

CULTURE OF LOVE

CULTURE OF CARE



Why should we care?

We rejoice at the great advances modern society has produced in medicine, technology, communications, and travel. Despite such progress, we continue to witness an increasing contempt for human life.

Youth suicide is a significant problem in Australia, we have one of the highest teenage abortion rates in the world,¹ the morning-after pill is now available over the counter, destructive embryonic research has been given the go ahead, human cloning may be on the way, there are calls for the re-introduction of capital punishment and for the acceptance of euthanasia and assisted suicide as a means to end suffering.

This emerging culture is increasingly concerned with efficiency and autonomy, and blind to notions of solidarity and the value of human life. Aware only of the physical and material world, proponents claim some people are "better off dead" because they are; "useless," "a burden," "terminally ill," "sick of life," "suffering," "miserable," "lonely," "the wrong sex," "the wrong genotype," or because they are making us "miserable." Other advocates claim there are "too many of them," they have arrived "without notice," they are "too old, too sick, or too disabled." In a sense it becomes a "war of the powerful against the weak."

Anyone who would require more from us, greater acceptance, greater love, greater care, is rejected. We tend to fear them. "A person who, because of

illness or handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life style of those who are "more favoured" tends to be looked at as the enemy - to be resisted or eliminated. In this way a kind of conspiracy against life is unleashed"²

This mentality has a profound effect on society. The value of human life is undermined. Fear and despair prevail and the bonds of kinship and community are broken. It is little wonder that we see increasing outbreaks of violence both here and around the world. John Paul II has called this contempt for human life the "culture of death." Yet it does not have to be this way.

We can continue to curse the darkness and the violence that surrounds us, or we can light a candle to hope and love. Truth exposes the language of lies that empowers the "culture of death." No one is better off dead. Killing is not healing. True compassion does not kill. There is no such thing as a subhuman person. We can reject this culture of death and destruction. The Gospel shows us a way out of madness, into God's wonderful light.

RESPECT
LIFE
SUNDAY

TO LOVE AND BE LOVED...

Anita's Story

My brother Michael, 15, died quietly in January 1976 after a vicious nine month battle with leukemia. Chemotherapy had taken his hair. His skin was bruised, his arms full of intravenous needle holes. Still, my mother says, his death was strangely beautiful: A peaceful look came over his face; my parents knew his pain was over. After hearing so much about the debate on "assisted suicide," I asked my mother if Michael ever wanted a doctor to speed his dying. No, she said. Michael suffered but "wanted to live until the very end."

I understand. Not long ago, I too lay in a hospital bed, thin, bald and bruised, chemicals dripping into my veins. Like Michael, I had leukemia. Unlike him, I am alive and healthy today and questioning whether doctors should be able to accommodate seriously ill patients who wish to die. Having cancer wasn't fun. At times it was sheer hell. But family and friends held my hands while I was wracked with nausea, lifted me when I was too weak to stand, and buoyed my spirits with love and concern.

Was my quality of life diminished? Physically, yes. Emotionally, no way. I don't know that I've ever felt more loved. At my weakest and most vulnerable, that love let me hold on to my dignity. That's also why I find it hard to accept that euthanasia proponents offer an "exit" at all. Rather, it's an escape, one that sells short the human spirit. These proponents need only to see the patients I've seen, laughing and finding joy in life until the day they die, to know there is such a thing as the triumph of the spirit. Most of the terminally ill don't want the easy way out. They cling to life, savour it; their eyes have been opened to its richness. They cherish their time on this earth. A suicide manual won't ease the understandable fear of death. That takes compassion from families and caregivers, who can make dying truly "the final stage of growth." But the assisted suicide approach disturbs me most because it removes hope from the dying process. When all hope for a cure is gone, another hope emerges that in dying, we may find and hold to the very roots of life: love, laughter, compassion, joy, and forgiveness. Why would anyone advocate ending life before those important discoveries can be made and enjoyed.

(USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, 1995. "In Search of the Good Death: Euthanasia & The Way of True Mercy")



A New Culture of Life and Love

"One of Pope John Paul II's great legacies will be his vision of a more inclusive and noble humanity."³ He says, In an age when so many people forget who the person is, whence he comes, and where he is going, there is an imperative need to arouse in people an even greater sense of wonder at and gratitude for the greatness of every human life, (which is) a priceless resource, because it is a unique, unrepeatable gift from the Lord, the giver of Life.⁴ Pope John Paul II reminds us that we are on the side of life. We are called to be Salt and Light, to proclaim this Good News which is the "Gospel of God's love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the Gospel of life."⁵

God's love gives meaning to life. We exist in order to love. We cannot exist without love.⁶ Because love makes us fully human, God entrusts us to each other; to love and care for each other.

Every human life has a purpose. God did not make death and he does not delight in the death of any living thing. How precious must we be in the eyes of God, that he gave his only Son in order that we might not perish but that we might have eternal life.⁷ Every human life then has a meaning and a purpose, especially the lives of the elderly, the sick, the disabled and the weak.

How might we then offer this world of ours new signs of hope and love?

We must first recognise that we are each others' keepers; we are bound to each other by the bonds of love...⁸. We must look for the face of Christ in each person. We must learn to pass through fear into love.

A Tradition of Care

The Catholic Church is the oldest and largest provider of healthcare in the world. Since the very foundation of Christianity we have had a great tradition of care. Often it has been a counter-cultural witness of love and solidarity.

For example, the Roman Empire was struck by major epidemics around 165 AD and 251 AD, when it is thought that up to 25% of the population perished of smallpox and measles. Five thousand people a day are reported to have died in the city of Rome alone in the second terrible epidemic.⁹ Distress, despair and disorder prevailed.

What is less well known is that in the middle of all this chaos stood a small band of Christians who showed remarkable courage and stayed in Rome while the pagans fled. So seriously did they take the golden rule, the call to love one another, and to be each others' keeper, that they heroically stayed to care for the sick and dying. Some of them too caught the disease, suffering and dying along with those for whom they were caring. Yet they stayed until the end. They loved until the end.

These first Christians were among the first witnesses of hope, to a new culture of love and care.

They gave witness to the truth that suffering and death have been given new meaning. Human life has new value. Love became more powerful than death. A transformation of the Roman Empire had begun, to be carried on by subsequent generations of Christians whose response to suffering and despair has also born witness to love and hope.

Since then, Christians have provided assistance to travellers, and have cared for the poor, the sick, the orphans, abandoned children and widows. Each act of love and kindness has left a legacy. Initially provided by individuals, this noble ethic of care, hospitality and charity later became more organised, giving rise to the earliest versions of hospitals, hospices and hotels. St. Basil mentions a large hospital near Caesarea as early as around 370 and the famous Hotel-Dieu De Paris was established at least by 829 and possibly even earlier.¹⁰

WE SHARE A COMMON HUMANITY

The 12th century gave rise to more organised assistance, with the beginning of Religious Orders formed to care. The Knights Hospitaller of St. John (later Knights of Malta) cared for the sick and injured during the Crusades, while the Hospitallers of St. Lazarus cared for the lepers. St. John's Ambulance and the Red Cross can trace their origins to these old orders. Nearer to home, many orders of religious men and women and lay people have given their time and love to assist those in need, recognising their brothers and sisters in the stranger, the weak, the sick, the disabled, the elderly and the lonely. Orders such as the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of St John of God, the Sisters of Nazareth, and the Missionaries of Charity have helped to develop the advanced system of healthcare we have today.

Establishing Communities of Love

Today, Christians are again providing a counter-cultural lead, in rejecting the current claim that some people are "better off dead," and the subsequent tendency to abandon or reject them. The L'Arche communities are one shining example of the witness to love and our common humanity.

In 1964, French-Canadian philosopher Jean Vanier, welcomed two men with an intellectual disability into his home, and the L'Arche communities were born. Taking their name from the Biblical story of Noah's Ark, which symbolises a place of refuge," in French, L'Arche means a bridge, thereby also "implying a bridging role for L'Arche to bring people together." Based on a belief in the dignity of every person, these communities aim to respond to the distress of those who are too often rejected by society, they also aim to reveal the gifts of those with a disability. The communities typically provide family-style homes and lifestyle. L'Arche is now established in 30 countries including Australia, where Eileen Glass is our own version of Jean Vanier.

Eileen first came across L'Arche in France in the 1970's. She says "I was being introduced to people who had been "shut away," people who had never lived relationships simply as a "friend."¹¹ The community has discovered "that what defines a human being's worth is not their capacity to reflect or to achieve, but their capacity to love and be loved. People suffering from a handicap, even a heavy handicap, can in a mysterious way be a source of life, and radiate peace. We are witnesses to this."¹²

Other Christians too are rejecting the idea that some people are "better off dead" or a "burden" and continuing to care for the weak, elderly, sick and dying. Remaining with them, continuing to love and care for them, suffering with them, and never abandoning them. For Love is the most powerful and creative force in the world. Love allows us to overcome all. It inspires us, and brings out the best in us, ever calling us to become more human. It allowed one young man to carry a complete stranger through the snow to safety at the end of WWII. And it calls us too, like Anita's family, to love and be with others as their time comes to leave this world.

Need to build bonds of community again

Like the generations before us, we are called to build bridges and create bonds of community – to transform fear into love and discover the value in every human life. We need to once again link the old and the young, the weak and the strong, the sick and the healthy, the able and the disabled, those at life's beginning and those at its end. "We need a covenant between the generations, by which we focus on our children and grandchildren, who in due course will focus on us. We should revere and support our older people and see them as sources of wisdom and witnesses of hope and love."¹³ For no one is "useless" and each has an invaluable role to play in creating a civilisation of love and reminding us of our common humanity and our destiny beyond this vale of tears.



No matter what the level of our abilities or disabilities, we all share a common humanity. We belong together in the human family. We uphold the dignity of each person by creating relationships where we seek to grow together in mutual respect and love. In l'Arche we often live with people who are very different from ourselves; we experience difference at the level of capacity, of culture, of language and religion. This can challenge our beliefs, reveal our prejudices and call us to change. Such change can only flow from the conviction that each person is indeed sacred and entrusted with a gift for the wellbeing of the human family. It is our mission to recognize and call forth the unique gift of each person.

L'Arche International
www.larche.org



Joseph and Leo

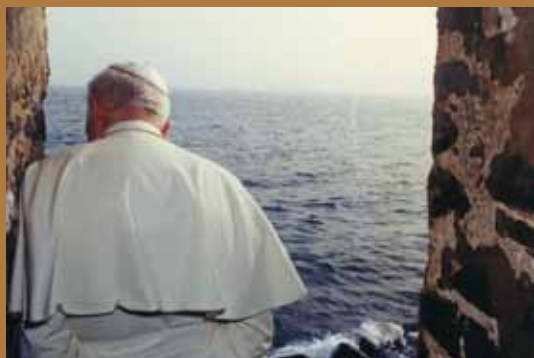
Young Man saves 13 year old girl.

It was the end of World War II. A young Jewish girl had survived one of the most brutal wars in history. Edith Zirer said, "I remember perfectly well. I was there, I was a 13 year old girl, alone, sick and weak. I had spent 3 years in a German concentration camp at the point of death. And like an angel... he saved my life; like a dream from heaven: he carried me on his back some 4 kilometers in the snow before catching the train to safety."

"On January 28, 1945 Russian soldiers liberated the Hassak concentraion camp, where I had been imprisoned for almost 3 years, working in a munitions factory. I felt confused, I was prostrated with illness. Two days later I arrived at a small railway station between Czystochowa and Krakow. I was lying on the ground, in the corner of a large hall where dozens of refugees were gathering the majority of whom still wore uniforms with the numbers of the concentration camps. Then he saw me. He came up with a big cup of hot tea, the first hot beverage I had had in weeks. Then he brought me a cheese sandwich made with Polish rye bread, wonderful. But I didn't want to eat. I was too tired. He made me eat. Then he told me I would have to walk to catch the train. I tried, but I fell down on the ground. He then took me in his arms and carried me for a long time. All the while the snow fell. I remember his brown jacket, the tranquil voice who told me about his parents' death and his brothers, the loneliness he felt, and the need not to be overcome by sorrow and to fight for life. His name was indelibly imprinted in my memory"

His name was Karol Wojtyla. A seminarian in 1945, he was later elected Pope John Paul II. After arriving in Israel in 1951 suffering from tuberculosis and frightful dreams connected with the war, Edith Zirer eventually rebuilt her life. She is the mother of two children and on Thursday, 23rd March 2000, Edith was personally able to thank Karol Wojtyla, when he was invited to Yah Vashem, the memorial to six million Jews killed in the Nazi Holocaust.

(Zenit News Service)



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Prayer for a New Culture of Love and Care

Jesus our hope.

You are the living sign of the Father's care for all people. You are the living promise of the eternal destiny of each and every human person, especially the sick and dying, the lonely, abandoned and the vulnerable.

Jesus our guide.

You teach us to give. You are the fullest example of a life given in service of others. Your love for the poor, the sick, the outcast and the ordinary teaches us to respect and serve the life of every human person.

Jesus our brother.

You teach us to receive. In humility and gratitude you accepted the care of your friends; you let Simon carry your cross; when you were dying you allowed your loved ones to wait with you. You show us that there is no indignity in our dependence upon others.

Jesus our Lord.

You are the living source of our love. With gratitude we recall the many Christian men and women who have shared this love with those in need.

Help this generation to give and receive love; to build a new culture of love and care.

For you are the Lord of life

Now and forever

Amen.

Support those who care:

L'Arche Australia (03) 6278 3633

www.larche.org.au

Sister of Nazareth (Sister Margaret Ann)
(03) 9830 5022

Missionaries of Charity (03) 9415 1011

Eastern Palliative Care 1300 130 813

www.eastpallcare.asn.au

Knights of the Southern Cross 9639 8808

www.ksca.org.au/councils_vic

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