

The Gospel of Life

Evangelium vitae

STUDY GUIDE



**United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities**

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FOREWORD

Imagine being born into a village located in a jungle, and growing up under the care of people who do not see a path through; moreover, the jungle is changing daily, thickening. Paths which used to provide safe passage are no longer trusted, and the guides who relied on them are no longer around.

And then a person arrives who steadily sees, looks into your eyes and soul, and says, “The jungle is dark, but you can bear more light in it than you think. Come, let’s go this way. This way is sure. It is *the* way. Illumined by the truth. Ending in life. It is THROUGH the jungle, not outside of it, that your adventure of life is to be lived, but guided by a light which is not of the jungle itself”

That was what it was like to be coming of age in the late 70s and early 80s. The Cold War had us learning as little boys and girls what nuclear attack would mean, and how to shelter under our desks. The Sexual Revolution was bent on forming us in its image, as little centers of autonomous sexual pleasure, the path for safety guarded by contraception and the legality of abortion. And it turns out that contraception and abortion protected the human person from the ravages of the jungle about as well as the school desk would fare in the face of a nuclear blast.

And the guide? That is what it was like, and still is like, to experience Pope St. John Paul II. Even through his writing.

John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*) remains a relevant and sure guide, filled with the voice and Christ-filled confidence of a pope we call “Great.” This encyclical on the importance of every human life and of protecting human dignity—especially through the protection of human life—helps guide readers to experience the courage, joy, and clarity of this great teacher and compassionate spiritual father.

Through it, we can find paths through the culture of death, the Valley of the Shadow of Death in the world today, to a culture of life, in which each of us has a part to play.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is designed to be used in small or large group settings to discuss and reflect on the papal encyclical, *Evangelium vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*). It can be used in conjunction with either the “*The Gospel of Life: Compendium*” or with the full encyclical text. This study guide provides scripture passages, prayers, and discussion questions to help participants reflect more deeply on *The Gospel of Life* and its central themes and teachings.

We recommend meeting once a week, or once every other week for 60 to 90 minutes. This study guide is divided into six sessions, and each session follows the same basic format:

- ◆ OPENING PRAYER
- ◆ REVIEW / SUMMARY
- ◆ SCRIPTURE READING
- ◆ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
- ◆ CLOSING PRAYER
- ◆ ANNOUNCEMENTS

Participants are expected to come to each session having already read the designated material for that gathering. The study guide is ideal for use in parish ministry studies, diocesan or parish pro-life meetings, high school theology classes, youth or young adult book studies, adult faith formation series, Catholic book clubs, and more! And while specifically designed to help facilitate group studies, individuals can also use this tool on their own to increase their understanding of the text and make real-life connections.

We encourage you to adapt this tool to best serve your needs and those of your particular group or community. While a basic framework is provided, you can make adjustments as necessary. For example, instead of having all participants read the material in advance, you can choose to meet for 90 minutes and read the designated sections from the “*The Gospel of Life: Compendium*” together. If distance or other factors prevent you from meeting in person, consider meeting via video chat. Perhaps in addition to the closing prayer, you could also invite members to offer personal prayer intentions, as well. Feel free to customize this study to make it the most helpful for your particular group.

BEST PRACTICES

While we encourage you to adapt this study as needed, some basic best practices are provided to help guide you.

◆ DESIGNATE A FACILITATOR.

One person should be selected as the “leader” of your group study. This person helps facilitate discussion, keeps the session on topic, sends reminders to group members, makes announcements, and completes any other tasks needed to make the study meaningful and fruitful for all participants.

◆ PRACTICE HOSPITALITY.

Take steps to make everyone to feel welcome and comfortable. Greet group members as they arrive and try to anticipate any specific needs as best you can. For example, if you’re meeting in person, help them find a place to set down their coats or purses. Have pens and paper available for those who might like to take notes. Simple gestures such as this extend a sense of hospitality and welcome. If your meeting space allows for it and you have the resources, consider making light refreshments available. Perhaps group members would want to take turns bringing in something to share. While refreshments certainly aren’t necessary, having coffee, sodas, or juice and light snacks can make your time together even more enjoyable.

◆ BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.

Make a point to get to know one another and build relationships. At your first gathering, have everyone introduce and share a little about themselves. As you continue to meet, consider having an opening “ice breaker” in which all members take turns answering a new question. For example, maybe you want to start your gathering by asking each person to share a “rose” and “thorn” from their week: some blessing or exciting news and a challenge or something they would like prayers for. You can also do fun questions like: *What place would you most like to visit and why? What’s your favorite movie? What food could you not live without?* And so on.

◆ BEGIN AND END ON TIME.

We recommend that you keep your sessions to 60 or 90 minutes. Whichever length you choose, be sure to keep the gathering running on time out of respect for all participants. While some members may want to chat before or after the specified meeting time, be sure to keep the formal study session within the agreed upon timeframe.

◆ KEEP THE MEETING LOCATION CONSISTENT.

When possible, keep your meeting location consistent. This provides familiarity and reliability to group members. If the location does need to change, be sure to make announcements, send out reminders, and provide clear directions for the alternate location. You might also consider posting a sign in the usual location directing to the new location for people who might miss the message.

◆ ALLOW TIME FOR SILENCE.

In a group setting, silence can often feel a little awkward or uncomfortable. But often, silence is needed to allow participants to collect their thoughts, reflect more deeply, or even gather the courage to share what is on their hearts. Silence can also help foster openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Explain to group members that pauses in the discussion are natural and that you'll all become more accustomed to silence throughout the study.

◆ LET THE HOLY SPIRIT LEAD.

In addition to asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the opening prayer, continue to let him lead throughout the session. For example, sometimes your group may spend more time on a particular topic or discussion question. Perhaps something specific is resonating with your group. You may not be able to get to all the discussion questions, and that is okay. Allow the Holy Spirit to help you discern what to spend more time on and when it may be best to move on to the next question.



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OPENING PRAYER

To be prayed at the beginning of each session.

Heavenly Father,

As we come together to study and meditate upon *The Gospel of Life*,
we ask you to send your Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds to your truth.

Grant us your wisdom and understanding
as we seek a deeper appreciation for your gift of life.

May our time together help us to grow in love and knowledge of you,
and help us respond to your promptings.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER

To be prayed at the end of each session.

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.

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SESSION ONE

The Gospel of Life: Introduction

READING

Study Guide: Foreword

Compendium: Background, Introduction (paragraphs 1-6)

OPENING PRAYER

See page 7.

REVIEW / SUMMARY

Invite one person to provide a brief summary of the readings for this session. This can be the group facilitator or any member of the group.

SCRIPTURE READING

Ask one member of the group to read the following Scripture passage aloud. When he or she is finished, take a few moments to silently reflect on the Scripture passage.

John 3:16-21

[16] For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. [17] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. [18] Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. [19] And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. [20] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. [21] But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What inspired you to want to read and study *The Gospel of Life*?

2. How do you think the experiences of Pope St. John Paul II's early life may have influenced his understanding of human dignity and his decision to write this encyclical?

3. In the text we read that "*The Gospel of God's love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the Gospel of life are a single and indivisible Gospel.*" What do you think that means?

4. What are some examples of ways consciences find it difficult to distinguish between good and evil?

5. What do you think some of the characteristics would be of "an authentic civilization of truth and love"?

CLOSING PRAYER

See page 7.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- ◆ *The reading for our next session will be Chapter 1 (paragraphs #7-28).*
- ◆ *Our next meeting will be ... [date, time, and location].*

SESSION TWO

The Gospel of Life: Chapter 1 Present Day Threats to Human Life

READING

Chapter 1 (paragraphs #7-28)

OPENING PRAYER

See page 7.

REVIEW / SUMMARY

Invite one person to provide a brief summary of the readings for this session. This can be the group facilitator or any member of the group.

SCRIPTURE READING

Ask one member of the group to read the following Scripture passage aloud. When he or she is finished, take a few moments to silently reflect on the Scripture passage.

Genesis 4:2-16

[2] Abel became a herder of flocks, and Cain a tiller of the ground. [3] In the course of time Cain brought an offering to the LORD from the fruit of the ground, [4] while Abel, for his part, brought the fatty portion of the firstlings of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, [5] but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry and dejected. [6] Then the LORD said to Cain: Why are you angry? Why are you dejected? [7] If you act rightly, you will be accepted; but if not, sin lies in wait at the door: its urge is for you, yet you can rule over it.

[8] Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out in the field." When they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. [9] Then the LORD asked Cain, Where is your brother Abel? He answered, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" [10] God then said: What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground! [11] Now you are banned from the ground that opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. [12] If you till the ground, it shall no longer give you its produce. You shall become a constant wanderer on the earth. [13] Cain said to the LORD: "My punishment is too great to bear. [14] Look, you have now banished me from the ground. I must avoid you and be a constant wanderer on the earth. Anyone may kill me at sight." [15] Not so! the LORD said to him. If anyone kills Cain, Cain shall be avenged seven times. So the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one would kill him at sight. [16] Cain then left the LORD's presence and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean that contraception and abortion are “fruits of the same tree”?

2. Why do you think our society views suffering as meaningless? How does a Christian understanding of suffering counter such views?

3. Why is euthanasia a misguided response to suffering?

4. What does Pope St. John Paul II mean when he writes about the “eclipse of the sense of God and of man?” How does this contribute to confusion between good and evil, precisely in relation to human life?

5. Pope St. John Paul II provides a number of positive signs even amidst a culture of death. What are some that you have personally witnessed which contribute to the building of a “civilization of love and life”?

CLOSING PRAYER

See page 7.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- ◆ *The reading for our next session will be Chapter 2 (paragraphs #29-51).*
- ◆ *Our next meeting will be ... [date, time, and location].*

SESSION THREE

The Gospel of Life: Chapter 2 The Christian Message Concerning Life

READING

Chapter 2 (paragraphs #29-51)

OPENING PRAYER

See page 7.

REVIEW / SUMMARY

Invite one person to provide a brief summary of the readings for this session. This can be the group facilitator or any member of the group.

SCRIPTURE READING

Ask one member of the group to read the following Scripture passage aloud. When he or she is finished, take a few moments to silently reflect on the Scripture passage.

Luke 1:39-45

[39] During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, [40] where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. [41] When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, [42] cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. [43] And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? [44] For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. [45] Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Jesus' death on the Cross reveal the great value of human life?

2. Why is man considered the “crown” of all God’s creation?

3. How is the value and dignity of human life specifically linked to its beginning and end? How does this reality help us understand our earthly life?

4. Why aren’t there specific calls in Scripture to protect life at its beginning and end? How does the Bible confirm our understanding of the value of life?

5. Jesus’ death on the Cross “proclaims that *life finds its center, its meaning, and its fulfillment when it is given up.*” As God’s children, we are also called to give of ourselves in love for our brothers and sisters. What are some ways that we can give our lives for others?

CLOSING PRAYER

See page 7.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- ◆ *The reading for our next session will be Chapter 3 (paragraphs #52-77).*
- ◆ *Our next meeting will be ... [date, time, and location].*

SESSION FOUR

The Gospel of Life: Chapter 3 God's Holy Law

READING

Chapter 3 (paragraphs #52-77)

OPENING PRAYER

See page 7.

REVIEW / SUMMARY

Invite one person to provide a brief summary of the readings for this session. This can be the group facilitator or any member of the group.

SCRIPTURE READING

Ask one member of the group to read the following Scripture passage aloud. When he or she is finished, take a few moments to silently reflect on the Scripture passage.

1 John 3:11-18

[11] For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another, [12] unlike Cain who belonged to the evil one and slaughtered his brother. Why did he slaughter him? Because his own works were evil, and those of his brother righteous. [13] Do not be amazed, [then,] brothers, if the world hates you. [14] We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. Whoever does not love remains in death. [15] Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life remaining in him. [16] The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. [17] If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him? [18] Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why are God's commandments truly gifts?

2. What is the role and purpose of punishment? Why is the death penalty unnecessary in our modern society?

3. What is the difference between euthanasia and legitimate decisions to forego specific medical treatments?

4. Why are euthanasia and assisted suicide perversions of mercy and compassion? In light of our faith, what constitutes true compassion, and what does God ask of us as followers of Christ?

5. How are Christians called to respond to laws that legalize abortion or euthanasia? What is our responsibility to our brothers and sisters?

CLOSING PRAYER

See page 7.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- ◆ *The reading for our next session will be Chapter 4 (paragraph #78-101).*
- ◆ *Our next meeting will be ... [date, time, and location].*

SESSION FIVE

The Gospel of Life: Chapter 4 For a New Culture of Human Life

READING

Chapter 4 (paragraphs #78-101)

OPENING PRAYER

See page 7.

REVIEW / SUMMARY

Invite one person to provide a brief summary of the readings for this session. This can be the group facilitator or any member of the group.

SCRIPTURE READING

Ask one member of the group to read the following Scripture passage aloud. When he or she is finished, take a few moments to silently reflect on the Scripture passage.

Psalm 139:1-16

- [1] LORD, you have probed me, you know me:
 - [2] you know when I sit and stand;
you understand my thoughts from afar.
- [3] You sift through my travels and my rest;
with all my ways you are familiar.
- [4] Even before a word is on my tongue,
LORD, you know it all.
- [5] Behind and before you encircle me
and rest your hand upon me.
- [6] Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
far too lofty for me to reach.

- [7] Where can I go from your spirit?
From your presence, where can I flee?
- [8] If I ascend to the heavens, you are there;
if I lie down in Sheol, there you are.
- [9] If I take the wings of dawn
and dwell beyond the sea,
- [10] Even there your hand guides me,

your right hand holds me fast.
[11] If I say, “Surely darkness shall hide me,
and night shall be my light”—
[12] Darkness is not dark for you,
and night shines as the day.
Darkness and light are but one.

[13] You formed my inmost being;
you knit me in my mother’s womb.
[14] I praise you, because I am wonderfully made;
wonderful are your works!
My very self you know.
[15] My bones are not hidden from you,
When I was being made in secret,
fashioned in the depths of the earth.
[16] Your eyes saw me unformed;
in your book all are written down;
my days were shaped, before one came to be.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the “contemplative outlook” which Pope St. John Paul II says is the first step to proclaiming the Gospel of life?

2. What are the various forms that Pope St. John Paul II identifies as celebrations of the Gospel of life?

3. What is the role of the family in building a culture of life? How does the family model and exemplify the values of care for life and the celebration of the Gospel of life?

4. What are some of the steps identified by Pope St. John Paul II that need to be taken in order to form consciences with regard to the value of every human life?

5. What is the unique role of women in transforming the culture? What is Pope St. John Paul II's message to women who suffer from having had an abortion?

CLOSING PRAYER

See page 7.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- ◆ *The reading for our next session will be the Conclusion (paragraphs #102-105).*
- ◆ *Our next meeting will be ... [date, time, and location].*

SESSION SIX

The Gospel of Life: Conclusion

READING

Conclusion (paragraphs #102-105)

OPENING PRAYER

See page 7.

REVIEW / SUMMARY

Invite one person to provide a brief summary of the readings for this session. This can be the group facilitator or any member of the group.

SCRIPTURE READING

Ask one member of the group to read the following Scripture passage aloud. When he or she is finished, take a few moments to silently reflect on the Scripture passage.

Revelation 12:1-6

[1] A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. [2] She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. [3] Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. [4] Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth. [5] She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and his throne. [6] The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to the encyclical, what does the motherhood of Mary reveal about the motherhood of the Church?

2. What is the special relationship between Mary and the cause of the Gospel of life? How is she a “living word of comfort” to the Church in the struggle against the culture of death?

3. Why is any rejection of human life really a “rejection of Christ” himself?

4. What is your biggest takeaway from the study of this encyclical?

5. How has a deeper understanding of *The Gospel of Life* impacted you? How have you seen a deeper understanding of the value of the human person bear fruit in your life?

CLOSING PRAYER

See page 7.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- ◆ *Thank you for a wonderful document study that has deepened our understanding of the Gospel of Life and helped us grow in love of Christ and service to him!*
- ◆ *Here are some opportunities to put what we have learned into action ... [provide information on any service events or activities available in your parish, school, diocese, or faith community].*