

- 1) to know the impact that the pastoral life has had on your work, how he did it change and grow;
- 2) to know some of the most beautiful fruits that you have seen mature among you in these years;
- 3) to know as the spirit of dialogue and communion, able to avoid ideologizzazioni and politicization, has animated the promotion and defense of life in your organization.

The announcement of John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* was no surprise for us. Growing up in the environment of the Pastoral Care of Families and working in Family Counseling of the Catholic Church in Poland, we were deeply rooted in the message of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Pope Paul VI. Positive and Christian view of marriage, natural methods of fertility awareness, education and defense of the unborn child's life were the values that the Polish Church surrounded us with as air. Gave the power not only to build our own happy marriage and family, but also to actively engage in the fight against the widespread abortion in Poland. We were fully aware that the basis of this great foundation was built by Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, later Pope St. John Paul II, on a full of wisdom encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

The fact that the Holy Father was working on a new encyclical, dedicated to the protection of human life, we learned in 1991. That was the main topic of many private conversations during the International Congress of Families, which was held in Bratislava under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for the Family. We were delighted. That was it! This was exactly what the modern world needed. What the Church needed. We discussed the matter with prof. Jereme Lejeune, a geneticist and a great defender of life, who often visited Holy Father.

In 1993, we joined Human Life International movement. Father Paul Marx a charismatic leader and defender of life decided that in Poland Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union will be established. We started training leaders from the region, which prepared them for pro-life activities in their countries. We really needed the encyclical on the subject. We waited impatiently for it.

Being young and impatient, we wanted to get the encyclical immediately and our disappointment was that we still have to wait. It was only when we saw the already published text of the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* in Polish, we understood why. It definitely was beyond our expectations.

Perhaps remembering the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which is very short, it seemed to us that the next encyclical will be similar. A few important words, tips and that is all. By receiving to our own hand the text of the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* we were positively shocked. That was a whole book. Great, multifaceted developed text on such an important and difficult subject! No wonder that the Holy Father, so busy with current responsibilities, need a few years to write it. Nobody before him and after him did write anything like it.

From the beginning it was clear that this encyclical is of great importance for the whole Church. Pro-life movements functioned almost everywhere, in protest against the killing of children in the womb. The legalization of abortion has already covered most of the rich countries of the West. We in Poland got the "right to abortion" in 1956 under the pressure of the communist Soviet Union. So we had 35 years of sad experience. Since the beginning of the Solidarity movement the battle to change the law and the effort to protect the conceived

child was on. It ended with a great success in 1993. Polish experience of changing the law in a positive direction, which was strongly supported by the Holy Father also had its impact on the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*. John Paul II, a number of difficult issues consulted with his friends, the great defenders of life. Among them were Dr. Wanda Póltawska and Fr. prof. Tadeusz Styczeń.

We read the encyclical with bated breath, although very slowly. This is a difficult text, written in theological language. Its full understanding requires concentration and time. It also requires explanation to share this text with others.

At once the idea to organize a conference in Warsaw on the encyclical came up. Organizers were three: Family Council of the Polish Episcopate, Polish Federation of Pro-Life Movements and Human Life International - Europa. Interest was huge and although in Poland pro-life issues were not new, the encyclical opened another door, motivating us to deepen many aspects and topics in defense of life.

What for us was most important? Well, at the beginning of John Paul II's encyclical in the theological analysis he refers us to the Scriptures. The gift of human life and commandment "Thou shalt not kill" deeply analyzed, referring to the first brother murder in the history. To the tragedy of Cain. Notes that God by punishing the murderer does not allow to kill him. Do not kill Cain! At this time, pro-life movements especially in America increasingly fostered. Defense of life often became full of aggression and fighting. There were even cases of shooting abortionists! However, do not kill Cain, so that you do not draw on yourself the curse of God. By killing Cain we can not win the struggle in defense of life! This is very important! You can win only one way! By surrounding with love every life, also poor, sick and helpless. We quoted this passage many, many times. Today, the pro-life movements rely more on "love them both", the mother and the child, as well as find somewhere the lost father.

This reminds us of a bit amusing situation which was told to us by Dr. Jack Willke, "the father of the pro-life movements". He was invited to lecture on a pro-life conference for approx. 200 Lutheran pastors. He took the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* and the whole talk based on reading of consecutive fragments of the Scriptures quoted there by the Pope. He did not say which source is used. At the end of the lecture, however, he was asked a question where we can find so well chosen quotes. So he opened the cover and showed the encyclical, causing amazement and admiration.

Another very important thing was bending over the suffering, sinful woman who had an abortion. Holy Father does not "sugarcoat" anything. Sin called sin and showed its great wickedness. However he leaned forward to the sinner, showing the way back to God. The truth of the committed sin, faith in God's mercy, repentance and penance. These few paragraphs of the encyclical certainly spiritually saved many women who have had abortions. After all they are the second victim. This is perhaps the most often quoted passage of the encyclical. Working in a Family Counseling Center we had a lot of situations where women returned, sometimes after many years. Post-abortion syndrome blocks the acceptance of the Divine Mercy and full entrustment to God. The warm words of St. John Paul II precisely in this Encyclical resonate today with encouragement and faith that God forgives even the heaviest sin, if we go ask and apologize for it.

The third very important aspect of the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* is a simple tip on how to fight for the legal defense of life. For example, the battle in the Polish Parliament (1993), it became clear that the enemy uses the situation. The question arose: if one can in good conscience vote for the bill, which protects life, but not completely. Is supporting good solutions at the same time did not support the killing of the so-called. exceptions? Achieving a total ban on abortion in the current democratic system is virtually unattainable. This dilemma very clearly occurred during the battle in the Polish Parliament. Many noble people voted against the amendment that protects most of unborn children, not wanting to accept the exceptions placed there by the opponents. This serious moral dilemma, of course, went to the Holy Father. John Paul II dealt with it very deeply. Opinions of moralists were divided. The late Fr. prof. Tadeusz Styczeń told us that Holy Father dealt with this problem with great care. Solved it in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*. He described the conditions of a positive vote. The attitude of people voting for life must be unambiguous and made public. It must be ensured that at the current stage of the negotiations nothing more can be achieved. We always have to strive for the full protection of human life. As a result, many children were saved.

The encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* is an epoch-making document. It became the foundation of the doctrine of the Church in matters of defense of human life. Today, after 20 years of its influence the defenses of life by the Catholic Church is completely evident. Moreover, it is extremely important and should be talking about in a pastoral sense. It is also a moral support to the lay people who spontaneously engage in the defense of human life.