



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO CARDINAL WILLIAM KEELER
ON THE OCCASION OF THE MEETING
ORGANIZED BY THE BISHOPS' COMMITTEE
FOR PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES**

*To My Venerable Brother
Cardinal William Henry Keeler
Archbishop of Baltimore
Chairman of the Bishops' Committee
for Pro-Life Activities*

As you gather in Washington with so many individuals and groups dedicated to the defence of human life, I send greetings in the Lord, with the assurance of my prayers for the success of this important meeting jointly organized by the Bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities and the Pontifical Council for the Family.

At last year's Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops, the Bishops of the continent were unequivocal in their insistence upon the Christian duty to defend and promote human life from the moment of conception to that of natural death, and they abundantly praised those who have generously and courageously undertaken that duty (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, n. 63). More recently, the United States Bishops have issued the statement *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, which splendidly echoes the voice of the Synod and the teaching of my own Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*. Your meeting is another sign that in the United States of America the Gospel of Life has found fertile ground in which to grow and bear fruit, precisely because it sheds light on a matter of critical importance for society, a matter so essential that no one can remain indifferent.

At the end of the 20th century we are witnessing a strange paradox: the sanctity of human life is being denied by an appeal to freedom, democracy, pluralism, even reason and compassion. As the Bishops' statement points out, words have become unmoored from their meaning (cf. *Living the Gospel of Life*, n. 11), and we are left with a rhetoric in which the language of life is used to promote the culture of death. Freedom is sundered from truth, and democracy from the moral values required for its survival; a faulty notion of pluralism loses sight of the common good; reason often refuses to

engage the truths which transcend empiric experience; and a false sense of compassion is incapable of facing the limits and demands of our nature as created and dependent beings. The language of human rights is constantly invoked while the most basic of them - the right to life - is repeatedly disregarded. The Bishops have identified the source of this contradiction in the moral confusion which comes inevitably with "the gradual restructuring of American culture according to ideals of utility, productivity and cost-effectiveness" (*Living the Gospel of Life*, n. 3). So great is the confusion at times that for many people the difference between good and evil is determined by the opinion of the majority, and even the time-honoured havens of human life - the family, the law and medicine - are sometimes made to serve the culture of death.

At such a time, Christians must act. This is a fundamental demand not only of discipleship but also of democracy, which flourishes when "people of conviction struggle vigorously to advance their beliefs by every ethical and legal means at their disposal" (*Living the Gospel of Life*, n. 24). This is not easy in a situation where there is at times deliberate falsification of the Church's teaching and scorn for those who promote it. Yet none of this can be allowed to blur your vision or diminish your energies.

Your action needs to be both educational and political. There must be a thorough catechesis on the *Gospel of Life* at all levels of the Catholic community. Catholics imbibe much of their surrounding culture, and therefore this catechesis needs to challenge the prevailing culture at those points where human dignity and rights are threatened. Such a catechesis has as its goal that shift of perception and change of heart which accompany true conversion (cf. Eph 4:23). The call to conversion must ring out in your homes, in your parishes and in your schools, with complete confidence that the Church's teaching about the inviolability of life is deeply in tune with both right reason and the deepest longings of the human heart. This educational effort will increasingly open the way for Catholics to exercise a positive public influence as citizens of their country, without false appeals to the separation of Church and State in a way that consigns the Christian vision of human dignity to the realm of private belief. *The choice in favour of life is not a private option but a basic demand of a just and moral society.*

The pro-life concern must be present in every aspect of the Church's pastoral activity. It is my fervent hope that your meeting will signal the commitment of the whole Catholic community to implementing the teaching of *Living the Gospel of Life*, that it will help to coordinate better the activities of the various groups involved, and that it will strengthen the resolve of many people to continue their generous and tireless efforts. Commending all gathered at the Washington meeting to the loving protection of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer who is the Way and the Truth and the Life (cf. Jn 14:6), I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 20 February 1999.

JOHN PAUL II

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