newborn guppy.”<sup>33</sup> In 1993, 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 decision, claiming, “The fetus is not a person and therefore cannot be assaulted.”<sup>34</sup>

A broad range of victims after birth are likewise being targeted for elimination 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 foreboding signs that philosophers, physicians, bioethicists, attorneys, and like-minded ideologues are working toward this very goal.

To philosopher Michael Tooley, “Newborn humans are neither persons nor even quasi-persons, and their destruction is in no way intrinsically wrong.”<sup>35</sup> Implacable animal rights defender Peter Singer contends that newborn infants do not qualify as legitimate persons because they “are neither rational nor self-conscious.” This pernicious concept provides him with a rationalization for the morality of infanticide, especially performed upon 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.”<sup>36</sup>

Imposition of the nonperson epithet is not confined to the early stages of the human life span. From July 21 to July 24, 1983, a group of prominent medical professors and bioethicists met at Dartmouth College to survey the status of the teaching of medical ethics. They produced a report in which some members of the group expressed support for inclusion in the medical ethics curriculum of the question “When does a dying patient cease to be a person?” This, they acknowledged, constituted a natural extension of the question “When does a fetus become a person?”<sup>37</sup>

Today’s abortion and euthanasia proponents persist in placing the best possible face on the reduction of devalued individuals to the level of nonpersons. What they invariably fail to mention is its striking affinity with the dark history of nonpersonhood: the nonperson designation undergirding 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.

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<sup>33</sup>Mary Anne Warren, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion,” *Monist* 57 (January 1973): 47, 58.

<sup>34</sup>Richard Perez-Pena, “Doctor in Abortion Case To Appeal Assault Count,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1993, A41.

<sup>35</sup>Michael Tooley, *Abortion and Infanticide* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), 411.

<sup>36</sup>Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 183, 191.

<sup>37</sup>Charles M. Culver et al., “Basic Curricular Goals in Medical Ethics,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 312.4 (January 24, 1985): 256.

According to papal biographer George Weigel, 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.”<sup>38</sup> During a visit to St. Louis, Missouri, the pope drew an arresting historical association between the plight of black slaves resulting from the U.S. Supreme Court *Dred Scott v. Sandford* 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 nonpersons deprived of protection under the law.<sup>39</sup>

An examination of the similarities between *Dred Scott* and *Roe v. Wade* reveals how much on target the Holy Father is 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”<sup>40</sup> parallels the *Dred Scott* declaration that black people “are not included ... under the word ‘citizens’ in the Constitution.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, just as *Roe* did not recognize unborn humans “in the law as persons in the whole sense,”<sup>42</sup> *Dred Scott* failed to regard black people “as part of the people or citizens of the State.”<sup>43</sup> Within a year after *Dred Scott*, the Virginia Supreme Court—resorting to an even more explicit precursor of the *Roe* terminology—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.”<sup>44</sup>

The pope makes an indispensable 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 contradistinction 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 entire lifespan: “*The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception*”; consequently, the Holy Father asserts, “Society as a whole must respect, defend, and promote the dignity of every hu-

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<sup>38</sup>George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: HarperCollins, Cliff Street Books, 1999), 8.

<sup>39</sup>Address upon arrival in St. Louis, “America, Resist the Culture of Death and Stand Firmly on the Side of Life” (January 26, 1999), *L’Osservatore Romano* (English), February 3, 1999, 6.

<sup>40</sup>*Roe v. Wade*, 158.

<sup>41</sup>*Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 19 Howard 404 (1857).

<sup>42</sup>*Roe v. Wade*, 162.

<sup>43</sup>*Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 19 Howard 411–12.

<sup>44</sup>*Bailey & als. v. Poindexter’s Ex’or*, 14 Grattan 432 (1858).

man person, at every moment and in every condition of that person's life."<sup>45</sup> John Paul, the pilgrim pope, has been tireless in articulating this message wherever he travels.

### **Ideological Foundations of Verbal Duplicity**

Now, as in the past, lying has been an essential ingredient 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. A major component of the pope's efforts in challenging the death culture consists of showing how the falsehoods covering up destructive practices are endowed with widespread credibility when presented within the context of ideologies constructed by influential persons and institutions. To illustrate the strong interdependence between killing, lying, and ideology, the pontiff cites the biblical account of the first murder, Cain's slaying of Abel (Gn 4:2–16): "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?'"

From this the Pope concludes, "Cain tries to cover up his crime with a lie" and emphasizes 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." John Paul also uses the story of the first murder to illustrate how closely lying is associated with ideologies that bolster such despicable 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."<sup>46</sup>

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."<sup>47</sup> 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." Moreover, a milieu that no longer finds it necessary to "acknowledge the enduring absoluteness of any moral value" breeds an antagonism toward human life with disastrous ramifications. "All around us," he points out, "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."<sup>48</sup>

His focus on the ominous nature of morally relativistic ideologies provides an important insight into understanding how it is possible for physicians and scientists to countenance doing away with unwanted human beings inside and outside the womb.

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<sup>45</sup>John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, nn. 60, 81, original emphasis.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, nn. 8, 7, 8.

<sup>47</sup>John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, n. 106.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, n. 84.

One of the most forthright and prophetic pronouncements on record—an editorial published in a 1970 issue of *California Medicine*—incorporates all of the rhetorical factors the pope identifies as essential for the justification of killing in the name of healing: an elitist, relativistic ideology bolstered by bold-faced lying and disseminated under the auspices of prestigious medical purveyors.<sup>49</sup>

The editorial—published under the auspices of the California Medical Association (CMA)—acknowledges that the extensive approval of abortion is greatly contingent 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 but suggests, nevertheless, “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.”<sup>50</sup>

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.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, under the ordinary standards of honest discourse it would be considered ludicrous to deny that abortion destroys a human life. In conformity with the tenets of semantic gymnastics, however, when such patent nonsense is circulated under that most socially impeccable auspice—organized medicine—it is transformed into an incontestable truth.

The irony and deception underpinning the CMA editorial is mind numbing. Here is a statement formulated under the aegis of a reputable medical organization encouraging its members to work for legitimizing abortion by totally disregarding the undisputed “scientific fact [not philosophical speculation], which everyone really knows, that human life begins at conception” and calling abortion something other than killing. Today, more than three decades later, no longer does everyone really know about the authentic humanity of prenatal life and what abortion does to this life, thanks to the awesome power of big lies in the hands of prestigious purveyors backed up by an elitist ideology. The insidious politicization of science and medicine on behalf of a relentless antilife agenda has resulted in a monumental transformation—the reduction of undisputed scientific facts to the suspect level of sectarian beliefs.

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<sup>49</sup>“A New Ethic for Medicine and Society,” *California Medicine* 113.3 (September 1970): 67–68.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

Although the CMA editorial highlights the embrace of abortion as a prime example of how the quality-of-life mentality is “eroding the old ethic,” its thrust is not confined to abortion. It admittedly possesses decided draconian implications for doing away with vulnerable individuals *after* birth as well: “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* (1932), 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.”<sup>52</sup>

The Holy Father indicates that, instead of leading to the betterment of mankind, “grave crimes” have been committed and are still being perpetrated in the name of the type of ethical relativism promoted in the CMA editorial. “When social life ventures on to the shifting sands of complete relativism,” he emphasizes, “... *everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining*: even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life.”<sup>53</sup>

His concern is wellfounded. Ever since the 1970 CMA editorial, 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 implacable promoters—situation ethics founder Joseph Fletcher—proclaimed that the sanctity of life ethic “must give way to a code of ethics of the *quality* of life.” Those targeted for elimination under his version of quality control include “subhuman life in utero” and “subhuman life in extremis.”<sup>54</sup> He considered life-sustaining medical treatment for Down’s syndrome infants a waste of valuable resources since it would needlessly perpetuate the existence of “a sadly non- or un- or subhuman creature.”<sup>55</sup> His defense of fetal research was 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.’”<sup>56</sup>

Another avid advocate of the quality-of-life ideology as a basis for defending abortion, euthanasia, infanticide, and physician-assisted suicide is the seemingly ubiquitous Australian philosopher Peter Singer. One of his major strategies—an unre-

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, n. 20, original emphasis.

<sup>54</sup>Joseph Fletcher, “Ethics and Euthanasia,” *American Journal of Nursing* 73.4 (April 1973): 671, 673.

<sup>55</sup>Joseph Fletcher, “The Right to Die: A Theologian Comments,” *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1968): 62.

<sup>56</sup>Joseph Fletcher, “Fetal Research: An Ethical Appraisal,” in National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, *Appendix: Research on the Fetus*, DHEW publication no. (OS) 76-128 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 3-8, 3-12.

mitting attempt to undermine the Judeo-Christian sanctity-of-life ethic—comprises a central component of *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethic*. The book abounds with a cascading assortment of disparaging references intended to malign this ethic: a “tragic farce”; “the constraints of religious conformity”; “paradoxical, incoherent, and dependent on pretence”; “sheer absurdity.”<sup>57</sup> 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 a sense of the future can have a right to life.”<sup>58</sup>

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.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the Holy Father’s repeated warnings about the disastrous effects wrought by a draconian quality-of-life mindset, this mentality has long since been put into practice as a basis for endowing hospital infanticide with ethical credibility. A quality-of-life formula— $QL = NE \times (H + S)$ —was devised by pediatric surgeon Anthony Shaw for this very purpose. 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.”<sup>60</sup>

A multidisciplinary health-care committee actually employed the formula to determine which children born with spina bifida at the Oklahoma Children’s Memorial Hospital would be denied medical treatment. Twenty-four infants who failed the pseudo-mathematical jumble of physiological, cognitive, and socioeconomic criteria for survival were dispatched to a children’s shelter where they “died between one to 189 days of age (mean thirty-seven days).”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethic* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 3, 189, 191–92.

<sup>58</sup>Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer, *Should the Baby Live? The Problem of Handicapped Infants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 120.

<sup>59</sup>John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, n. 19, original emphasis.

<sup>60</sup>See Anthony Shaw, “Defining the Quality of Life,” *Hastings Center Report* 7.5 (October 1977): 11.

<sup>61</sup>Richard H. Gross et al., “Early Management and Decision Making for the Treatment of Myelomeningocele,” *Pediatrics* 72.4 (October 1983): 450, 452–53.

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."<sup>62</sup>

### **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 energizing the death culture. At the close of their conference in March 2001, the pope told members of the Pontifical Academy for Life that "to expose and denounce the lethal effects of the culture of death" is necessary but is not alone sufficient to ensure the triumph of the culture of life.<sup>63</sup> 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 persuasively taught by the Holy Father.

No one has imparted a more inclusive and noble vision of humanity than John Paul. "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."<sup>64</sup>

*Evangelium vitae* contains an abundance of uplifting and eloquent expressions regularly voiced by the pope in his unequivocal 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."<sup>65</sup>

John Paul's persevering focus on the intrinsic humanity of prenatal life is not limited to biblical testimony; it is also backed up by extensive scientific evidence and spectacular developments in fetal surgery which project graphic, personalized images of the fetus as a legitimate patient deserving the best possible treatment and

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<sup>62</sup>Stephen N. Wall and John Colin Partridge, "Death in the Intensive Care Nursery: Physician Practice of Withdrawing and Withholding Life Support," *Pediatrics* 99.1 (January 1997): 66.

<sup>63</sup>"We Are Certain that Life Will Triumph" (March 3, 2001), *L'Osservatore Romano* (English), March 14, 2001, n. 2.

<sup>64</sup>Address to 150 national directors of the pro-life movement, "Every Life Is a Valuable Resource" (November 15, 1991), *L'Osservatore Romano* (English), November 18, 1991, n. 2, original emphasis.

<sup>65</sup>John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, nn. 44, 60, 84, 95.

care. During an address to a gynecological-obstetrical conference, he applauded the “fetal therapies now emerging,” not only because they “offer new hope for saving the lives of those suffering from pathologies,” but also because they reveal “the fetus in its full human dignity.”<sup>66</sup> The humanity of the unborn is vividly documented in a stunning photograph taken of Sarah Marie Switzer’s hand reaching out of the womb at twenty-four weeks gestation and grasping the surgeon’s finger during corrective surgery for spina bifida. After the surgery, she was sewn back into her mother and was subsequently born two months later.<sup>67</sup>

Some of the Holy Father’s most memorable and spirit-filled reflections have highlighted the unique worth of the disabled and the elderly. On a visit to an institution for the handicapped, he spoke about transforming the difficulty of living with a disability into a transcendent, divine-sustaining experience:

The Lord does not ask us to close our eyes to infirmity. It is very real, and we must have a clear awareness of it. He asks us to look more deeply, to believe that in these suffering bodies, there throbs not only human life with all its dignity and rights, but also, by virtue of baptism, divine life itself, the marvelous life of the children of God. If to the external eyes of men you appear weak and infirm, before God you are great and brilliant in your being.<sup>68</sup>

During an address to the elderly residents in a home operated by the Little Sisters of the Poor in Perth, Australia, he offered insightful observations on the increasing spiritual growth intrinsic to the aging process and its powerful impact on the self and others:

I express the hope that as your physical energies diminish with age—as must be in our earthly pilgrimage—your inner spiritual resources will increase and be renewed day by day.... If you think back, you will see that your whole life is a story of God’s love coming upon you in successive stages.... You invite other age groups to realize that feverish activity is not the measure of a useful life. Your ability to cherish life for its own sake, in spite of a lessening energy and mobility, challenges others to reflect not only on the value of *doing* but on the value of *being*. Your lives are directed towards the Kingdom of Heaven, and this challenges those whose interests are all bound up with the passing world. As you gradually detach yourselves from certain possessions, you help others to reflect on their own relationship to material things. In this way your lives can be an eloquent witness to the essential values taught by Christ.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Address to an international congress on the “Fetus as a Patient” of the Gynaecological and Obstetrical Clinic of Rome “La Sapienza” University, “Fetal Life Must Be Protected and Nurtured” (April 3, 2000), *L’Osservatore Romano* (English), April 5, 2000, n. 3, 1.

<sup>67</sup>For details on Sarah Marie’s surgery and accompanying photographs, see Skip Hollandsworth, “Born Twice,” *Life* (December 1999): 115–121.

<sup>68</sup>Visit to the Don Guanella Institution for the Handicapped, “You Are Precious and Irreplaceable Members of Society and the Church” (March 28, 1982), *L’Osservatore Romano* (English), April 5–12, 1982, n. 2.

<sup>69</sup>To the elderly in the home of the Sisters of the Poor, “Old Age Is also a Time of Responsibility for the Future” (November 3, 1986), *L’Osservatore Romano* (English), December 9, 1986, nn. 1, 2, 7, original emphasis.

John Paul has conveyed comparable life-affirming portrayals of other groups and has pointed out similar characterizations embedded in the formal declarations of organizations and nations. Some of the most telling accounts include his utmost regard for youth and their unbounded responses to him<sup>70</sup>; his moving statements on the incomparable genius and dignity of women<sup>71</sup>; his repeated reminders to America to abide by the categorical pro-life standards embodied in such founding documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights<sup>72</sup>; and his persistent message to the international community about the sacredness and intrinsic worth of every human being, particularly the most vulnerable individuals.<sup>73</sup>

The Holy Father has created an indispensable linguistic framework—calling things by their proper name—for contesting the lexicon powering the culture of death and supplanting it with a vocabulary of humanization and divinization. The challenge remains for us to become conversant with and to apply his rich and profound discourse of truth telling in the monumental task of evangelizing culture during the third millennium.

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<sup>70</sup>Catholic News Service, ed., *John Paul II Speaks to Youth at World Youth Day* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

<sup>71</sup>United States Catholic Conference, eds., *Pope John Paul II On the Genius of Women* (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1995).

<sup>72</sup>In an appeal to the American people, the pope emphasized: “At the center of the moral vision of your founding documents is the recognition of the rights of the human person, and especially respect for the dignity and sanctity of human life in all conditions and at all stages of development. I say to you again, America, in the light of your tradition: love life, cherish life, defend life, from conception to natural death.” Address at departure ceremonies at Baltimore-Washington Airport, “Your Founding Documents Embody Unchanging Principles of Natural Law” (October 8, 1995), *L’Osservatore Romano* (English), October 11, 1995, n. 3.

<sup>73</sup>In a talk before the United Nations, John Paul identified the basic premise that “although each person lives in a particular concrete social and historical context—every human being is endowed with a dignity that must never be lessened, impaired, or destroyed but must instead be respected and safeguarded.” He further emphasized that “concern for the child, even before birth, from the first moment of conception and then throughout the years of infancy and youth, is the primary and fundamental test of the relationship of one human being to another.” Address to the thirty-fourth General Assembly of United Nations, “Dignity of the Human Person Founded on Justice and Peace” (October 2, 1979), *L’Osservatore Romano* (English), October 15, 1979, nn. 12, 21.