

John Paul the Great and the Gospel of Life

by Lisa Everett

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

*The Gospel of God's love for man,
the Gospel of the dignity of the person
and the Gospel of life
are a single and indivisible Gospel.*

Bl. John Paul II

As we look forward to the canonization of Bl. John Paul II this coming Spring, it seems fitting to consider what a debt we owe as a Church to this man whom the Holy Spirit placed on the chair of Peter as a champion of human love and human life at a critical time in history.

“As a young priest, I learned to love human love,” Pope John Paul once reflected. He counted many married couples among his friends, and when he was appointed chaplain for the university students in his diocese, he took small groups of young people camping among the lakes and ski slopes of the Tatra mountains. There was singing and laughter but also serious conversation on what interested the students most—relationships, marriage and sex. Father Wojtyla listened sincerely and spoke frankly, showing the young people what their dignity and their Christian faith demanded. As a professor of ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin in the 1960s, he delivered an eyebrow-raising series of lectures on love, marriage and sex that later became the book, *Love and Responsibility*. Many years later, the Pope who began World Youth Day would articulate his conviction that helping young people to understand the link between love and life and sex is the irreplaceable foundation for the culture of life:

“It is an illusion to think that we can build a true culture of human life if we do not help the young to accept and experience sexuality and love and the whole of life according to their true meaning and their close interconnection. Sexuality, which enriches the whole person, manifests its inmost meaning in leading the person to the gift of self in love. The trivialization of sexuality is among the principal factors which have led to contempt for new life.”

As Bishop of Cracow, Karol Wojtyla was appointed as a member of the “birth control commission” established by Pope John XXIII and expanded by Pope

Paul VI. Since he was not allowed to leave communist Poland to attend the meetings in Rome, Bishop Wojtyla participated via written reflections, a stroke of Providence which gave him enormous influence on the writing of *Humanae vitae*, the landmark encyclical which reaffirmed the constant teaching of the Church on the responsible transmission of human life.

When he became pope in 1978, Karol Wojtyla lost no time in the making the pastoral care of marriage and the family one of his main priorities. In the first three years of his pontificate, in fact, he launched five major initiatives regarding the family. First, in September of 1979 he started his series of Wednesday audience catecheses that came to be known as the “theology of the body,” a primary purpose of which was to give a deeper and more beautiful basis to the Church’s understanding of and evangelization about sexuality, including the moral norm prohibiting contraception. Second, in 1980, he convened an international synod of bishops on the family. Third, in 1981, he inaugurated the Pontifical Council for the Family and, fourth, he authored the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, on the role of the Christian family in the modern world. In this document, he laid out a breathtaking vision for the family as a community of persons at the service of love and life. When presenting difficult issues like contraception, he referred to the Church as both teacher and mother:

“In the field of conjugal morality the Church is Teacher and Mother and acts as such. As Teacher, she never tires of proclaiming the moral norm that must guide the responsible transmission of life. The Church is in no way the author or the arbiter of this norm.... As Mother, the Church is close to the many married couples who find themselves in difficulty over this important point of the moral life ... she knows that many couples encounter difficulties not only in the concrete fulfillment of the moral norm but even in understanding its inherent values. But it is one and the same Church that is both Teacher and Mother. And so the Church never ceases to exhort and encourage all to resolve whatever conjugal difficulties may arise without ever falsifying or compromising the truth: she is convinced that there can be no true contradiction between the divine law on transmitting life and that on fostering authentic married love.” Later on he would reflect that the motherly love of the Church consists in being close to people and all that happens to them, bringing their human needs within the radius of Christ’s saving power, as did Our Lady at the wedding at Cana. There, Mary, the model of the Church, acted as both mother and teacher, noticing the need of the newlyweds and interceding with her Son, but also giving a clear directive to the servants, “Do whatever He tells you.”

It was to Our Lady, in fact, that John Paul the Great entrusted the cause of life, and it was on one of her feast days that he planned to announce his fifth major initiative for the family. He was on his way to the Wednesday audience on May 13, 1981, to announce the establishment in Rome of a Pontifical Institute for Studies

on Marriage and the Family when the would-be assassin struck. Months later, the Holy Father entrusted the Institute to Our Lady of Fatima, who he credited with saving his life that day. Many years later, in 1994, when the Holy See was battling to keep contraception and abortion from being defined as universal human rights by the United Nations, Pope John Paul connected the attack on his life with the attack on the family:

“I understand that I have to lead Christ's church into the Third Millennium through prayer, by various programs. But I saw that this is not enough, she must be led by suffering, by the attack 13 years ago. The Pope has to be attacked. Why now? Why in the Year of the Family? Precisely because the family is threatened, the family is under attack. The Pope has to suffer, be attacked, so that every family may see that there is a higher Gospel, the Gospel of suffering by which the future is prepared....”

Bl. John Paul II often repeated his conviction that the future of humanity passes by way of the family. In his *Letter to Families* to mark the United Nations Year of the Family in 1994, he wrote that “the family is placed at the centre of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love.” He took up this theme again the following year in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, the Gospel of Life, calling upon the family to become “the ‘sanctuary of life,’ the place in which life—the gift of God—can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth. Consequently the role of the family in building a culture of life is decisive and irreplaceable.”

During Respect Life month, as the Year of Faith draws to a close, let us take to heart the appeal addressed to each of us by soon-to-be-saint John Paul the Great:

“I look with renewed confidence to every household and I pray that at every level a general commitment to support the family will reappear and be strengthened, so that today too—even amid so many difficulties and serious threats—the family will always remain, in accordance with God's plan, the ‘sanctuary of life’.”