



The Wonder of Life

A Pastoral Letter
from the Irish Bishops'
Conference to mark
the Day for Life 2003
and the 25th Anniversary
of the Pontificate of His
Holiness John Paul II

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The Wonder of Life

DEEP AMAZEMENT AT HUMAN WORTH AND DIGNITY

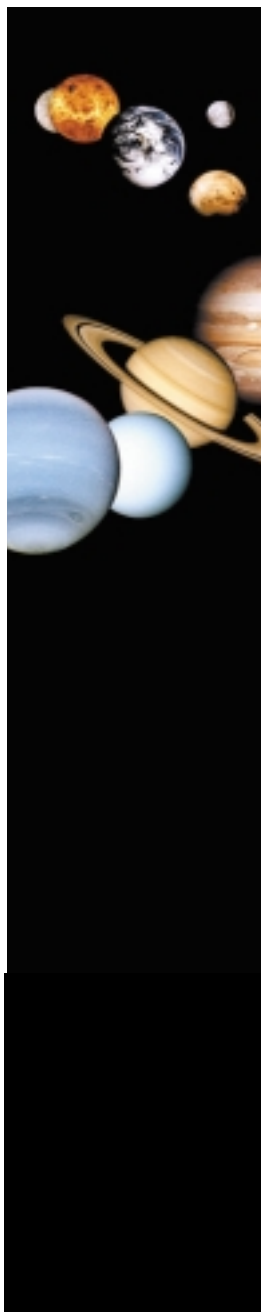
In December, the European Space Agency intends to land a package of instruments on the surface of Mars. It is hoped, among other things, to learn whether Mars has, or could once have had, the conditions to sustain life. If evidence for life on Mars were to be found, there would be huge excitement.

The fascination with the quest to discover whether primitive life forms might have existed on a neighbouring planet serves to highlight what an extraordinary place our earth is – filled with thousands upon thousands of species of plants and animals. In the Book of Genesis the Creator rejoices in the abundance of life on earth. After each day of creation, ‘God saw that it was good’.

The high point of the Genesis account is the creation of human beings in the image and likeness of God. It was then that ‘God saw everything that he had made and indeed it was *very good*’ (Gen 1:31).

Men and women are unique in this world; we alone can appreciate the wonder of creation, can love, can choose, can seek to grasp the meaning of life, and can come to know the God who made us. We do not know if any other beings like us exist in the whole vast universe.

More wonderful again is the fact that the Creator speaks to human beings as friends and invites us into a personal relationship.¹ If we take that truth for granted, we have not understood how extraordinary it is. God, who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16), cares about each of us, loves each of us and invites each of us to share the glorious life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus prayed at the Last Supper that we might all be one as he and the Father are one (Jn 17:21). When we live in Christ, we are new creatures (2 Cor 5:17); the Spirit is poured into our hearts crying Abba, Father (Gal 4:6). Each individual receives the invitation to live in a personal relationship with God; each person matters to God for his or her own sake.





Just twenty-five years ago, on the 22nd of October 1978, Pope John Paul formally inaugurated his Pastoral Ministry as Pope at a Mass in St Peter's Square. On that occasion he spoke of the love of God for each person, and of how that love reached its fulfilment in Christ. Jesus brought the living God close to us in a way that could never have been anticipated. 'The absolute and yet sweet and gentle power of the Lord responds to the whole depths of the human person'. That gentle power, which answers the deepest longings of our humanity, speaks the language of love and truth, not of force.²

As we celebrate his Silver Jubilee as Pope, it is good to reflect on some of the ways in which he has reaffirmed and expanded that vision over the last twenty-five years. In his first encyclical³ he expressed once again this central idea of his pontificate – the wonder of human life, especially when our life is seen in the light of the Gospel. The fruit of contemplating the Incarnation and Redemption, he says, is adoration of God and wonder at ourselves. The marvel of human dignity in the light of Christ is the very heart of the Gospel:

In reality, the name for that deep amazement at human worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity.⁴

To appreciate the wonder of that message requires reflection and prayer. In order to celebrate and live the Good News of Life, we need a reflective, prayerful outlook which 'arises from faith in the God of life, who has created every individual as a "wonder"':

It is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility. It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image.⁵

In this noisy and busy world it is not easy to find space for contemplating the deepest truth, but only by doing so will we be able 'with deep religious awe to rediscover the ability to revere and

honour every person'.⁶ Only if we take the time to reflect will we begin to understand the fundamental truth about ourselves, which is too deep to be appreciated 'at first glance'. Only then can we look at each human being with reverence and with deep gratitude to God for the gift of life and the promise that this life can flourish eternally in the many mansions of our Father's house.

The teaching of the Church about human life is not, in the first place, about rules and prohibitions; it is about the greatness of human worth and dignity. It is about saying 'yes' to life and its wonder. From that affirmation of life various negative statements follow, for instance that murder and torture and slavery are wrong. 'In Christian morality, the prohibition, "Thou shalt not", is always a consequence of the positive command, "Thou shalt love"'.⁷ When Pope John Paul wrote an encyclical on the sacredness of human life, he called it *Evangelium Vitae* (The Good News [the Gospel] of Life). Everything that he says about the sacredness of human life is Good News.

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.⁸

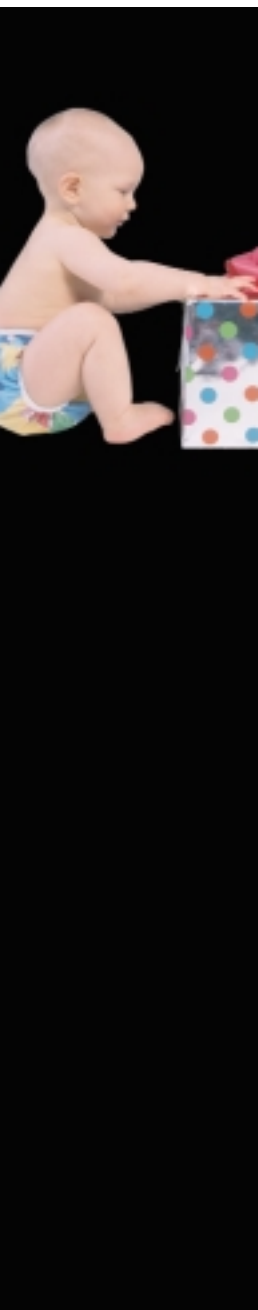
THE DIGNITY OF LIFE

A highlight in Pope John Paul's twenty-five years has been the celebration of World Youth Days. Those who have been privileged to attend them have been struck by how much in tune he is with the young people and how he calls them to recognise their dignity:

You are young and the Pope is old... But the Pope still fully identifies with your hopes and aspirations... You are our hope... Do not let that hope die! Stake your lives on it! We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son.⁹

He does not hesitate to put to them the challenge of respecting human life:





Today you have come together to declare that in the new century you will not let yourselves be made into tools of violence and destruction; you will defend peace, paying the price in your person if need be. You will not resign yourselves to a world where other human beings die of hunger, remain illiterate and have no work. You will defend life at every moment of its development; you will strive with all your strength to make the earth ever more liveable for all people.¹⁰

Scientific advances have increased our knowledge of the wonder of human life. The analysis of the human genome shows that many of a person's physical characteristics, and the factors that may lead to some of his or her – the child's sex is already decided – personality traits, are already there in the first cell of the new human life. The development of these characteristics will depend not on the addition of anything from outside, but on the life which is already present and beginning to grow.

Before this tiny human being is conscious of anything, he or she is already in relationships – a son or daughter, a grandchild, possibly a brother or sister or cousin. The tiny child is also in a relationship with God. We can read with a new understanding the words of the Lord to the prophet Jeremiah: 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you' (Jer 1:5).

The Church teaches that God directly creates every human soul.¹¹ In the first moment of the existence of every human life, God speaks to this new human being as a friend and invites him or her into a personal relationship. This invitation and the act of creation go together. The Bible speaks of God breathing on the dust of the earth to form Adam (Gen 2:7). Breath is the symbol of life, God's own life. This is why we human beings are restless until we rest in God: we are made by God; we bear within us the indelible imprint of God; we are drawn to God.¹²

LIFE: A GIFT TO BE LIVED

The story of every human life, at every moment and in every situation, is a story of how we are touched, attracted and transformed, often in unexpected ways, often in ways of which we

are not aware, by that divine choice and by the promise it opens up to us. As we grow through life, it is also the story of how we respond to God's invitation, sometimes accepting it, sometimes rejecting it, often failing to understand it.

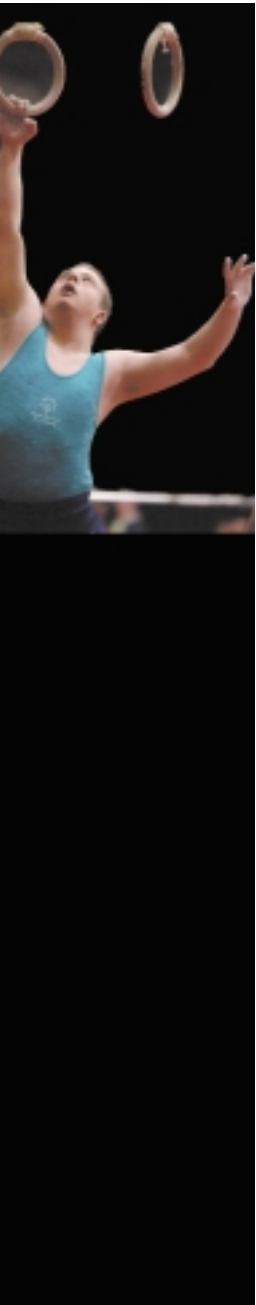
Pope John Paul, therefore, sees the Church as being inescapably committed to people – not simply to an abstract humanity but to each human being. In *Redemptor Hominis*, he points out that every person writes his or her own history through 'numerous bonds, contacts, situations and social structures' and does so in many different contexts: personal, community social, family, society, nation, the whole human race. The Church's fundamental mission is to accompany, guide, lead and encourage each of these persons in order to draw them into closer union with Christ as they travel their unique road towards the new creation. *'The Church wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk the path of life with each person ...'*¹³

Appreciating the wonder of the gift of life and of God's love means living life to the full. The Holy Father has constantly stressed that responsibility in whatever situation a person is. In the first year of his pontificate, he visited Ireland and told us clearly that there is no such thing as an 'ordinary' layperson: 'As God's holy people, you are called to fulfil your role in the evangelisation of the world'.¹⁴ He has canonised more saints than any of his predecessors, wishing to show the great variety of contexts in which people have lived the life which receives its fullest dignity and meaning from the Incarnation and Redemption. During the Great Jubilee, he addressed people from many walks of life, ranging from journalists to bishops, to university teachers, to prisoners, to young people, to the elderly, to politicians, to artists, to members of the armed forces.

In the Jubilee gathering for people with disabilities, he addressed them with a reminder of the promise of fulfilment that Christ offers to all:

In your bodies and in your lives, dear brothers and sisters, you express an intense hope of redemption. In all this is there not an implicit expectation of the 'redemption' that Christ won for us by





his death and resurrection? Indeed, every person marked by a physical or mental disability lives a sort of existential 'advent', waiting for a 'redemption' that will be fully manifest, for him as for everyone, only at the end of time. Without faith, this waiting can be tinged with disappointment and discouragement; supported by Christ's word, it becomes a living and active hope.¹⁵

That thought is particularly apt in this European Year of People with Disabilities. The Special Olympics gave an inspiring insight into the creativity and achievements of people with intellectual disabilities. It is important that we realise that the lessons we were taught by the spirit of those athletes are also relevant to those with all kinds of disability, physical, sensory, learning and mental health.

During the last twenty-five years, the Pope has frequently reflected on suffering¹⁶ – and has experienced it himself. He encourages the sick and their carers to 'overcome the barriers and limits of time and space, and try to see every human situation, especially suffering, in the light of eternity, towards which we are all called to travel'.¹⁷

All of this expresses a conviction that human life, whether in ourselves or in others, is always a wonder, calling for profound reverence. It is filled with a promise that exceeds anything that any human eye has seen or ear heard (I Cor 2:9). The Gospel of Life can have an echo even in the hearts of those who do not believe, 'because it marvellously fulfils all the heart's expectations while infinitely surpassing them'.¹⁸

PROTECTING LIFE

Precisely because life is so amazing a gift, it is an appalling evil when it is deliberately destroyed or irresponsibly endangered. The Second Vatican Council spoke of our inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbour of every individual and pointed to the most serious crimes by which the lives of others are disregarded or destroyed:

The varieties of crime are numerous: all offences against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and wilful suicide; all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures; all offences against human dignity, such as subhuman

living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working conditions where people are treated as mere tools for profit rather than free and responsible persons; all these and the like are criminal: they poison civilisation; and they debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honour of the creator.¹⁹

Since those words were written we have unfortunately become familiar with other crimes against humanity: ethnic cleansing, mass terrorism, and abusing the limited resources of the earth 'as if they were inexhaustible',²⁰ thus threatening the quality of life for future generations.

The Gospel of Life is at work when people seek to prevent or counteract these evils, for instance bringing health care, or emergency relief, or development aid, or peace-keeping forces, or efforts to build a more just and peaceful society to situations where life is made precarious by violence or underdevelopment or injustice or disasters. 'These deeds strengthen the bases of the "civilisation of love and life" without which the life of individuals and of society loses its most genuinely human quality'.²¹

In our own country, the years of violence in the North, the rise of violent crime especially in our cities, the dreadful death toll on our roads, the tragedy of young suicides, the arrival of many immigrants, often bearing scars of sad experiences of war and persecution, the destruction of lives through the abuse of drugs, the dreadful suffering caused to young and vulnerable people by sexual and other forms of abuse, all demand that we find ways of giving practical expression to our reverence for life and our commitment to respect and protect it.

These examples of lack of respect for the dignity of every human life are acknowledged by reasonable people as tragic realities to be prevented and overcome.

The Holy Father points, however, to an emerging reality in many countries which is 'both a disturbing symptom and a significant cause of grave moral decline':





Choices once unanimously considered criminal and rejected by the common moral sense are gradually becoming socially acceptable.²²

The practice of abortion has been widely accepted in many parts of the world. In experimentation on embryos we see tiny human lives being used and discarded. These helpless human beings cannot benefit from such procedures; they are simply being used as instruments, as objects.

We see proposals to bring human beings into existence by cloning, as was done with Dolly the sheep. Bringing a human being into existence without mother or father, for the purpose of being identical to someone else, would be gravely immoral even if it did not, as it certainly does, risk severe damage to a child who would be produced in this way.

It suggested by some that this would be acceptable if the cloned child were never intended to survive and would simply be the object of research or the source of organs and thus serve a 'therapeutic' purpose. Thus we see the growing acceptance of what is absurdly called 'therapeutic cloning' as opposed to 'reproductive cloning' – as if all cloning is not, by definition, reproductive! If human cloning were 'successful', it would produce a life, capable, if it had been brought about in the way that God intended, of growing and of being born.

Although the process of cloning is gravely immoral, it would produce a human being, addressed by God's invitation. 'Therapeutic cloning' simply means that these human beings would be created with a view to abandoning them when they no longer serve any useful purpose for us. If the European Union approves of or tolerates such an abomination it will be doing violence to the very foundations of respect for human dignity on which the best of European culture is founded.

When the Pope came to Ireland, he pointed out that, 'To attack unborn life at any moment from its conception is to undermine the whole moral order...' He went on to make an appeal to us:

The defence of the absolute inviolability of unborn life is part of the defence of human rights and human dignity. May Ireland never weaken in her witness before Europe and before the whole world, to the dignity and sacredness of all human life, from conception until death.²³

Ensuring that human life, from its beginning to its natural end, is respected in Ireland and in the world, is an inescapable task for those who understand the wonder of the gift of life. That task has many dimensions.

- It involves a serious effort to make sure, as far as we can possibly do so, that every human being, whether at home or abroad, is given the respect, support and care he or she needs – in housing, education, health care and the development of their community.
- It involves trying to ensure so far as we can that people's lives are not placed unjustifiably at risk by themselves or by others. This has implications in areas such as road safety, drug education and rehabilitation programmes, provision for safety at work, care for the general environment, food safety and so on.
- It involves efforts to bring peace to regions of conflict, to address the exploitation and ill-treatment of those who are weak, to provide aid and the means of development to regions of famine and poverty, to expose and correct violations of human rights around the world.
- It involves ensuring the best possible legal protection for unborn children; it concerns personal, community and social support for women who are unhappily pregnant or who feel that the birth of (another) child may bring burdens that they will be unable to carry. Although the medical profession has maintained high standards of respect for unborn life, the legal situation in Ireland is far worse than when the Pope spoke here in 1979, particularly as a result of the 'X Case'. We find ourselves increasingly implicated in European





policies, for instance with regard to cloning and the provision of abortion in the developing world. The Holy Father's appeal is more urgent than ever.

- It involves respecting life until its natural end. Last year our Committee for Bioethics published a booklet, *End of Life Care, Ethical and Pastoral Issues*, which speaks of some of the important issues that arise in this area. At the same time, the Episcopal Conference published a leaflet, *Living with Dying*, which among other things addresses the question of euthanasia. This too is an instance where previously unthinkable actions are beginning to be legalised in European countries.

THE GOSPEL OF LIFE: A TRUTH FULL OF HOPE

The Gospel of Life is a Gospel of hope. It does not promise freedom from suffering and effort. Rather it offers a promise that is more powerful than any suffering or hardship, a promise worth the effort of all our heart and soul and might, a promise whose fulfilment is reached only through death with Christ in order to rise with him to the fullness of life.

What we need above all is hope. One of the defining images of the new century is the collapsing twin towers – an image of the vulnerability of what seemed impregnable, of the fragility of even the most successful and vibrant human lives, of the destructive power of hatred and disrespect for life. It is an image of what the Holy Father has called the 'culture of death'.²⁴

In his letter to the Church in Europe, Pope John Paul pointed to an underlying sense of dread in our world, a suspicion that the future may be bleak and uncertain, an atmosphere of emptiness and a loss of the meaning of life, a feeling of loneliness. These are the marks of a continent that seems to be losing its Christian memory.²⁵

This loss of hope, this fear of the future, is the result of an attempt to see human life apart from God and apart from Christ.²⁶ It is, in other words, the result of a failure to see human life in the light of the vision that the Pope has been presenting for twenty-five years, since the day

when he inaugurated his pastoral ministry as Pope and called on the world not to be afraid:

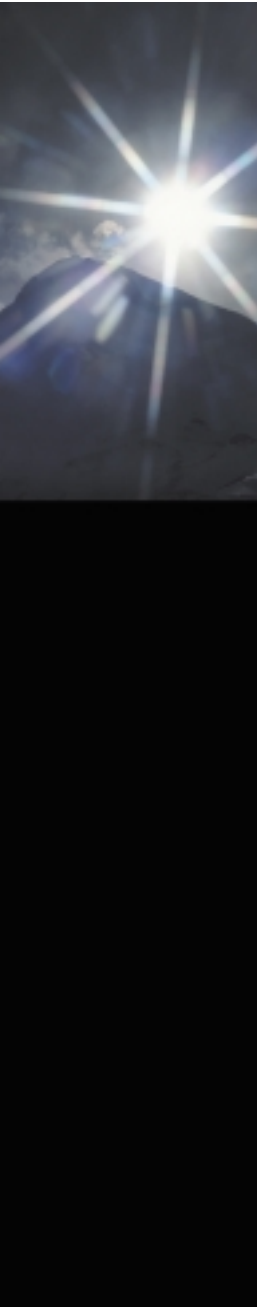
Brothers and sisters, do not be afraid to welcome Christ and accept his power. Help the Pope and all those who wish to serve Christ and with Christ's power to serve the human person and the whole of mankind. Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors to Christ.²⁷

Now, a quarter of a century later, he issues the same call to the Church in Europe. When human life is seen in the light of God's love for us and God's invitation to us, life is full of wonder and the future for the human family is full of hope. That is the truth which sets us free from fear and which opens the doors to Christ.

If hope is to be real, it must grow out of love, given and received.²⁸ God's love, which is the foundation of hope, is also a command: 'Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another' (Jn 13:43). Practical love for those who are poor acknowledges that persons have value in themselves, which does not depend on success, wealth or social status. Care for the sick and those who are weak or frail shows that people have value in themselves which does not depend on their health or their ability to make an economic contribution to society. Acceptance of people who differ culturally, ethnically, politically or religiously can express our recognition that we are part of the family of God in which people 'of every race, language and way of life' will be gathered 'to share in the one eternal banquet'.²⁹ Respect for the goods of the earth is demanded by our responsibility for one another and for ensuring the quality of life both of individuals today and of future generations.³⁰

From the beginning, Pope John Paul has proclaimed the truth about human life. It is a truth which is full of wonder and hope. Our highest hopes and aspirations for ourselves, for those we love, for the whole human family, are too limited. God's promise to each human being, however tiny and helpless, however old and frail, however poor, however oppressed, however different from us, is the Good News of Life: 'It marvellously fulfils all the hearts expectations while infinitely surpassing them'.³¹ That is the truth which the Holy Father calls us to respect and to welcome with wonder.





MARY: MODEL OF WELCOME AND CARE FOR LIFE

Mary is the Mother of this Life which came to us in the Son whose incarnation waited on her agreement, 'Let it be done to me according to your word' (Lk 1:38). Mary is 'the incomparable model of how life should be welcomed and cared for'.³² In her Assumption we see her sharing in the triumph of her Son's risen life, 'the communion with the Father, to which every person is freely called in the Son by the power of the Sanctifying Spirit. It is precisely in this "life" that all the aspects and stages of human life achieve their full significance.'³³

PRAYER OF POPE JOHN PAUL TO MARY

O Mary,
bright dawn of the new world,
Mother of the living,
to you do we entrust the *cause of life*:
Look down, O Mother,
upon the vast numbers
of babies not allowed to be born,
of the poor whose lives are made difficult,
of men and women
who are victims of brutal violence,
of the elderly and the sick killed
by indifference or out of misguided mercy.
Grant that all who believe in your Son
may *proclaim the Gospel of life*
with honesty and love
to the people of our time.
Obtain for them the grace
to *accept that Gospel*
as a gift ever new,
the joy of *celebrating* it with gratitude
throughout their lives
and the courage to *bear witness to it* resolutely,
in order to build,
together with all people of good will,
the civilization of truth and love,
to the praise and glory of God,
the Creator and lover of life.³⁴

NOTES

1. Cf. VATICAN II, *Dei Verbum*, On Divine Revelation, 2.
2. JOHN PAUL II, *Homily at the Beginning of his Pastoral Ministry*, 22 October 1978.
3. *Redemptor Hominis* (1979).
4. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.
5. *Evangelium Vitae*, 83.
6. *Evangelium Vitae*, 83.
7. Irish Episcopal Conference, *Human Life is Sacred* (1975), 80.
8. JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1.
9. JOHN PAUL II, *Homily in Downsview Park Toronto*, 28 July 2003.
10. JOHN PAUL II, *Address at the Vigil of Prayer*, Tor Vergata Rome, 19 August 2000.
11. Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 36.
12. Cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 35.
13. *Redemptor Hominis*, 13.
14. JOHN PAUL II, *Homily in Limerick*, 1 October 1979.
15. JOHN PAUL II, 3 December 2000
16. e.g. *Salvifici Doloris* (1984), *Dolentium Hominum* (1985).
17. JOHN PAUL II, *Address to Personnel of Orthopaedic Injury Centre Rome*, 23 March 1985.
18. *Evangelium Vitae*, 2.
19. VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 27.
20. JOHN PAUL II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 34.
21. *Evangelium Vitae*, 27.
22. *Evangelium Vitae*, 4.
23. JOHN PAUL II, *Homily in Limerick*, 1 October 1979.
24. *Evangelium Vitae*, 12.
25. *Ecclesia in Europa*, 8.
26. *Ecclesia in Europa*, 9.
27. Homily at the Beginning of his Pastoral Ministry, 22 October 1978.
28. *Ecclesia in Europa*, 84.
29. Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II.
30. *Ecclesia in Europa*, 89.
31. *Evangelium Vitae*, 2.
32. *Evangelium Vitae*, 102.
33. *Evangelium Vitae*, 1.
34. *Evangelium Vitae*, 105.

