

The Cult of Life  
By  
David VanLandingham

A recent New York Times front page carried the story of the Israeli bombing killed fifty four people including thirty seven children, on the same page was a story whose first paragraph read, “Congo — Children die here from the same ailments that needlessly kill children all over Africa — malaria, diarrhea, measles, malnutrition — but on a vast and cataclysmic scale.”

Where is the Catholic Church? Why isn't it and all of its membership aggressively working to stop the devastation? Isn't care of the less fortunate critical to Jesus' philosophy?

I believe the answer lies, ironically, in what I will call the “cult of life.” The Church says “Every human life, from the moment of conception until death, is sacred because the human person has been willed for its own sake in the image and likeness of the living and holy God.”<sup>1</sup> The church has elevated the preservation of life to the most sacred, the most important of human values. For example, of all the sins listed in the Catechism, abortion alone carries the penalty of “excommunication *latae sententiae*,” (by the very commission of the offense). The scope of this obsession ranges from stem cell research and abortion, to suicide and euthanasia with almost absolute provisions against ending a life seemingly regardless of any greater good. The preservation of life seems to dominate Catholic theology and practice and yet not sufficiently so to save the lives of the millions who die each year from war, genocide, starvation and insufficient health care. But the church does identify one greater good, the preservation of ones own life. Killing is

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<sup>1</sup> CCC 2319

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permissible to save ones own “sacred” life, “love toward oneself remains a fundamental principle of morality.”<sup>2</sup> There are so many contradictions in the Church’s approach and emphasis on “life” issues that, if I may be a bit facetious, the Church needs to get back to basics. Jesus said “you have no teacher but the Christ.”<sup>3</sup> The only possible way to resolve the contradictions of the “cult of life” is to trust Jesus for your theology.

Jesus said “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.”<sup>4</sup> “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”<sup>5</sup> “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”<sup>6</sup> “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”<sup>7</sup> “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”<sup>8</sup> “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”<sup>9</sup> There is a substantial list of “greater goods” that Jesus held more sacred than this self centered love of life.

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<sup>2</sup> CCC 2264

<sup>3</sup> Mt 23:10

<sup>4</sup> Lk 14:26

<sup>5</sup> John 12:25

<sup>6</sup> Mk 8:35, Lk 9:24 Mat 16:25, Lk 17:33

<sup>7</sup> Jn 10:11

<sup>8</sup> John 15:13

<sup>9</sup> Mt 5:21-22

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Jesus said “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”<sup>10</sup> “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”<sup>11</sup> “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”<sup>12</sup> The church errs when it too tightly fuses the flesh and the spirit. If the Spirit gives birth to the spirit, then it is a process of an intelligent plan, a definite decision and action on the part of God in behalf of the specific individual, anything less disparages God and devalues the soul. The existence of the soul is not the result of a biological function. God alone decides when, how and if life is fulfilled with a soul.

In analyzing abortion and by extension, stem cell research, the Church takes the position that “irreparable harm done to the innocent”<sup>13</sup> The passage “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart”<sup>14</sup> gives us proof to the contrary. The comment was made to a living, thinking, rational human being, one with life in its fullest sense, both flesh and soul. It is not possible that if God knew us before the beginning we would not actually live in the manner and form which he knew us. Humans, through stem cell research, cannot thwart prior knowledge of God. Every human being with a soul that God envisioned before the beginning of time will exist.

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<sup>10</sup> Jn 3:6

<sup>11</sup> Jn 6:63

<sup>12</sup> Mt 10:28, Lk 12:4-5

<sup>13</sup> CCC 2272

<sup>14</sup> Jer 1:5

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The Catechism says “God put us in the world to know, to love, and to serve him”<sup>15</sup> This alone is fairly convincing logic that research embryos, and the others that are discarded, have not been fulfilled with a soul. Why, if God’s purpose is to create those who would know, love, and serve him, would he include individuals who have no cognizance or free will, or any chance of attaining either? The reason the Church has always had a dilemma with what happens to the soul of a child which isn’t baptized is because it cannot accept the fact that God handles every individual independently of man’s interference or without the church’s influence. If God wants an un-baptized to be saved it will be saved, or if he wants it to not exist (not have a soul), it will not exist. If he wants an embryo, a fetus or a breathing child to have a soul it will have a soul exactly at the point in time that he decides appropriate for that individual and not simply because and when two humans copulate.

Once we have established God’s prerogatives in the procreation process we can more accurately assess the question of the greater good in “life” issues. “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”<sup>16</sup> Choosing to sacrifice your life for a greater good is honored by Jesus. Caring for the sick is a prime requisite, an absolute requirement for salvation.<sup>17</sup> The church has established the principle, in infant baptism, that society can act on behalf of an incognizant, therefore society has the duty and ability to choose the greater good for an embryo. Theoretically, if society chooses one of six embryos to be used in stem cell research to develop medical cures, and the

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<sup>15</sup> CCC 1721

<sup>16</sup> John 15:13

<sup>17</sup> Mt 25:31-46, Lk 10:25-37

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others are discarded, which of the six will have eternal life? If God involved a soul when he knows that no life will ever exist, the answer would be “all of them” because a just God doesn’t send someone to eternal damnation without recourse. But you get the idea; the embryo used in research has accomplished the greater good; which, if chosen by cognizant individuals and costing them their lives, would result in eternal life.

The same principles apply in abortion, although the “greater good” is less dramatic. While we must reject the rationale in scripture relating the soul to birth or breath, since Spirit is not a function of biology, the gospels do provide additional guidance and confirm that God is individually involved. Jesus stipulated that belief is a basic qualification for redemption<sup>18</sup> and said “the words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”<sup>19</sup> That the fetus does not have the capacity for either would lead us to conclude that God hesitates beyond conception and even birth before involving a soul. Whatever the situation of the soul, “greater good” must always apply. The fetus is a vital resource in procreation for both the family and society and so cannot be treated lightly, however, the life, health and welfare of the mother is also vital and “greater good” decisions not only consider the existence of the soul but that others are dependent on the mother’s well being. With the incognizant, the rule applicable to adults still applies; that of the greater good.

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<sup>18</sup> Mk 16:16, Jn 3:15, Jn 5:24

<sup>19</sup> Jn 6:63

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At the end of the life spectrum is the suicide and euthanasia question. Interestingly it sheds light on the validity of the entire cult of life phenomenon. The Church says suicide “is forbidden by the fifth commandment.”<sup>20</sup> It “contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self.”<sup>21</sup> That “natural inclination” and “self love” should dominate rationale in Christian theology is indicative of how far the “cult of life” diverges from Jesus but with suicide we have a clear inconsistency. Jesus said “but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”<sup>22</sup> “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”<sup>23</sup> “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”<sup>24</sup> There is only one way to interpret the phrase “lay down your life” and that is deliberate, self inflicted death. Jesus said that it is not only proper but virtuous to choose suicide for the “greater good.” Practical implementation of these commands would bless a suffering man facing devastating expenses in a futile fight for life when his early death would assure that his wife and dependents have the necessary funds for life support. Jesus used the term “follow me” on numerous occasions. The theology of the “cult of life” would condemn Jesus for his deliberate decision to cause others to kill him on the cross for the greater good.

The very fact that the only exception to “Sanctity of Life” revolves around self love defines this morality, both in common sense and in the teachings of Jesus. The Church

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<sup>20</sup> 2325

<sup>21</sup> 2281

<sup>22</sup> Mk 8:35, Lk 9:24 Mat 16:25, Lk 17:33

<sup>23</sup> Jn 10:11

<sup>24</sup> John 15:13

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states, “One is bound to take more care of one's own life than of another's.”<sup>25</sup> Jesus’ Greatest Commandments have a higher morality. “Love your neighbor as yourself,”<sup>26</sup> “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”<sup>27</sup> Jesus said, turn the other cheek<sup>28</sup>, and do not be afraid of those who would kill the body.<sup>29</sup> If you follow Christ, perhaps you die, and if you do, you face immediate salvation because you have obeyed the Greatest Commandments and “there is no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend.”<sup>30</sup> But if you follow the Church, you defend yourself and kill and you face judgment.

The “cult of life” is the fuel for the mid-east conflict. Christians are so obsessed with their self love and defense that there is no aggressive Christian movement to stop the slaughter of the innocent. If the “stop the war” movement had the same emphasis by both the leadership and the membership as abortion, peace would be assured.

I introduced this discussion with comments on the devastation in Africa. On the surface it may not appear that abortion is related but it most certainly is. The “cult of life” dominating church emphasis has multiple effects. The first is that it propagates the practice of disregarding Jesus as the prime source of Christian doctrine. The church has established emphasis contrary to Jesus. He did not condemn abortion, but the church defines it as the only sin penalized by “excommunication latae sententiae,” Jesus

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<sup>25</sup> CCC 2264

<sup>26</sup> Mt 22:36-40, Mk 12:28-34

<sup>27</sup> Lk 6:31,

<sup>28</sup> Lk 6:27-31

<sup>29</sup> Mt 10:28Lk 12:4

<sup>30</sup> John 15:13

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endorsed suicide for the greater good. The church is opposed yet gives consideration if the suicide prevents personal suffering<sup>31</sup> but not the suffering of others. Jesus did not approve of self defense but the church supports it as its only justification for killing, and bases this justification on self love, which Jesus loathed. Secondly, it overshadows the prime mandates established by Jesus. Jesus spent his ministry in aid of the suffering; the sick and the poor. Each time he commissioned his disciples on their missions they were tasked to heal the sick.<sup>32</sup> Taking care of the unfortunate was established as the definition of the Great Commandments.<sup>33</sup> Caring for the sick and the hungry is a specific mandate for salvation; those who fail face damnation for that reason alone.<sup>34</sup> You may conclude that healing the sick is the same as saving lives but Jesus did not make that connection. Earthly life wasn't Jesus concern, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."<sup>35</sup> Human suffering was the focus of Jesus ministry and the critical test for salvation, that the church places life above human suffering enables Catholics, both the leadership and the membership, to ignore the devastation in Africa and find justification in condemnation of abortion.

The "cult of life" is little more than the aggrandizement of the flesh, raising its value, in contradiction to Jesus, to match or even exceed the value of the soul. The result, the casualty, is the real values established by Jesus, the values of the spirit not the values of

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<sup>31</sup> CCC 2282

<sup>32</sup> Mt 10:1-8, Lk 9:2,

<sup>33</sup> Lk 10:25-37

<sup>34</sup> Mt 25:31-46

<sup>35</sup> Jn 11:24-26

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the flesh. Jesus said “you have no teacher but the Christ”<sup>36</sup>. Every Catholic eventually faces God. Where the Church disagrees with the Teacher, Catholics must follow Jesus.

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<sup>36</sup> Mt 23:10