

# The Permanent Challenge of *Evangelium Vitae* to All Sides of the Unending Abortion Debate

*J.R. Kelly\**

ABSTRACT: On its twenty-fifth anniversary John Paul II's *The Gospel of Life* remains a highly significant reading in the unending cultural and policy wars about abortion. It does not correspond to what is most often taken to be the positions of adversaries or bystanders but challenges all of them. With an uncanny sophistication the pope links realism and the aspirational in permanently relevant ways. To show this I will examine its positions, which remain hugely relevant not only for his time and for ours but, in all likelihood, forever.

ON ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY John Paul II's *Gospel of Life* remains a highly significant reading in the unending cultural and policy wars about abortion. It does not correspond to what is most often taken to be the positions of adversaries or bystanders, but challenges all of them. With an uncanny sophistication the Pope links realism and the aspirational in permanently relevant ways. To show this I will examine its positions, which remain hugely relevant not only for his time and for our time but, in all

---

\* *James R. Kelly* received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1969 and taught at Fordham University from 1971 until 2010, when he became emeritus. His chief areas of research have been the sociology of religion and civic conflict. In addition to publications for professional journals such as *Review of Religious Research*, *Sociology of Religion*, he has contributed extensively to *America*, *Commonweal* and *Christianity Today*. He has published research for the U.S. Catholic Conference, the Lilly Foundation, and the National Office of Ecumenical Officers. He was elected President of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in 1997. He has been a member of the New York Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue since 1975 and served as the first executive secretary of the Cardinal Bernardin Common Ground Catholic Initiative. More recent publications include "Why the Pro-Life Movement Should Return to Its Roots" in *America* (Feb. 16, 2009), "Pro-Life Politics: From Counter-Movement to Transforming Movement" in *Consistently Opposing Killing: From Abortion to Assisted Suicide, the Death Penalty, and War*, ed. Rachel M. MacNair and Stephen Zunes (Praeger, 2008), and entries on "Human and Civil Rights," "Inequality in America," and "Taxes in Catholic Social Thought" in *Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy* (2007).

likelihood, forever.

1. *The relevance and meaning of natural law.*

The Catholic moral understanding points us toward the depth of human fulfillment. For this reason the pope writes that the Gospel of Life “has a profound and persuasive echo in the heart of every person – believer and non-believer alike – because it marvelously fulfills all the heart’s expectations while infinitely surpassing them.” He holds that all of humankind can grasp “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. That upon the recognition of this right, every human community and the political community itself are founded” (EV §2). John Paul II aspires to “reach all people of good will” so “that justice and solidarity will increase.”

2. *Abortion is not a single issue but comprehensive.*

Today this proclamation is especially pressing because of the extraordinary increase and gravity of threats to the life of individuals and peoples, especially where life is weak and defenseless. In addition to the ancient scourges of poverty, hunger, endemic diseases, violence and war, new threats are emerging on an alarmingly vast scale. (EV §3)

Accordingly, the Pope cites *Gaudium et spes* §22:

Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful self destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies. Indeed, they poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury.

Besides abortion and euthanasia, this paragraph contains fourteen other attacks against human life. In EV §41 Pope John Paul II pithily gives us the conclusive inner core of *Evangelium Vitae*: “Thus the deepest element of God’s commandment to protect human life is the requirement to show reverence and love for every person and the life of every person.”

### 3. Comprehensiveness is best measured by consistency.

Where life is involved, the service of charity must be profoundly consistent. It cannot tolerate bias and discrimination, for human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage of and in every situation; it is an indivisible good. (EV §87)

To this the Pope immediately adds: “We need then to ‘show care’ for all life and for the life of everyone,” and thus he invites us to practice what is often called “a preferential option for the poor”: “As disciples of Jesus, we are called to become neighbors to everyone (cf. Lk 10:29-37), and to show special favor to those who are poorest, most alone and most in need.” He adds more “preferential options” specifics in the next section:

When life is challenged by conditions of hardship, maladjustment, sickness or rejection, other programs – such as communities for treating drug addiction, residential communities for minors or the mentally ill, care and relief centers for AIDS patients, associations for solidarity especially towards the disabled – are eloquent expressions of what charity is able to devise to give everyone new reasons for hope and practical possibilities for life. (EV §88)

### 4. *An authentic morality requires sociological realism.*

In EV §90 Pope John Paul II adds a strong sense of realism, which in turn invites the notion of “common ground” to his analysis of the prospects for the realization of a gospel of life. While *Evangelium vitae* is aspirational, he insists that it must not be utopian:

The Church well knows that it is difficult to mount an effective legal defense of life in pluralistic democracies.... The Church encourages political leaders, starting with those who are Christians, not to give in, but to make those choices which, taking into account what is realistically attainable, [fully understands] that it is not enough to remove unjust laws [since] the underlying causes of attacks on life have to be eliminated, especially by ensuring proper support for families and motherhood [and] for this reason there need to be set in place social and political initiatives capable of guaranteeing true freedom of choice in matters of parenthood.

In a political and cultural liberal democracy the working towards a “true freedom of choice” challenges both sides of the abortion controversy.

The pope acknowledges that the challenge of manifesting *The Gospel of Life* is ever deepening. In EV §4 he cautions that more attacks on human dignity are occurring and that there is a development of “a new cultural

climate” and “broad sectors of public opinion” that justify them and “claim not only exemption from punishment but even authorization by the state” with the result that

choices once unanimously considered criminal and rejected by the common moral sense are gradually becoming socially acceptable... [so] that conscience itself, darkened as it were by such widespread conditioning, is finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish between good and evil in what concerns the basic value of human life.

This deepening challenge by an enveloping culture of opinion and law on people’s moral sense has comprehensive consequences that the pope broadly classifies as a “culture of death”:

Symptoms of this trend include the lack of solidarity towards society’s weakest members – such as the elderly, the infirm, immigrants, children – and the indifference frequently found in relations between the world’s peoples even when basic values such as survival, freedom and peace are involved. (EV §9)

*5. These attacks and their justifications constitute a culture of death.*

In John Paul II’s view, the cultural and governmental approbation of former immoralities

can be described as a veritable structure of sin. This reality is characterized by the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity...and actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency. Looking at the situation from this point of view, it is possible to speak in a certain sense of a war of the powerful against the weak. A person who because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life style of those more favored tends to be looked upon as an enemy... (which) involves not only individuals...but goes far beyond, to the point of damaging and distorting, at the international level, relations between peoples and States. (EV §12)

*6. The subject of abortion includes more than abortion.*

Only in EV §13 does the pope singularly mention abortion, and in this context he is specifically speaking about the moral distinction between abortion and contraception. Contraception “is opposed to the virtue of chastity in marriage” while abortion “is opposed to the virtue of justice and directly violates the commandment ‘You shall not kill’.” The pope explicitly acknowledges that in the Christian scriptures “there are no direct and explicit

calls to protect human life at its very beginning, as specifically not yet born” (EV §44). But he immediately adds: “this can easily be explained by the fact that the mere possibility of harming, attacking, or actually denying life in these circumstances is completely foreign to the religious and cultural way of thinking of the People of God.” He cites Jeremiah 1:5 in this regard: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” He also points out that “expressions of awe and wonder at God’s intervention in the life of a child in its mother’s womb occur again and again in the Psalms.” In EV §54 John Paul II notes that the most ancient non-biblical Christian writing – the early first-century *Didache* – taught: “you shall not put a child to death by abortion nor kill it once it is born.” In my view, the *Didache* encouraged what we would now call a “comprehensive ethic of life,” as it intersects abortion with numerous other violations of integrity and justice:

“You shall not kill: There are two ways, a way of life and a way of death; there is a great difference between them.... In accordance with the precept of the teaching: you shall not kill..., you shall not put a child to death by abortion nor kill it once it is born.... The way of death is this: ... they show no compassion for the poor, they do not suffer with the suffering, they do not acknowledge their Creator, they kill their children and by abortion cause God’s creatures to perish; they drive away the needy, oppress the suffering, they are advocates of the rich and unjust judges of the poor.”

### 7. *Stretching deeply to an active non-violence.*

While *Evangelium vitae* is decidedly comprehensive in its defense of human life, at this point John Paul II is tentative in his embrace of an explicit recommendation of non-violence as found in what is known as a “consistent ethic of life” that invites us and our polities to practice an active pacifism.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In his *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), Daniel K. Williams asserts that the proliferators of the 1960s and 1970s believed “that their most natural allies could be found in the antiwar or civil rights movements” (p. 256). Tom Cornell, one of the founders of the Catholic Peace Fellowship in 1964, said that pacifism led to his opposition to both the Vietnam War and abortion: “Catholic pacifists are opposed to war because it is the planned, mass taking of human life for political purposes.... We are opposed to abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and economically enforced starvation also, on the same basis” (quoted by Patricia McNeal, *Harder than War: Catholic Peacemaking in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1991), p. 169). In 1971 Gordon Zahn, one of the founders of the official international Catholic Peace Movement Pax Christi explicitly called consistent the linkings of oppositions to the Vietnam War and abortion: “It is not just a matter of consistency: in

In EV §55 he characterizes it as “a genuine paradox” that there are situations of “legitimate defense” (presumably a just war or a case of capital punishment) “in which the right to protect one’s own life and the duty not to harm someone else’s life are difficult to reconcile in practice.... Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another’s life, the common good of the family or of the State.” However, with regard to capital punishment, the pope applauds the growing tendency to limit and even abolish the death penalty. And in EV §27 he directly notes the importance of finding non-violent approaches the resolution of conflicts between peoples.

8. *Abortion as particularly offensive.*

Although *The Gospel of Life* is manifestly comprehensive, in §58 John Paul II writes: “Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable.” Sounding an Orwellian warning, he observes that today “in many people’s consciences the perception of its gravity has become progressively obscured...., a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense.” For this reason,

we need more than ever to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name. [For] especially in the case of abortion there is a widespread use of ambiguous terminology, such as “interruption of pregnancy,” which tends to hide abortion’s true nature but no word has the power to change the reality of things: procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing...of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth.

But the Pope immediately follows his Orwellian critique of verbal cowardice with a straightforward sociological realism:

---

a very real sense it is the choice between integrity and hypocrisy. No one who publicly mourns the senseless burning of a napalmed child should be indifferent to the intentional killing of a living fetus in the womb.” Zahn, “The Unborn Life and the Protection of Life,” *Commonweal* (May 28, 1971), pp. 337-39. In their May 1983 Pastoral Letter *The Challenge of Peace* (§286-§287) the bishops taught that the same moral principle governed both the classical just war principle of discrimination (prohibiting any direct targeting, much less the killing of noncombatants) and the traditional prohibition against induced abortion: “Nothing can justify the direct attack on innocent human life, in or out of warfare. Abortion is precisely such an attack.”

It is true that the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as the decision to rid herself of the fruit of conception is not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place.

“Nevertheless,” he continues, the Church has constantly taught that “these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.”

Though insistent on the absolute immorality of abortion, the pope does not argumentatively skew the historical and theological scholarship. He acknowledges that the texts of scripture do not explicitly condemn abortion nor did the early philosophical discussions pinpoint the “precise moment of the infusion of the spiritual soul.” Nevertheless, he writes: “Throughout Christianity’s two thousand year history, this same doctrine” that describes “abortion as a particularly grave moral disorder” has been “constantly taught by the Fathers of the Church and by her Pastors and Doctors” (EV §61).

#### 9. *The contemporary Orwellian drift.*

The pope writes of a “remarkable contradiction” between the undeniably “noble principles” of human rights and individual freedom and how they are so very often eviscerated in practice:

How can these repeated affirmations of principle be reconciled with the continual increase and widespread justification of attacks on human life? How can we reconcile these declarations with the refusal to accept those who are weak and needy, or elderly, or of those who have just been conceived?” (EV §19)

John Paul II acknowledges that “the taking of life not yet born or in its final stages is sometimes marked by a mistaken sense of altruism and human compassion,” but he emphatically warns:

that such a completely individualistic concept of freedom ends up by becoming the freedom of “the strong” against the weak... (which) no longer recognizes and respects its essential link with the truth...lead[ing] to a serious distortion of life in society...[with the] promotion of the self understood in terms of absolute autonomy.

In the same paragraph the pope asks: What are “the roots of this remarkable contradiction” between “the declaration of noble principles and their actual

practice?” He locates them in “a notion of freedom which exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way..., a completely individualistic concept of freedom...[which] ends up by becoming the freedom of ‘the strong’ against the weak who have no choice but to submit.” For the pope, an authentic freedom must have

an inherently relational dimension.... This is a great gift of the Creator, placed as it is at the service of the person and of his fulfillment through the gift of self and openness to others. [The consequences of times when] “others are considered not for what they “are” but for what they “have, do, and produce” ...is the supremacy of the strong over the weak...and the values of being are replaced by those of having...[while] the so-called “quality of life” is interpreted primarily or exclusively as economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure. (EV §23)

But there is more to modernity than its darwinian view of self.

#### *10. The complexity of dialogical engagement.*

In EV §26 the pope cautions against any one-sided portrayal of modernity: “It would therefore be to give a one-sided picture, which could lead to sterile discouragement, if the condemnation of the threats to life were not accompanied by the presentation of the positive signs at work in humanity’s present situation.” Among the eight contemporary positives he lists he includes the many centers that offer moral and material support to mothers who are in difficulty and are tempted to have recourse to abortion, developments in medical science, and the “agencies and organizations mobilizing their efforts to bring the benefits of the most advanced medicine to countries most afflicted by poverty and endemic diseases.” In §27 he lists:

Among the signs of hope we should also count the spread, at many levels of public opinion, of a new sensitivity ever more opposed to war as an instrument for the resolution of conflicts between peoples, and increasingly oriented to finding effective but “non-violent” means to counter the armed aggressor. In the same perspective there is evidence of a growing public opposition to the death penalty. Modern society in fact has the means of effectively suppressing crime by rendering criminals harmless without definitively denying them the chance to reform.

“Another welcome sign,” he writes, “is the growing attention being paid to ecology.”

In dialogical fashion the pope chronicles the empirical and philosophical reasons contemporary thought gives for making abortion and euthanasia legal:



That “civil law cannot demand that all citizens should live according to moral standards higher than what all citizens themselves acknowledge and share,” that “the prohibition and the punishment of abortion in these cases would inevitably lead – so it is said – to an increase of illegal practices” that “would [otherwise] be carried out in a medically unsafe way” and the question “whether supporting a law which in practice cannot be enforced would not ultimately undermine the authority of all laws” (EV §68-§69).

Cautioning against what he terms the moral relativism these contemporary reasons connote, the pope even more deeply questions the ethical probity of governing by popular consensus. In language strikingly congruent with the moral and political critiques of “populism,” he writes:

Democracy cannot be idolized to the point of making it a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality. Fundamentally, democracy is a “system” and as such is a means and not an end. Its “moral” value is not automatic, but depends on conformity to the moral law to which it, like every other form of human behavior, must be subject: In other words, its morality depends on the morality of the ends which it pursues and of the means which it employs.

To be sure, the pope places the “almost universal consensus with regard to the value of democracy” as “a positive ‘sign of the times,’ as the Church’s Magisterium has frequently noted.” But in still another reference to the “natural law” as a necessary reference for civil law, John Paul II adds a caution:

Even in participatory systems of government, the regulation of interests often occurs to the advantage of the most powerful, since they are the ones most capable of maneuvering not only the levers of power but also of shaping the formation of consensus. In such a situation, democracy becomes an empty word.

11. *An unending complexity: Living Evangelium vitae is no simple matter.*

“While,” the Pope continues, “abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize,” there are still questions of prudence remaining for those who conscientiously follow the gospel of life. “When,” the pope counsels, “it is not possible to overturn or completely abrogate a pro-abortion law, an elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well known, could licitly support proposals aimed at limiting the harm done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality. This does not in fact represent an illicit cooperation with an unjust law, but rather

a legitimate and proper attempt to limit its evil aspects” (EV §73).

Thus Pope John Paul II offers a portal to what was once a common democratic “big tent” position: to “make abortion safe, legal, and rare” and the possibility of support for restrictive state abortion laws made possible by the 1992 Supreme Court decision *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which affirmed legal abortion but introduced the criteria of “undue burden,” which permitted legislators to work for state laws that introduced “incremental” restrictions on abortion and thus respected to some small degree the traditional moral objection to abortion. Some recent example of such limited “incremental” bills supported by the U.S. Catholic Conference’s Committee on Pro-Life Activities include the *Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act* and the *Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act*. Citing some relevant research, the bishops say regarding the first: “The bill asserts a compelling governmental interest in protecting unborn children beginning at 20 weeks because of the substantial medical evidence that an unborn child can experience pain at least at this stage.” They cite scientific sources showing that babies at twenty weeks have the “ability to respond to music, to his or her mother’s voice, and to other stimuli.”<sup>2</sup> In their letter to Senators the bishops note: “Not only is the United States one of only seven countries worldwide to allow abortion after 20 weeks, putting us in company with the likes of China and North Korea, but the overwhelming majority of Americans oppose late-term abortions as well.”<sup>3</sup> The Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act would require any healthcare practitioner present when a child is born alive following an abortion to give the same degree of care to preserve the life and health of the child as would be given to any other newborn at the same gestational age. And after giving such care, the bill would require the practitioner to ensure that the child is immediately transported to a hospital. The bishops are in full accord with *Evangelium vitae*.

The pope readily acknowledges: “Service of the Gospel of Life is thus an immense and complex task” that requires “the practical ecumenism which the Second Vatican Council authoritatively encouraged” requiring “dialogue and

---

<sup>2</sup> Derbyshire and Bocmonn, “Reconsidering Fetal Pain,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 46 (2020):3-6.

<sup>3</sup> Among others, they cite a January 2020 Marist Poll reporting that 79% of Americans want abortion banned after the first six months of pregnancy. They cite sources that conservatively estimate the annual number of late-term abortions as over 6,000.

joint efforts with the followers of other religions and with all people of good will. No single person or group has a monopoly on the defence and promotion of life” (EV §91). Later he writes: “we need to promote a serious and in-depth exchange about basic issues of human life with everyone, including non-believers, in intellectual circles, in the various professional spheres and at the level of people’s everyday life” (§95).

Abortion opinion polls constantly show that dialogue about the abortion issues will be complicated and will require a prudence that is highly sophisticated. A 2018 report by the Public Religion Research Institute found that “a majority of the American people are in the middle of the abortion policy debate” with just a little over half saying it should be restricted to the first trimester and afterwards allowed only for rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother.<sup>4</sup> While the Institute summarized the findings as “62 percent of Americans believe abortion is a complicated issue” rather than either a pro-life or pro-choice one, it did add that “a majority of both Black and Hispanic Americans believe abortion is morally wrong.” A recent summary of Gallup polls shows that Americans have remained relatively consistent since 1975 with slightly more than half saying it should be legal only in certain cases, about one-quarter legal in any case, and less than one-fourth saying never legal.<sup>5</sup>

#### 12. *Each parish should promote Evangelium vitae.*

The U.S. Catholic bishops recently issued “Pope St. John Paul’s Challenge to Our Church: The Inspiration for Walking with Moms in Need.”<sup>6</sup> It reminds Catholics – more probably, it informs Catholics – that on March 25, 2020 the Church celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Evangelium vitae*, “the prophetic document reaffirming the Church’s constant teaching on the value and inviolability of every human life.” Pope John Paul II, it continues,

outlines the many challenges that expectant mothers may face, including lack of support from the father, financial strains, concerns about her own health or that of her child, and pressures from family and friends. For these reasons he teaches that it is particularly important that the Church be demonstrably alongside mothers, offering them encouragement, assistance, and support.

---

<sup>4</sup> *The New York Times* (July 14, 2019), SR 4.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Lerer, “Democratic Prosecutors Call for Abortion Rights,” *The New York Times* (November 18, 2019), A21.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Conference of Bishops, *WalkingWithMoms.com*.

So, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Pro-Life Activities has launched a nationwide effort, beginning March 25, 2020 entitled “Walking with Moms in Need: A Year of Service.” With the support of bishops and pastors, each parish and each parishioner is invited to reach out and support women facing difficult or unexpected pregnancies, especially women in poverty, for *Evangelium vitae* emphasized “a consistency of charity, affirming the responsibility to care for and protect all human life, especially the lives of the most vulnerable among us.” While the corona virus has put all church gatherings on hold, the virus has only magnified the unending task of embodying the gospel of life.

### 13. *Embodying the Gospel of Life.*

In recognition of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Pope John Paul II’s injunction to witness to the “immense and complex” aspiration of the Gospel of Life “at the level of people’s everyday life” on November 11, 2019, Archbishop Joseph F. Nauman, the Chairman of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, spoke about the need for improved pastoral responses to women facing unexpected or challenging pregnancies:

The challenges can be immense for women in difficult or unplanned pregnancies. 75% of women who choose abortion are low income.... Women facing challenging pregnancies should see the Church as a place where they can find help...and while many pregnancy help resources are appropriately coordinated at the diocesan or regional level, moms in need are best reached at the local level. We have well over 17,000 parishes in the United States. Each parish is best able to identify the local pregnancy help resources that are currently available and to identify potential gaps that need to be addressed. The parish community is uniquely positioned to encourage a collaboration of resources at the local level to increase awareness of help available to mothers and families in need.<sup>7</sup>

An accompanying document entitled “Pope St. John Paul’s Challenge to Our Church: The Inspiration for ‘Walking with Moms in Need’” highlights the conditions of “women in poverty” and the need for a “profound consistency” that “shows care for all life and the life of everyone’.” Its last sentence reads: “As followers of Christ, may we strive to continually respond to the needs of the poor and vulnerable entrusted to us by God.”

---

<sup>7</sup> [Cmsusccb.org/news/19-189.cfm](https://www.cmsusccb.org/news/19-189.cfm).

Archbishop Nauman then asked the bishops to invite the parishes in their diocese to join a nationwide effort from March 25, 2020 to March 25, 2021 which will be called “Walking with Moms in Need: A Year of Service.”

14. *The Abortion Culture War’s Best Kept Secret.*

Though Archbishop Nauman did not mention it – indeed, it goes unmentioned by almost all abortion protagonists and, as far as I can ascertain, all major media – there is a state program that promotes making more certain that a woman can actually freely choose motherhood rather than abortion. The state of Minnesota in 2005 established its “Positive Alternatives” grants program, which funds and supports programs and non-profit organizations aimed at reducing the financial pressures a pregnancy might cause, such as lack of medical care, food, and housing, including rent assistance. This program also assists women to improve their health by focusing on long-term solutions to self-sufficiency, including help in achieving employment and education goals, such as services that support the continuation and completion of high school.<sup>8</sup> Through December 2020 the program is funded to provide \$6,714,000 per biennium to 34 grantees. Grantees are required to evaluate their program outcomes annually by tracking indicators and reporting their findings to the Minnesota Department of Health’s “Positive Alternatives.” From July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2019, 22,321 individuals received services. Seventy percent were unmarried, twelve percent were under twenty years of age, and one-third were under thirty. Some 37% received financial assistance for housing, utilities, or childcare expenses. Of them, 34% were African American, 20% were Hispanic, 12% multi-race, and 41% were white. 31% sought help in their first trimester and 31% were postpartum.

Unfortunately, many of the most politically powerful find it serves their interest by keeping abortion the bedrock of a cultural war that, unlike *Evangelium vitae*, wants no government application of a solidarity with the poor, the marginal, and the refugee. And not a few of opponents of abortion blind themselves, in my view, to the political opportunism of the contemporary Republican Party to the extent of calling President Donald Trump the most pro-life president ever. In her February 18, 2020 request for donations to its “Victory Fund” Carol Tobias, the president of National Right to Life described herself as “overwhelmed” as she stood next to President Trump at the annual March for Life and described him as “unapologetically pro-life in his pro-life

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.healthstate.mn.us/people/womeninfants/positivealt/overview.html>.

advocacy” as “pro-abortion Democrats and their allies in the media, in Hollywood, and in abortion clinics across America have been trying to remove him from office since the day he was elected.” Her appeal has the President’s face on its envelope with the caption “He stands with us.... We must stand with him!” In my view, the Trump embrace is a choke hold on the culture of life expressed by *Evangelium vitae* and will remain a historical embarrassment for for the pro-life movement for the foreseeable future. Studies routinely show that donors to the Republican Party are overwhelmingly fiscal conservatives and social liberals, affirming notions of free trade and consumer choice and so also free choice in matters of personal morality. Scholars have claimed that the 1976 Republican Convention vote to include an anti-*Roe* constitutional amendment to the Party Platform was a shrewd tactic to add to its declining party base.<sup>9</sup>

Knowledgeable judgment understands that the Supreme Court will not reverse *Roe*, that abortions will (however restrained) continue, and that, ultimately, stopping abortion requires winning hearts and minds.<sup>10</sup> There are no permanent political victories, and there is always the next election to win. We should remember that both sides of the abortion issue are called “movements” because they involve far deeper bonds than those of transient political alliances. A sociological view of the pro-life movement’s deepest conviction – that every human being including the unborn is singularly valuable – will remain in a state of permanent nascence,<sup>11</sup> that is, the

---

<sup>9</sup> Tanya Melich, *The Republic War against Women* (New York NY: Bantam, 1996), pp. 38, 335. For a comprehensive overview, see James R. Kelly, “Pro-life Politics: From Counter-Movement to Transforming Movement,” *Consistently Opposing Killing*, ed. Rachel M. MacNair and Stephen Zunes (Westport CT, 2008), pp. 159-72.

<sup>10</sup> In his *Good Intentions: A History of Catholic Voters’s Road from Roe to Trump* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press) Steven P. Millies observes that when Chief Justice John G. Roberts faced the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2005 he agreed that *Roe* is settled law (p. 88) and that “the most important part of the *Casey* decision laid in its fundamental refusal to reverse *Roe*” (p. 90). In her article “McConnell Brings Abortion-Related Bills to Senate Floor,” Sheryl Gay Stolberg writes that the un-passable “abortion votes are a way to drive a wedge between Democrats without inflicting political harm on Republicans who are facing tough re-election races,” *The New York Times* (Feb. 25, 2020), A12.

<sup>11</sup> Francesco Alberoni, *Movement and Institution* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984) pp. 19-22. For a comprehensive sociological perspective, see James R. Kelly, “From Counter-Movement to Transforming Movement? Towards the Crystallization and Dual Challenge of the Consistent Ethic of Life,” *Life and Learning*

movement's progressive egalitarianism must be constantly redeemed from both political defeat and political distortion. A "permanent nascence" requires a permanent commitment.

In *Evangelium vitae* John Paul II in effect inspiringly translates the sociological notion of "Permanent Nascence". The Gospel of Life "involves above all proclaiming the core of this Gospel. It is the proclamation of a living God who is close to us, who calls us to profound communion with himself and awakens in us the certain hope of eternal life" and "to see in every human face the face of Christ. It is the call for 'a sincere gift of self' as the fullest way to realize our personal freedom" (EV §81).