

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Pope reaffirms opposition to abortion, mercy killing**

VATICAN CITY (ABP) -- Pope John Paul II issued a statement March 30 reaffirming the Roman Catholic Church's condemnation of abortion and euthanasia, as well as extending its ban on contraception and its opposition to capital punishment.

In an encyclical titled "Evangelium Vitae," or "The Gospel of Life," the pope issued his strongest condemnation to date of both abortion and the death penalty and extended "moral condemnation" to medical research involving human embryos.

"I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral," wrote the pope in the 11th encyclical of his 16-year papacy.

Even decisions to abort for reasons that are not "purely selfish" or "out of convenience" -- such as the mother's health or to preserve a decent standard of living for other members of the family -- are sinful, the pope said. "These reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being."

Euthanasia, even to end suffering, is a "grave violation of the law of God," the pope said, but should be distinguished from legitimate decisions to forego "aggressive medical treatment." In cases where death is imminent and inevitable, it is permissible to "refuse forms of treatment that would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted," he said.

Papal encyclicals are statements dealing with matters related to the general welfare of the Roman Catholic Church. They are reserved for the most important papal declarations. They are not regarded as infallible documents, but their moral and doctrinal teachings are binding on Catholics, who number nearly a billion worldwide.

Many of the 59 million Catholics in the United States differ with church teachings on issues of faith, however. According to a 1993 USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll, 85 percent of American Catholics said they would follow their own conscience on difficult moral questions, compared to 9 percent who would submit to papal

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL  
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teachings.

The encyclical is the pope's first since a coalition of conservative Catholics and evangelicals released a statement last spring pledging cooperation on some of the same moral issues, including abortion and euthanasia.

One of the Baptist signers of the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" document, Richard Land, declined to evaluate the pope's positions, saying March 30 he had not yet seen a copy of the encyclical. "I would be reluctant to speak to it until I see it," said Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

The Southern Baptist agency opposes abortion, euthanasia and embryo research but not contraception or the death penalty.

On abortion, Pope John Paul praised efforts "in defense of life" that "act resolutely but without resorting to violence." But he did not mention specifically pro-life advocates who have killed doctors or others involved in providing abortions.

He reaffirmed the church's practice of excommunicating anyone "who actually procures an abortion," but he offered "a special word" to women who have terminated a pregnancy. "Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong," the pope said, but he counseled the women "do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope."

The pope decried a view in society that "everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining: even the first of the fundamental rights: the right to life."

"In this way democracy, contradicting its own principles, effectively moves toward a form of totalitarianism," he continued.

However, the pope noted "signs of hope," among them "evidence of a growing public opposition to the death penalty." Justified uses of the death penalty are "very rare," or "practically non-existent," the encyclical said.

The pope reaffirmed the Vatican's ban on birth control, countering the argument that safe and available contraception is the most effective remedy against abortion with his assessment that a "contraceptive mentality" can lead to temptation for abortion.

"Indeed, the pro-abortion culture is especially strong precisely where the Church's teaching on contraception is rejected," he said.

According to the 1993 USA Today poll, four out of five (82 percent) Catholics said they disagree with the church's ban on the use of condoms. More than half (56 percent) reject the church's position that abortion is forbidden except to save the mother's life. Fifty percent disagree with the church's ban on sex outside of marriage, compared to 48 percent who agree with the teaching. And 44 percent reject the church's teaching that homosexual behavior is always wrong, compared to 51 percent who concur, the poll reported.

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-- By Bob Allen

## **Video resources offered to ease fear of witnessing**

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Two new video projects could put words in the mouths of Christians who want to share their faith but fear they don't know what to say.

The projects, which come from different sources, both capitalize on the new American pastime of watching movies and concerts on video at home.

The first project, called "Silent Witness," is the brainchild of country music superstar Ricky Skaggs. "Silent

Witness" is a 96-minute video in which Skaggs and other country musicians who are Christians perform and give their testimonies.

The idea is for Christians to pop a bag of popcorn and invite their non-Christian friends over to watch the video with them or to give the video to non-Christian friends as a gift, said Stan Strickland, president of Rainmaker Films, the video's distributor.

The second project is a new home video version of the "Jesus" film, which has been translated into 300 languages and has been instrumental in introducing millions of people to Christ overseas.

The "Jesus" film strategy for the United States, promoted by Campus Crusade for Christ, is for a church to buy several hundred copies of the "Jesus" film video and then offer free copies to people through a door-to-door canvass.

The video is a 77-minute version of the original film about the life of Christ, based on the gospel of Luke. It also includes specific information at the end about how to become a Christian.

The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board has been working with Campus Crusade in pilot projects on this concept in Florida, Kansas, Nebraska, Arkansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Mississippi.

Overseas, just the technology of showing a film in remote villages attracts people to watch the film, said Toby Frost, associate director of the HMB's mass evangelism department. But the film, while critically acclaimed for its quality and witness, has not been seen as widely in the United States, he said.

"In the U.S., we're kind of technology-hardened," he said. "But the attraction here is offering a free video to every home."

As church surveyors go door-to-door offering free copies of the video, from 60 percent to 90 percent of all people contacted accept the video, Frost said. Nationwide, Campus Crusade reports an average acceptance rate of 40 percent.

As part of the Campus Crusade strategy for this project, the same volunteers who offer the free video return to the home two weeks later to complete an opinion survey about the video. The survey asks questions such as "How many people in your home watched the video?" and "Do you have any questions about the video?" and "Did anyone in your home pray to receive Christ after watching the video?"

"Nationally, we're seeing 16 percent of all people who accept the video saying that someone in their home has prayed to receive Christ," Frost explained.

Based on Campus Crusade's estimate of 40 percent of all homes accepting the free video, the cost for a church to canvass 1,000 homes would be about \$3,000. Campus Crusade offers churches a complete packet of instructions, literature and training materials for the project, as well as copies of the video for \$7.50 each.

"Silent Witness" draws on a similar idea, but without the strategic support offered by Campus Crusade for the "Jesus" film.

"Silent Witness" could be used as a church-wide project but is being marketed specifically to individuals for one-on-one contact with friends and neighbors.

The country music video has drawn praise from Christians of all backgrounds and religious affiliations, Strickland said.

"The viewers are drawn by the stars and the quality, but they are held by the truth of Christ's life-changing power in these entertainers' lives," he said. "From the most conservative pulpit to the most charismatic, people have found common ground with this project -- well-known celebrities whose theology may vary but they all love the Lord."

The video features eight country musicians talking about special memories of church or emotional moments when they felt God's presence. Each segment was filmed at the location of the musician's choosing.

Glen Campbell, filmed at his theater in Branson, Mo., talks about turning from a life of alcohol abuse to Christ and sings "No More Night."

Marty Stuart sings a song he wrote specifically for this project, "Let Me Be a Witness," with support from Southern Gospel legends Jerry and Tammy Sullivan, whom Stuart says prayed him back to God.

Other artists featured on the video include Tammy Wynette singing "Precious Memories," Marty Rabon singing "Beulah Land," Sawyer Brown singing "A Carpenter's Son," the Gatlin Brothers singing "Help Me," Skaggs singing "The Mind of Christ" and Johnny Cash singing "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"

Individual copies of "Silent Witness" may be ordered from Rainmaker Films for \$29.95.

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## **Americans believe atheists capable of leading good lives**

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- Can a person be good and ethical without believing in God?

Yes, according to three-fourths of American adults recently surveyed by the Gallup Poll in a representative national sampling.

Those most likely to believe this are the young, the college-educated and people who do not consider religion important in their own lives, according to a report of the poll in Emerging Trends, the newsletter of the Princeton Religion Research Center.

Among people who do not consider religion important in their own lives, 90 percent believe a person can be good and ethical without believing in God. That contrasts with a 66 percent among people who do consider religion important in their lives.

Among adults younger than 35, 81 percent said atheists can be good and ethical, compared to 70 percent of adults 65 and older.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

## **Latest polls: Fewer non-Christians attending churches today**

(ABP) -- Fewer non-Christians are attending church, evangelical influence is waning and only one-in-five baby busters regularly reads the Bible, according to two annual assessments of key indicators in American religious beliefs.

Both the Barna Research Group and the Gallup Poll have released annual reports of poll findings about religious beliefs and practices in America. Among their findings are:

-- Fewer non-Christians are attending church services, according to Barna. Four years ago, 53 percent of the people attending church services on a given weekend were not born-again Christians. That proportion has dropped to 45 percent.

-- Although evangelicals get much media attention for their political activity, they represent only 6 percent of the American adult population. This is a 50 percent decrease in magnitude since 1992, Barna reported.

-- Those least likely to read the Bible during the week are baby busters, Barna found. Only 21 percent of

busters read the Bible during the week, about half the rate of people 65 or older.

-- Only half the people who attend a church service on the weekend also read the Bible during the week, Barna found.

-- The number of Catholics whose beliefs clearly classify them as "born-again" is increasing, Barna found. Among Catholics, 22 percent describe holding to "born-again" beliefs, which means they have "made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important today" and believe they will go to heaven when they die because they have confessed their sins and "accepted Jesus Christ as Savior."

-- 90 percent of American adults believe in heaven, Gallup found. However, belief in heaven as a place where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded decreases in direct proportion to a person's level of education.

-- Nearly three-fourths of American adults believe in hell, Gallup also found. But very few who believe in hell think they will end up there.

-- Nearly 80 percent of American adults believe in miracles, Gallup reported, while 12 percent do not believe and 9 percent aren't sure.

-- 96 percent of American adults say they believe in God or a universal spirit, according to the Gallup Poll. Just 3 percent say they don't believe in God.

-- Only 65 percent of American adults believe in the devil, Gallup also found.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

## **Bible translated into 341 languages, a portion in 2,092, report says**

NEW YORK (ABP) -- The complete Bible is now available in 341 of the world's languages and the New Testament in 822, according to an annual report by a group committed to translating, publishing and distributing the Scriptures.

At least one book of the Bible is now available in 2,092 of the world's estimated 6,000 languages, said Eugene Habecker, president of the American Bible Society, while releasing the 1994 Scripture Language Report. The report was compiled by the New York-based Bible society and its global partner, the United Bible Societies.

"While this is a major accomplishment, we must continue the work," Habecker said.

At least a portion of Scripture appeared in 27 new languages, according to the report. Four new Bibles were reported and the New Testament was made available for the first time in 18 more languages.

Among new portions of Scripture, defined in the report as at least one complete book of the Bible, was an American Bible Society publication of the Gospel of Luke in Gullah, a Creole language that developed out of the American slave trade. Gullah is still spoken today, in varying proficiency, by an estimated 250,000 people, mostly African Americans in the southeastern coastal region of the United States, the report said. The book is now in its third printing, at over 10,000 copies.

One of the four new complete translations is an Imbabura Quichua Bible, which was launched and dedicated in Ecuador last October.

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-- By ABP staff

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CORRECTION: In the last paragraph of the March 21 story, "Southwestern dean resigns," please replace the name Elizabeth with Linda.

CORRECTION: Please replace the 12th paragraph of the March 23 ABP story, "'John the Baptist' still evangelizing," with the following:

Four decades later, he returned to that island in the Pacific to participate in the dedication of a monument to the casualties on both sides. The Japanese and American veterans sat on opposite sides of the monument. After leading a prayer, Craven and a former Japanese captain who had become a Buddhist priest embraced, setting an example for the men.

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