

THE EVANGELIUM VITAE (GOSPEL OF LIFE) AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR NIGERIAN SOCIETY: AN ETHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

John Paul II, in 1994, presented *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life) as an ethical response to such anti-life activities as abortion, euthanasia, warfare, segregation, cloning, capitalism, among others. The encyclical had mixed reactions: on one hand, it elicited interests, and on other hand, it stoked controversy. In all of these, most Christian ethicists affirmed the positive impacts of John Paul II's work on society. In provenance, he relied on and corroborated Paul VI's views on human life as outlined in his work, *Humanae Vitae* (On the Human Life). The latter condemned all the anti-life ideologies of the nineteenth century. In view of that, John Paul II calls for the sustenance of human life through ethics and values. One of the objectives of this study is reading and interpreting Paul II's work in order to underscore its significance in society. In its scope, structure, discussion and analysis of data, the research is carried within the method of religious phenomenology. In the research's findings, John Paul II was well situated in his arguments for the culture of life and the culture of death as depictions of good acts and bad deeds, respectively. At the end and for a societal wellbeing, the study recommends building of the culture of life in families, schools and religious institutions.

Keywords: John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Human Life), Provenance and Significance, Culture of life and Culture of death, Christian Ethics, Nigerian Society.

Introduction

The *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life) was written in 1994 by John Paul II, a former pope who died in 2005 and was succeeded by Pope Benedict XVI. The work elicited interest and was adjudged as one of the best works of John Paul II, especially in matters pertaining to ethics and values. Nonetheless, some scholars see the work as a controversial book with respect to its tough stance on women reproductive rights. It has to be noted that John Paul II did not write in a vacuum, rather, he relied on the merits of his predecessors like Pope Paul VI's work, *Humanae Vitae* (On human life), published in 1968, in defence of threats against human life. The present study interrogates both the backdrop to John Paul II's work, *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life), and its significance in society.

Today's world is replete with some ideologies or practices that negate human life; John Paul II, through his teachings and writings, condemned such unethical conduct. The study approaches this discourse from (a) a short profile of John Paul II, (b) philosophical and theological presuppositions in *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life), (c) *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life) and its strategic vision for society, (d) the envisioned application of *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life) to society (e) *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life), an ethical appraisal, and (f) conclusion. The paper, proceeding from the specialty of Christian ethics, and also within the broad framework of religious phenomenology, observes that one of the outstanding features of the ethical positions of John Paul II is the inter-play of theological and philosophical resources. To create awareness about the writings of John Paul II and their applications to lived experience in society remains one of the objectives of the study. In cognizance of this, the research outlines and examines John Paul II's ethical thought as a significant contribution to knowledge. At the end, the study draws its evaluation from the body of discourse and with a conclusion.

A Short Profile of John Paul II

John Paul II was born on May 18, 1920 in the small southern Polish town of Wadowice to Karol Wojtyla and Emilia (Kaczorowska⁹) Wojtyla. He received two names, Karol and Józef¹⁰ from his parents at baptism on June 20, 1920¹¹ though his mother named him “Lolek”. His birth coincided with what is generally known as ‘Polish miracle’ and like an expectant hero, actions of Marshal Jozef Piłsudski¹² would resonate later in his life as a scholar and pope. Like what Tad Szulc calls the “literary output”¹³ of John Paul II, many historians and biographers have equally flashed their literary torchlight on the relationship between the birth of John Paul II and the civic reception of Piłsudski by the Poles¹⁴.

Karol Wojtyla lost his mother on April 13, 1929 and in his own words regarding the mother’s death¹⁵:

Quite soon I became a motherless only child. My father was admirable and almost all the memories of my childhood and adolescence are connected with him. The violence of the blows that had struck him had opened up immense spiritual depths in him; his grief found its outlet in prayer.¹⁶

Another event in his life was the death of his elder brother, Edmund¹⁷ on December 5, 1932.

He was also moved emotionally by the death of her sister, Olga who died “only a few days after birth.”¹⁸ Not overwhelmed by these miserable events, and with the support of his father, the young Karol, moved on. Nevertheless, these events did not inhibit the young Karol from discovering his talents and opening him to certainties that would mould him into his ideal person and ideology.

The young Karol Wojtyla’s journey to academic and spiritual life began in the autumn of 1926, when he started elementary education at the age of six. Following his good performance, he was admitted to middle school in 1930. The essence of both formal and informal education is to study, analyse, understand and evaluate nature¹⁹ in such a way that human activities would be fine-tuned to the optimal degree of overcoming its impediments. The primary and secondary schools had provided platforms for development of intellectual powers based on the overall classroom performance, coupled with exploration of extra-curricular activities. Karol Wojtyla distinguished himself in academic excellence and disciplined life which equipped him for higher education.

⁹ Maiden name or what is commonly called ‘Nee’ in some societies. It is a regular feature in official documents like international passports and visa, for requesting the mother’s family name. At times, the mother’s family name is used in the place of her husband’s surname.

¹⁰ He received the name as a way of preserving the good memories of Marshal Jozef Piłsudski, a Polish national hero noted for waging war against Soviet Russia, at that time.

¹¹ Infant baptism is a practice in the Roman Catholic Church. Being that his parents were also staunch Catholics, a month after his birth, was good enough for christening their baby.

¹² Some writers like George Weigel, in his book; *Witness to Hope: The Biography of John II* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999) has given a critical analysis of roles played by him in the Second Polish Republic.

¹³ Tad Szulc, *John Paul II: The Biography*, 9.

¹⁴ This is the noun form of the people from Poland.

¹⁵ See Karol Wojtyla, *Giobbi ed altri inediti* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1982), 83.

¹⁶ A. Frossard, “*Be Not Afraid!*” (New York: St. Martin’s, 1984), 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19. He had obtained a degree in medicine before his death.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Nature is here seen as the physical world including all natural phenomena and living things.



In 1938, Karol Wojtyła moved with his father to Kraków and began his undergraduate studies at Jagiellonian University, where he enrolled in the department of Polish philology in the Faculty of Philosophy. Commenting on what this branch of study meant for him, he remarks:

I found myself attracted to the study of the language itself. We studied the descriptive grammar of modern Polish as well as the historical evolution of the language, with special emphasis on its ancient Slav roots. ...this opened up completely new horizons for me; it introduced me to the mystery of language itself.²⁰

Karol and his father lived in a moderate apartment on Tyniecka Street in the Debniki quarter – which is historically separated by the Vistula River. Being in the university was an opportunity for him to undergo various transformative stages in life; these called for exploring his potentials, testing his skills and developing personal interests in professional and extra-curricular activities. He was already writing poetry and composing scripts for the theatre. Besides, he was also contemplating on what his life would be in terms of profession and career; he was faced with two options: married or celibate life. At his moment of decision, he chose a celibate life; the option as far as he was concerned, should be accepted as “a gift and a mystery.” On recalling his choice, John Paul II, notes, “A day came when I knew for certain that my life would not be fulfilled in the human love, the beauty of which I have always felt deeply.”²¹

Following his papal election in 1978 as Pope John Paul II, he started his pastoral work on the philosophy of pro-life through acts of charity, pilgrimages and writings. His papacy witnesses increased demographics in conversion to the Christian faith and strengthened bonds of love in the spheres of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. From the papal audience to pilgrims to parts of the world, John Paul II, drew huge crowds that came to see and listen to his message of hope. He was one of the most recognised personalities of the third millennium. John Paul II, after a successful papal ministry, died on April 2, 2005 and was buried on April 8, 2005 at the Vatican City, Rome. On September 30, 2013, John Paul II was canonized by Pope Francis as a Saint in the Catholic Church.

In scholarly writings, broadly speaking, the works of John Paul II could be classified into three main genres: meditation and philosophy, plays and poetry, and papal documents: encyclicals,²² exhortations, letters, *et cetera*. From this arrangement, it is evident that he used his writings to convey his perception of human person and society, in the status of a poet, playwright, philosopher and theologian. Here are some collections under meditation and philosophy: *Memory and Identity Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium*, published on March 22, 2005; a conversational presentation of John Paul II's views on many secular topics, such as evil, freedom, contemporary Europe, nationalism, and democracy. Included in the book is also a Transcript of the Pope's discussion on his assassination attempt in 1981. *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, published on September 28, 2004; mostly addressed to his bishops, though a rich source of inspiration for everyone having knowledge of Christianity. *Roman Triptych (Meditation)* presented to the public on March 6, 2003 in Italy published by Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Pope John Paul II - In My Own Words*, published on August 6, 2003, a compilation book of carefully selected words and prayers of John Paul II, and was compiled by Anthony F. Chiffole. *Gift and Mystery - On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination*, presented to readers on April 20, 1999; it is about being a priest. *Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, published in 1997; a compilation of weekly lectures from 1979 to 1984 to married couples about the deep meaning of human love and

²⁰ John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 7.

²¹ André Frossard, “*Be Not Afraid!*” (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), 15.

²²The first ever encyclical written by a Pope was in 1745 by Benedict XIV, on usury. Since then, it has become the most authoritative and most important medium of papal teachings on faith and morals.



sexuality. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, on September 19, 1995, it was edited by Vittorio Messori; John Paul II makes many of his teachings and ideas more accessible. *The Way to Christ - Spiritual Exercises*, on October 7 1994; a conversational presentation of two retreats Karol Wojtyła gave ten years apart before becoming a pope. At that time, he served in Kraków as bishop and cardinal. *Person and Act*, by Karol Wojtyła; before his papacy, February 28, 1979; an in-depth phenomenological work tied to Thomistic ethics; and, *Love and Responsibility*, published in 1960 when he was the auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Kraków; it is an in-depth philosophical analysis of human love and sexuality.

His contributions to plays and poetry in Poland are regarded as very outstanding and enduring. He developed interest in plays and poetry at an early stage of his life. He was also vigorously involved in the production of some scripts: *Our God's Brother*;²³ *The Jeweller's Shop: A Meditation on the Sacrament of Matrimony*, *Passing on Occasion into a Drama*, *Arrow*. Others include *The Poetry of Pope John Paul II*, *The Place Within: The Poetry of Pope John Paul II*.

Naturally, the papacy offered John Paul II a unique opportunity to meditate, reflect and write on those issues or subjects that were close to his heart. His first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (Redeemer of Mankind) opened up the stream of other ones; it also served as it were, the 'manifesto' for his new pontificate. Subsequent papal documents (in a chronological order) include the following: *Dives in Misericordia* (The Mercy of God); *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work); *Slavorum Apostoli* (The Apostles of the Slavs); *Dominum et Vivificantem* (Lord and Giver of Life); *Redemptoris Mater* (The Mother of the Redeemer); *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern); *Redemptoris Missio* (The Mission of the Redeemer); *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Year: "New Things" One Hundred Years Later); *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth); *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life); *Ut Unum Sint* (That They May Be One); *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason), and *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (On the Eucharist in Its Relationship to the Church).²⁴ In all, John Paul II wrote fourteen encyclicals. They are resourceful materials for academic and spiritual research.

***Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life): Philosophical and Theological Presuppositions**

John Paul II's work is a product of the inter-play of theological and philosophical resources; it is from this background that the book, *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life), appraises the disconnection between good and evil patterns of life. The discourse centres on an "incomparable worth of the human person"²⁵ that human person is called to "a fullness of life that exceeds this earthly life, for it consists in sharing God's life even in its temporal phase."²⁶ By this, he means that one's happiness is opposed to *utilitarianism*²⁷:

²³ This play was written by Karol Wojtyła in Poland during World War II when the Nazis were suppressing Culture of Poland.

²⁴ The first and last letters of the fourteen encyclicals' Latin titles are adopted here as links to the dates of their publications, in the order of enumeration, *RH* (4 March 1979); *DM* (30 November 1980); *LE* (14 September 1981); *SA* (2 June 1985); *DV* (18 May 1986); *RM* (25 March 1987); *SRS* (30 December 1987); *ReM* (7 December 1990); *CA* (1 May 1991); *VS* (6 August 1993); *EV* (25 March 1995); *UUS* (25 May 1995); *FR* (14 September 1998), and *EE* (17 April 2003).

²⁵ He employed this concept to first part of his discourse on human person in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life). It is a follow up to the introductory premise: that Christ came that they may have life to the full (cf. Jn. 10:10).

²⁶ *Evangelium Vitae*, 2.

²⁷ The term "utilitarianism" is more specifically applied to the proposition that the supreme objective of moral action and the foundation on which all morality should be grounded is the achievement of the greatest happiness or satisfaction for the greatest number.



Life on earth is not an ultimate, but a penultimate reality, a sacred reality entrusted to us and to be brought to perfection in the gift of ourselves to God and to our sisters and brothers.... Every person opens to truth and goodness and led by the light of reason and grace can come to recognize – in the natural law written in the heart (Rom 2:14-15) – the sacred value of human life from its beginning to its end and the right to have it respected. It is upon this right that every human community is founded.²⁸

One has to understand the two-rooted foundations here: arguments from the divine origin of human life and the respect for nature – as derived from natural law. Therefore, a positive-life is based upon the divine law and natural reason. In corroboration, Paul M. Quay, observes:

Only persons can stand outside this Nature. Only persons are capable of an ultimate fulfilment, of a completion which transcends all process. Only persons have, in this sense, integral natures. Personal perfection is the perfection of an individual nature, not merely of Nature, precisely because the person possesses an eternal destiny.²⁹

Both the divine positive and natural laws lie outside humanity's control; it is God's act of creating that brought reality into existence. Karl H. Peschke defines natural law as that moral order which arises from human nature and recognizable by human reason.³⁰ Divine positive law is based on Old and New Testaments of the Scriptures.³¹

Livio Melina champions a proper understanding of the relationship between human and the divine laws:

In order to understand the fullness of Christian action, it is necessary to overcome both rationalism, which mortifies freedom by submitting it to external norms, and extrinsicism, which disregards the contribution of faith to the dynamism of praxis. An integral openness to the mystery of Christian action, in which human liberty joins synergistically with divine freedom, enables us to overcome moralism—which reduces human acts to merely external events in order to weigh their advantages and disadvantages... Certainly, we cannot see the light directly; we perceive it only through its reflections, as in a mirror (cf. 1 Cor 13 :12).³²

Gerard J. Hughes makes a case for approaching the natural law theory from two questions: "Different views about the use of reason to discover God's designs for human beings, and different accounts of what human nature is, and about how, or indeed whether, there is any way of deriving morality from such an account."³³ While acknowledging the progress made by the natural sciences vis-à-vis the existence of natural law, Hughes concedes to the fact that:

A comparatively uncomplicated view of human nature which a religious believer could hold is that human nature, as we find it, reflects the wisdom and goodness of the creator, God. To the extent that we can understand ourselves, to that extent we can understand God's designs in creating us as we are, just as to the extent that we can understand anything else in creation we can to that extent understand how the creator God intended things to be.³⁴

²⁸ *Evangelium Vitae*, 2.

²⁹ Paul M. Quay, "Contraception and Conjugal Love," in *Why Humane Vitae Was Right*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 23.

³⁰ Karl H. Peschke, *Christian Ethics: Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II vol. I* (Bangalore: St. Paul, 1996), 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 66-68.

³² Livio Melina, "The Fullness of Christian Action: Beyond Moralism and Antimoralism," *Logos: A Journal of the Catholic Thought and Culture* 8.3 (2005): 123-140, 137.

³³ Gerard J. Hughes, "Natural Law," in *Christian Ethics: An Introduction*, ed. Bernard Hoose (London: Cassell, 2003): 47-56, 47.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

Given an understanding of a human being as a reflection of the wisdom and goodness of God, John Paul II insists that “Life is a good, man and woman, formed from the dust of the earth, are traces of God’s glory.”³⁵ This means that human dignity is derived from God who is the highest good (*summum bonum*) and its knowledge proceeds from the natural law. It is from this self-consciousness that other values have been established. James T. McHugh agrees and avers as follows:

Human dignity derives from God's creation of each person, redemption of Jesus Christ, and the call to eternal happiness. Correspondingly, the dignity of the person is the foundation of fundamental and God-given human rights, as well as rights asserted or granted by society that are consistent with the dignity of the person and the common good.³⁶

The above excerpt calls for an integral human development and this starts in a state where citizens pursue their individual goals through obedience to rule of law and respect for human rights. Notably, every human right is intrinsically associated with freedom.³⁷

Humans are beings endowed with fundamental rights that are rooted in God who created man/woman free beings. John Paul II believes that Christian ethics should enlighten and guide all liberty so as to sync with the divine creation:

There is no true freedom where life is not welcomed and loved, and there is no fullness of life except in freedom. In the formation of conscience is the necessary link between freedom and truth. Only by admitting our innate dependence on God can we live and use our freedom and at the same time respect the life and freedom of every other person.³⁸

John Paul II continues same discourse on the relationship between human freedom and divine mandate. He expresses fear that constant abuse of human freedom might lead to grave consequences for human existence:

If I am free, I can make good or bad use of my freedom. If I use it well, I in my turn become more “good” as a result, and the good I have accomplished has a positive influence on those around me. If on other hand I use it wrongly, evil will take root and begin to spread both in me and around me.³⁹

This freedom prohibits the taking of an innocent human life because every human life is sacred and it implies inviolability of human which reflects the Creator’s inviolability. This also leads to the question of when human life begins. To this, John Paul II insists: “But from the time of fertilization a life of a new human being is begun, from the first instant there is established what this living being will be: a person”⁴⁰ and on difficulty of ascertaining the exactness of the presence of spiritual soul, “scientific research provides an invaluable indication of a personal presence at the first moment of a human life.”⁴¹ Additionally, he envisages a new attitude towards human person by stressing that everyone irrespective of one’s physical or psychological condition, remains an

³⁵ *Evangelium Vitae*, 33.

³⁶ Bishop James T. McHugh, "Building a Culture of Life: A Catholic Perspective," *Christian Bioethics* 7, no. 3 (2001): 441-452, 441.

³⁷ This is the definition of freedom according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1731: “Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one’s own responsibility. By free will one shapes one’s own life. Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed towards God, our beatitude.”

³⁸ *Evangelium Vitae*, 96.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, 37.

⁴⁰ *Evangelium Vitae*, 60.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*



integral member of the community. Similarly, sick persons should be cared for and respected as members of humanity. For him, old age or sickness does not rob one of his/her dignity.

Concerning human sexuality, John Paul II, sees it as a procreative power of human beings to continue the work of creation through nuptial action. Thus, human beings co-create with God the work of the furtherance of man/woman in the world; human bodies are not merely goods for the person but goods of the person, and as long as there is in our midst a living being. This sheds more light on human gender as marks of sexual differences, and is rooted in their being, as against merely biological and anatomical givens. Commenting on this, W. J. Eijk notes:

The combination of the loss of the sense of God and that of man unavoidably leads to the loss of the transcendence of the human being and hence his reduction to his physical aspect. The human body is no longer considered as a personal reality, but as a biological/material object with an instrumental or hedonistic value. In other words: man, instead of *being* his body – though something being more than that due to his spiritual dimension – thinks to *have* his body.⁴²

Going by the above expositions, John Paul II's work, *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life), is steeped in core philosophical and theological traditions of the Catholic Church, especially scholastic school of thoughts. The gained insights and their application to his work are beneficial to the readers who are offered the opportunity to reflect on the quantum of reasons deployed to the work's ethical resources. John Paul II, thus, re-thinks currency of ideology and praxis in society and applies the Catholic Church's philosophical and theological parameters in their analysis and evaluation. This has yielded his mission of the urgent need to understand human persons in the light of theological ethics and religious truth. The *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life) is an ethical effort aimed at the reconstruction of the present order so as to bring to limelight the lost path of moral goodness in today's world.

***Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) and Its Strategic Vision for Society**

The merit of any good work is its practical value for life situations. In this regard, the vision of the *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) is well articulated by John Paul II. The work is not addressed to Christians alone but for all human beings from different walks of life. Thus, the first vision of his work centres on the fact human life has a sacred and religious value, but in no way is that value a concern only of believers. The value at stake is one which every human being can grasp by light of reason; thus, it necessarily concerns everyone. Consequently, all that we do as the 'people of life and for life' should be interpreted correctly and welcomed with favour.⁴³

The second visualization for the *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) is a call to society to become active in all matters concerning pro-life initiative through the promotion of common good. For him, "A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated."⁴⁴

The third vision of John Paul II's ethical thought is not unmindful of the importance of political ideology's role in shaping and sustaining stability of civil society. The democratic governments should be encouraged to operate as the best political system thus the need for its promotion. In this sense, he argues that there is no "*true democracy* without recognition of every person's dignity and

⁴² Eijk W. J., "Evangelium Vitae and the Culture of Life Today," *Thomas Aquinas Research Complex* (2005), 9.

⁴³ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 572.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*,



without respect for his or her rights. Nor can there be true *peace* unless *life is defended and promoted*.⁴⁵

The fourth and the final vision of John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) is an enthronement of a new society where people of life and people for life take charge of all human endeavours. This demands a collaborative effort in the task of building a just and liveable community where everyone feels loved and cared for – in an atmosphere of justice, equity and tolerance. It is the vision of John Paul II that the numerical strength of these pro-life individuals will not only be felt, but “a new culture of love and solidarity develop for the true good of the whole of human society.”⁴⁶

The Envisioned Application of *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) to Human Society

Having discussed John Paul II's vision as regards his work, this section of the study considers the application-value of the same document to society. The *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) is a project that is an ethical model tailored towards religious, social, intellectual and cultural platforms. Here, he makes a case for an immediate call to action:

What is urgently called for is a *general mobilization of consciences* and a *united ethical effort* to activate a *general campaign in support of life*. *All together, we must build a new culture of life*: new, because it will be adopted with deeper and more dynamic conviction by all Christians; new, because it will be capable of bringing about a serious and courageous cultural dialogue among all parties.⁴⁷

Inferred from the above citation, John Paul II sets his eyes on Christian communities as one of the basic ways of the application of his work; in view of this, a renewal of a culture of life within the Christian communities becomes a new moral order. Sadly, this has not taken place and he accused some Christians of separating their faith from its ethical requirements concerning life.⁴⁸ To achieve this practical step, he mentions an openness of heart and moral courage as a veritable means to establishing the people of the gospel of life and as canvassed elsewhere in his earlier work, “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.”⁴⁹

In the *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life), John Paul II outlines and discusses the various pathways in terms of the application of the work to society and these include: (i) formation of individual conscience, (ii) recovery of the necessary connection between freedom and truth, (iii) the importance of formal/informal education, (iv) accepting person's inherent worth as a child of God (v) advocacy for the value of human life, (vi) promotion of the work of education, (vii) the need for a change in our value system/lifestyle, (viii) a general mobilization for a new culture of life concerns the following persons/professions, namely: the family, teachers and educators, intellectuals, the mass media, and women.⁵⁰

The *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) and Human Society: An Ethical Appraisal

Given the above discussion, the *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life), specifically from its philosophical and theological underpinnings, vision, and application to human situation, this section

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 573.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 567.

⁴⁸ *Evangelium Vitae*, 95.

⁴⁹ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 568.

⁵⁰ *Evangelium Vitae*, 95-99.



subjects John Paul II's work to an ethical analysis; this is part of the objective of the study to critically examine his treatise in order to affirm or disapprove its assumption or projections.

In the structure and layout of the work, John Paul II, views antilife as an affront to God and humanity and he appropriately labels such phenomenon as a culture of death. This concept embodies all vestige of immoral or unethical practice amongst members of society. On the contrary, he developed the culture of life and presented it as an ethical model/paradigm for individual or community welfare. It is a laudable effort with respect to the different sources and various arguments used in conveying his thought.

As already seen from the review of the work, it is evident that John Paul II applied his Christian (Catholic) tradition to the presentation of his ethical thinking. One cannot deny the plausibility of the newly-coined concepts (culture of death and culture of life) but it does not imply their acceptability; what he has achieved is an addition to lexicon in the field of ethics and/or religious studies. Based on field result, these concepts have been applied to other fields of discipline including the media, social sciences, social work, among others. Does this prove the veracity of the thinking as a moral reflection?

The paper subscribes to John Paul II's description of sinful disposition/act as a culture of death – finding its locus in the Biblical narrative of Cain and Abel. In this, he (John Paul II) interprets and situates the 'first-ever' case of murder as the template influencing all anti-life in modern society. One sees a logical sequence in his reason since Christian faith is a source of moral norm for millions of followers. However, some people may disagree with this supposition on the grounds that biblical stories, under normal circumstances, should be applied meant for Christians and not non-Christians as presented in the work. At this instance, one wonders why John Paul II failed to adduce a universal storyline in his depiction of immorality/crime in human community.

Further, the *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life) fails in ethical filtering system, that is, sampling of behavioural variables across cultures and societies in the world; owing to this lapse, he fails to mention specific name of persons or individuals who practiced either the culture of death or the culture of life for vilification or canonization. Yet again, he concentrated too much of his energy on Catholic faith and morals thereby making it the yardstick for measurement of the quality of human conduct in a globalized world. This is a case of over generalization and over dependence on one source for analysis of data. Already some writers like James T. McHugh have appropriated the culture of life for only Catholics:

The Gospel of Life is a response to, and rejection of, the culture of death. Catholics are reminded that the Gospel of Life is part of that Gospel which is Jesus Christ Himself. John Paul II tells Catholics that they are a people of life, sent, as a people, to proclaim this Gospel, thereby emphasizing the ecclesial responsibility. By their prayers, efforts, and their suffering, they are involved in 'a general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort in support of life' (E.V., No. 95), directed toward building a new culture of life. The encyclical ends with the prayer of John Paul II that the people of life may constantly grow in number and that a new culture of love and solidarity will develop for the true good of the whole of human society.⁵¹

This above position indicates a perception that John Paul II's thesis is exclusively meant for Catholics in comparison to the article of Christian faith. No doubt, it diminishes any universal character of John Paul II's intervention.

⁵¹ Bishop James T. McHugh, "Building a Culture of Life: A Catholic Perspective," *Christian Bioethics* 7, no. 3 (2001), 451.

Another area of the work which shows some contextual weakness is limiting the indices of culture of death to abortion, euthanasia, contraception, sexuality, violence, wars and warfare, cloning, and environmental degradation presents a closed border. One had expected John Paul II to also consider such domestic problems like child abuse, falsehood, financial crimes, corruption, ecclesial and diplomatic secrecy, religious supremacy, among others, as indications of the same culture of death. Notably, this study observes that John Paul II failed to apply the same concept to the documents used for the “Apologies and Forgiveness in 2000”. This lack is seen as a selective justice or an act of inconsistency when some members of the Catholic Church were given a soft landing in such grievous crimes as inquisition, the Holocaust, the Slave trade, et cetera. His inability to describe these mentioned unethical events as culture of death leaves much to be desired.

Hans Küng in his assessment of John Paul II’s work, faults the Catholic Church’s apology and forgiveness as lacking substantial elements of guilt and repentance, which are the key words in culture of death and the culture of life, respectively. This deficiency is criticized thus:

Despite the fact that in 2000 he forced himself through a public confession of the Church’s historical transgression, John Paul II has drawn almost no practical consequences from it. The baroque and bombastic confession of the Church’s transgressions, staged with cardinals in St. Peter’s Cathedral, remained vague, non-specific and ambiguous. The pope only asked for forgiveness for the transgressions of the “sons and daughters” of the Church, but not for those of the “Holy Father,” those of the “church itself” and those of the hierarchies present at the event.⁵²

By comparison, one could equate Küng’s intervention on John Paul II’s apology with an aftermath of paedophilia cases in the United States of America amongst some clergy and their victims. One finds similar views in Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel, a Catholic priest, who asserts, “if you were to look through the history of reform, you would find that the most powerful Church reformers began as individuals – often laypeople – who were trying to bring their own lives into agreement with the Gospel”.⁵³ But Küng’s assessment centres on the need for the Pope to mention the names of Church’s officials who committed such ‘sins’ in said the apologies.

One had expected John Paul II to integrate other the Abrahamic sources (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) or ancient Greek works into his discourse on human person. The thinking was that he would have gathered some cognate materials from Qu’ran or excerpts from the works of Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, among and other notable classics. Also, wider a consultation beyond the extraordinary consistory of Cardinals⁵⁴ could have made his work assume a universal touch.

Not losing the above observations, the *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life), in its proposal for culture of life as a solution to antilife, the work sets out a thesis and anti-thesis format which is quite difficult to achieve. For one, human behaviour is a complex phenomenon and he eulogizes the culture of life as if it is one-stop-solution for all problems in society. The logic, position, framework and structure for the ‘New culture of human life’ are all based on the Biblically oriented. In that case the hyped ‘virtue’ remains strictly a Christian ethical project.

In asserting the necessity of culture of life to society, John Paul II, submits as follows: “The *Gospel of life* is not for believers alone: *it is for everyone*. The issue of life and its defence and promotion is

⁵² Hans Küng, "Crisis in the Catholic Church: The Pope's Contradiction," in *Der Spiegel* (Germany: 2005): 1-6, 6.

⁵³ Benedict J. Groeschel, *From Scandal to Hope* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2002), 69.

⁵⁴ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 5.

not a concern of Christian alone *The Gospel of life* is for the whole of human society.”⁵⁵ One finds this claim incongruent with special reference to all-Catholic *instrumentum laboris*.⁵⁶

Given the above lacuna, the researcher also sees John Paul II's work as a short-term project. He gives an impression that evil could be eliminated in the near future; the *Evangelium Vitae* was published in 1995, as a follow up to his pursuit for respect for human life. But one expects that he could have reviewed his theory in the year 2000, to see if there was a need for review of the extant subsequent documents. Besides, his projection for the investiture of culture of life is unclear and nobody knows if it has begun or culture of death still pervades human conduct. In this regard, Weigel, bares his mind:

As the Holy Father understands fully well, building the culture of life is not something that will be accomplished in a month, a year, a decade, or even in our lifetimes. It is a task for generations, and given the reality of the *mysterium iniquitatis*,⁵⁷ it seems likely that it will be a never-ending task.⁵⁸

If this quote could come from one of the official biographers of John Paul II, then one keeps fingers crossed in this matter.

In addition, John Paul II's vision of culture of life suffered some setbacks when compared to his former works when the Church was defined institutionally, and as guarantor of truth to be accepted by all. His pre-papal writings were influenced by Max Scheler, and he fought against human oppression which led to the development of the concepts of the culture of life and culture of death. This study finds that John Paul II's soft approach to some dissent voices of his time changed greatly following his election as a Pope. One observes with sadness how he shifted from his opinion on opposition as a necessary ingredient for building an authentic human community to the mentality of punishment through imposition of censures. Some instances suffice: clamping down on some of his contemporaries like Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeeckx, Leonardo Boff, among others.

On some positive notes, the above critical statements do not in any way detract the merits of the *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life). John Paul II through the discourse has opened a new vista on human as a being capable of good thought and right action if enlightened by the Christian truth. His interest in the human affairs is clearly proven in this work. Thus, this treatise has become a resourceful material for scholarship and praxis.

Owing to the religious connotations surrounding sin in the secular society, one sees the central place of culture of death in symbolizing all forms and shades of impoliteness, anti-life actions and ideology, violence, war and warfare, ecological degradation, racism and discrimination and others as morally unacceptable in society. At the same time, culture of life stands for all the ethically approved conduct and values deployed to societal wellbeing; in other words, culture of life passes for goodness:

The hallmark of good reasoning is the weighing of our present and future plans, programmes, and thoughts in order to ascertain its *pros* and *cons*. The *genesis* of wisdom is the acceptance of constructive criticisms and fraternal corrections. Through these, one stands the ground to

⁵⁵ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Love* (Boston: Pauline, 1997), 572.

⁵⁶ It is the Latin designation for an “Instrument of work” and it is the sense in which is used here. John Paul II's discourse on the human life is primarily drawn from the Catholic perspective. Greater percentage of his raw materials was drawn from the *Magisterium* and the works of his predecessors. These are all-Catholic instruments.

⁵⁷ The mysterious nature of evil means repetitive nature of the occurrence of sin in the life of the human person.

⁵⁸ George Weigel, "John Paul II: A Life for Life," in *Culture of Life Conference* (Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture: Notre Dame University, 29 November 2001), 50.

service his personality in anticipation of becoming better person in the society and in the family....⁵⁹

The above citation has thrown more light to the significance of John Paul II's work in equipping a person with a balanced outlook to life, ethically considered. From the above assessment, this paper is impressed by the logical presentation and discussion of the ethical thought of John Paul II. *The Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life) remains an important book on the Christian faith and morals with positive insightful influence on society aimed at moral renaissance through its reading and application to societal problems.

Conclusion

The study began a preliminary inquiry into the *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life), a seminal work by John Paul II, which focused on the dignity of human person as the greatest gift from God to the order of terrestrial creation. Drawing from Christian ethics, especially its pedagogy and tradition, he argued that man/woman ought to be human person who aligns with God in cherishing and protecting life as an inestimable divine gift to humanity. Again, he applied different Biblical narratives to underscore the incomparable worth of human life vis-à-vis the cadre of other lower animals. The research observed that John Paul II's work was not written in an abeyance; his work was a continuum in the papal antecedents of the promotion of social order, especially the work of Pope Paul VI, the *Humanae Vitae*.

The philosophical and theological formation of John Paul II underpinned his ethical thought and he applied same to the hypothesis on human conduct: human life is the highest good. Besides these fields of study, his work was also influenced by a number of personal experiences during the Second World War and the Soviet Union's occupation of Poland. Those events shaped his religious conviction about the importance of God in the affairs of men/women in the world. Thus, the *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) canvassed for a new moral compass where antilife initiatives would neither be fashionable nor tolerated in family or community. He identified and named such negative-life acts as the culture of death. Again, he labelled all positive-life as culture of life. For him, therefore, human conduct is broadly classified into two strands: culture of death and culture of life.

The study interrogated the different premises on which John Paul II built his assumptions on the deteriorating degrees of the quality of human life in today's society. No doubt, the paper's findings were quite revealing and supported his evaluation: human life is on its lowest ebbs in terms of false ideology and practice amongst peoples of the world. The research agreed with John Paul II that the contemporary society had descended to the Stone Age in the name of postmodernity and civil liberty where the obscene had become the order of the day in all ramifications. In all of these, John Paul II challenged the status quo of the world drifting to the negative-life as opposed to culture of life.

The study in its analysis of John Paul II's work, gained a lot of theoretical and empirical insights into his ethical agenda, namely, a well-developed vision and actionable plans for the realisation of the gospel of life in society. He outlined a number of statements covering designated areas of interest where the gospel of life was best fitted in terms of vision; this is further followed by some actionable steps where the culture of life would be applied for societal development. These practical initiatives marked out the work of John Paul II as a resourceful tool in re-engineering the moral fabrics of today's civilization. Nonetheless, the paper also noticed that there were some areas where

⁵⁹ Augustine Chiedu Onyiloha, *God, Thou and I: A Discourse on the Christian Faith and Morals* (Enugu: Snaap, 2004), 120.



John Paul II did not do well in his discourse. The *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life) is an ethical work written from a Catholic standpoint and could not have covered all areas of humanity, especially the multicultural and multireligious character of society. In this sense, the work was limited both in scope and operation; the different assumptions about the near-failure of human conduct might suffer some setbacks against the backdrop of a dearth of comparative study. At best, John Paul II had given his personal assessment of human conduct and also blamed today's society for its decline. To this end, the researcher shared his opinion that human life is God's best gift to humanity and ought to be cherished and protected from negative all the influences arising from culture of death. Also, the paper accepted in its entirety a new ethical paradigm, the culture of life as explained in his work. The *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of life), in its outline and discourse, remains one of the best works by John Paul II in his x-ray of societal problems and also proffered solutions being part of his ethical vision the contemporary society.