

March for Life Vigil Mass
Votive Mass in Thanksgiving for the Gift of Human Life
Basilica Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
Washington, D.C.
January 23, 2020

Readings: 2 Maccabees 7: 1, 20-31; Romans 11: 33-36; Luke 1:39-56

I

Twilight Zone

When I was the age of most of tonight's Congregation, in the last Millennium –eons ago, I enjoyed watching the Twilight Zone. For its time, it was considered state of the art science fiction. One entire episode was shot in a hospital room. The doctors and nurses all wore surgical masks to protect the patient from infection. As the show unfolded, it became clear that the patient, whose face was completely bandaged, had been through a series of plastic surgeries attempting to correct a severe disfigurement.

The lead surgeon informed the beleaguered patient that they could only attempt one more surgery. However, the doctor was hopeful this time they would succeed. Most of the episode builds up to this last-chance surgery. In the closing scene, the final surgery had been completed some days ago. Now is the moment of truth. The nurses remove the bandages uncovering the patient's face. The woman is stunningly, drop-dead beautiful.

However, the doctors and nurses shake their heads in disbelief and dismay. They apologize profusely to the patient for their failure as they remove their own surgical masks revealing their own grotesquely hideous appearance. The closing music comes on as you begin to realize that in this fictional Twi-light Zone world: Beautiful is ugly and the hideous is gorgeous.

II

Moral Twilight Zone

We gather these days for the somber commemoration of the 47th anniversary of tragically flawed Supreme Court twin decisions – Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton. The Court's twisted logic established a so-called right to an inherently evil action, the killing of innocent preborn children. The High Court's 1973 decisions opened the door to a moral Twilight Zone where evil is revered as good.

Sadly, during the past 47 years abortion advocates have become more radical and intolerant. The façade of making abortion safe, legal and rare has been reduced to only keeping it legal. The killing of one's child is exalted as heroic and brave. Even the most modest regulation of abortion facilities for the protection of women's health is vigorously opposed.

Abortion was described by early feminists, Susan B. Anthony and Alice Paul, as the ultimate exploitation of women, but in this ethically topsy-turvy Twilight Zone, it is now hailed as the cornerstone of women's rights.

Margaret Sanger, a racist and eugenicist, seeking to rid the world of too many undesirable, poor children is heralded as a noble humanitarian; while the late Dr. Jerome LeJeune, who identified the chromosomal abnormality causing Down syndrome is reviled by many of his own professional colleagues because he opposed using his discovery to abort the children he sought to serve.

III

Coercion Replaces Choice

Sadly, in many ways for pro-lifers the days have grown darker. In recent years, abortion advocates have abandoned their slick slogan of choice. The former proponents of choice now seek to coerce Pro-Life Americans to become complicit in the killing of unborn children as evidenced by demanding tax funded abortions, compelling ministries like the Little Sisters of the Poor to provide abortifacients in their health plans, and efforts to force Catholic hospitals to provide abortions.

IV

The Courage of a Mother and Her Seven Sons

Our first reading from 2nd Maccabees presents us with the heroism of a Jewish Mother and her Seven Sons. An evil king seeks to force by torture and the threat of death, seven brothers to compromise their Jewish Faith by violating their dietary laws and in effect worshipping pagan idols. When the torture and killing of each of his six older brothers failed to motivate even one of them to abandon their Faith in the God of Israel, the King promises friendship, riches and power to the youngest.

Nevertheless, the seventh brother rejects the murderous King's promises of material wealth and comfort and like his six brothers heeds the exhortation of their heroic Mother who declared: **"I do not know how you came into existence in my womb; it was not I who gave you the breath of life, nor was it I who set in order the elements of which each of you is composed. Therefore, since it is the Creator of the universe who shapes each man's beginning as he brings about the origin of everything, he, in his mercy will give you back both breath and life, because you now disregard yourselves for the sake of his law."**

My good young people, Jesus never promised that discipleship would be easy. He told his first disciples that in order to follow Our Lord they must be willing to take up their cross. We must be willing to follow Jesus all the way to Calvary. It takes heroism today to stand for the sanctity of human life.

In this cultural, moral Twilight Zone to stand for the sanctity of the lives of unborn children, you may face ridicule and social exclusion. You may be penalized in the academy and work place. If abortion extremists achieve their goals, you and I could face fines and even imprisonment for our refusal to cooperate with the intrinsic evil that is abortion.

V

Reasons for Hope

Thankfully, not everything is doom and gloom! In these early days of 2020, there are signs of hope. Despite a biased secular media, decades of persistent pro-life educational efforts have resulted in our nation's youth being more Pro-Life than their parents. More than 70% of Americans oppose 2nd trimester abortions and more than 85% oppose third trimester abortions.

The efforts of more than 2,700 pregnancy resource centers, surrounding with love and practical support more than half of million mothers annually, have helped to steadily and significantly reduce both the number and rate of abortions in our nation over the past 30 years. There is also reason to hope the United States Supreme Court, which imposed by judicial fiat our current liberal abortion policy, may be poised to return to States a greater ability to protect the lives of unborn children.

VI

Silver Anniversary of the Gospel of Life

In just a little more than two months, we will commemorate another significant anniversary. March 25th 2020, is the Feast of the Annunciation when the Angel announced to Mary that through the power of the Holy Spirit she was to conceive an embryo – an unborn child – who was both her son and the Son of God. It also marks the 25th anniversary of Pope St. John Paul's landmark and prophetic encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*.

St. John Paul did not make reference to any Twilight Zone episodes, but he did caution us about what he termed **"... an extremely serious and mortal danger: that of confusion between good and evil, precisely in relation to the fundamental right to life."** [24] St. John Paul counseled: **"When conscience, this bright lamp of the soul (Mt. 6:22-23), calls evil good and good evil (Is. 5:20), it is already on the path to the most alarming corruption and the darkest moral blindness."** [24]

St. John Paul wrote that this moral confusion results in part from a distorted notion of freedom, a freedom that is untethered from truth. Our contemporary, cultural notion of freedom is the ability to do whatever I want, whenever I want, as long as it does not hurt anyone else too badly. This is a false freedom that allows the strong to impose their desires upon the weak. [19] Freedom separated from truth in the end creates a tyrant State that allows and even encourages the disposal of life when it is weakest. [20]

VII

Protection of the Sanctity of Life

St. John Paul challenged Catholics to protect human life and the dignity of the human person wherever and however it is attacked. *The Gospel of Life* is not just about protecting the unborn from abortion or the elderly from euthanasia. St. John Paul wrote:

“And how can we fail to consider the violence against life done to millions of human beings, especially children, who are forced into poverty, malnutrition and hunger because of an unjust distribution of resources between peoples and between social classes? And what of the violence inherent not only in wars as such but in the scandalous arms trade, which spawns many armed conflicts which stain our world with blood? What of the spreading of death caused by reckless tampering with the world’s ecological balance, by the criminal spread of drugs, or by the promotion of certain forms of sexual activity which, besides being morally unacceptable, also involve grave risks to life? It is impossible to catalogue completely the vast array of threats to human life, so many are the forms, whether explicit or hidden, in which they appear today!”

Wherever life is threatened or the dignity of the human person is diminished, we must as individuals and a Church rise to the defense of those who cannot defend themselves.

VIII

Pre-eminent Priority

At the same time, St. John Paul spoke clearly that special attention must be given to the issues of abortion and euthanasia. In this regard, he cited three reasons why the protection of the unborn must be a priority. First because current laws not only fail to defend the life of the unborn, but they exalt abortion as a positive good and a right. [11] Secondly, abortion attacks human life **“at the time of its greatest frailty when it lacks means of self-defense.”** [11] Finally, St. John Paul noted that abortion’s personal and societal consequences are more serious because it is **“... carried out in the very heart of and with the complicity of the family – the family which by its nature is called to be the sanctuary of life.”** [11] Moreover, the sheer magnitude of the number of human lives destroyed by abortion elevates its importance in comparison to other threats to life. Since 1973, 61 million unborn children have been killed by abortion and each has a mother and a father who have been scarred by the death of their child.

In November, the Bishops of the United States approved a document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, attempting to provide guidance to Catholics as they exercise their responsibility as voters. Many important societal issues with great moral significance are included such as immigration reform, welcoming and caring for refugees, the care for the poor, access to health care, opposing racism and bigotry, promoting religious liberty, and the care for creation. While all of these issues and several others are important and significant to the choices we make as voters, for the reasons cited by St. John Paul the bishops affirmed that the protection of the unborn remains a preeminent priority.

VIII

Walking with Moms in Need – Year of Service

Also in November, the Bishops enthusiastically embraced an initiative entitled ***Walking with Moms in Need: A Year of Service*** as the most appropriate way to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of *The Gospel of Life*. Every diocese and every parish in the

United States are encouraged to assess the pastoral and practical assistance currently available to pregnant moms and families.

We are also asking dioceses and parishes to evaluate the effectiveness of our communication of available resources to mothers experiencing a difficult pregnancy. The challenges can be immense for women with untimely pregnancies, especially women in poverty. According to statistics from abortion providers, women who choose abortion were poor, young and unmarried: 75% were low income, 60% were in their twenties, and 86% were unmarried. Imagine the adversities these women faced?

Pregnant and parenting moms in need are in our parishes and neighborhoods. While many pregnancy resources are appropriately coordinated at the diocesan or regional level, moms in need are best reached at the local level. We have well over 17, 000 Catholic parishes in the United States. Each parish is best able to identify the local pregnancy help resources that are currently available and to identify the potential gaps.

As Pope Francis reminds us, our parishes are called to be ***“islands of mercy in the midst of a sea of indifference.”*** The 25th anniversary of *The Gospel of Life* gives us a wonderful opportunity to assess, expand and communicate the resources to pregnant moms and families in need. ***Walking with Moms in Need: A Year of Service*** officially commences March 25, 2020. I encourage each of you to help your parish implement this initiative. I also urge you to inquire with your local pregnancy resource center how you can help. Lives that we may not currently be able to protect by the law, we can rescue through love.

Our goal is not only to identify gaps or areas with insufficient resources, but then to take concrete steps to expand the help available to mothers, not only during the pregnancy but for months and even years after the child’s birth. We want to do everything possible to help both mother and child, not only survive but thrive.

In tonight’s Gospel, Mary provides us the perfect example as she travels a long distance over difficult terrain to accompany Elizabeth during the final months of her pregnancy. Each one of us can do something to help women in our communities who have given their Fiat by welcoming the child in their womb.

IX

The Pope Has Our Back

Finally, with fourteen other Bishops from Kansas, Iowa, Missouri and Nebraska, I met with Pope Francis last week. The Pope began our time together by inviting us to ask him any question, raise any concern and even criticize him. He asked us to be honest with him, otherwise our meeting would be a wasted opportunity. Pope Francis spent nearly three hours with us allowing each of us to speak about whatever was on our heart.

The Holy Father was thrilled when I shared with him about the ***Walking with Moms in Need*** Initiative. Pope Francis was delighted about this effort to accompany mothers with difficult pregnancies.

I also shared with him that the United States Bishops in our November meeting had reaffirmed that protecting the unborn remains a preeminent priority. I told him we received some criticism, even being accused of insulting the Pope.

Pope Francis appeared stunned. He asked: Why? I said because we called the protection of the unborn a preeminent priority. His immediate response was: It is a preeminent priority. Pope Francis said if we do not defend life, no other rights matter.

The Holy Father said that abortion is first a human rights issue. Of course, our Faith enlightens and motivates our concern for the unborn, but protecting lives of unborn children is not a matter of religious faith but upholding the most fundamental of human rights. Pope Francis was aware of the March for Life in the United States and was delighted to know the anticipated large numbers of pilgrims, especially the participation of so many young people.

At the beginning of our meeting, Pope Francis said that he asked that our conversation be confidential so that we and he could speak freely. However, the Holy Father encouraged me, I dare say, ordered me: Please tell the pilgrims at the March for Life and the entire Pro-Life community – The Pope is with you! He is praying for you! He supports you! He encourages you to persevere! The Holy Father asked me to thank especially those who work in our pregnancy resource centers for accompanying women with difficult pregnancies, for being part of these ***islands of mercy***. God and fourteen other Bishops are my witnesses that Pope Francis was passionate in support of the Church's Pro-Life efforts. The Successor of Peter has our back.

X

Life Will Be Victorious

When you are appointed a bishop, you are invited to choose an Episcopal motto. Most often, the motto is a phrase from the scriptures. In my case, it is: ***Life Will Be Victorious***. It is not from the scriptures but from Pope John Paul's *The Gospel of Life*!

In part, I chose this motto because of my long involvement with the Church's Pro-Life apostolate. It expresses a confidence that God will bless our efforts and with His divine assistance we will succeed in restoring a respect for the sanctity of each and every human life, no matter age or stage of development, no matter race or ethnicity, no matter mental or physical abilities.

I chose it even more because I pray my ministry as a bishop is one that brings hope to others, a hope not based on human wisdom or strength, but on the love of God revealed in the embryo conceived in the womb of Mary, the baby born in the cave in Bethlehem, the man who through His ministry freed many from the enslavements of sin, who ultimately gave His life for

us on Calvary and who vanquished the power of death through His Resurrection, the ultimate victory of life.

Our Lord has already won the victory of life and you and I are privileged to be part of its unfolding at this particular place and this moment in history. The truth of His Gospel can and does liberate us from the moral confusion and chaos of our time.

Jesus did not promise an easy effort to His disciples. Though he did teach that *His yoke is easy and His burden light*. It is not that what He asks of us is not difficult, but that Our Lord promises to accompany and sustain us. He also promised, if we lose our life in following Him, we will experience *abundant life* in this world and eternal life with him forever in His Heavenly Kingdom. Jesus is the Lord of Life! Indeed, ***Life Will Be Victorious!*** Amen.