

Opening Mass, 2022 National Prayer Vigil for Life

Archbishop Lori

Chairman, USCCB Committee on Pro-Life Activities

5:30 p.m., Thursday, January 20, 2022

Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

|

A Salute to Pro-Life Ministries

More than a few times in my nearly 45 years of priesthood, I have met with women and couples who were contemplating an abortion. Almost without exception, these women and couples were deeply conflicted. Most experienced a very deep and real anguish. With the help of God's grace, I tried to walk with them, to connect them with helpful pro-life medical services and ministries, and never to assume that I fully understood what they were going through. Some couples with whom I met received troubling pre-natal diagnoses. Others, especially unmarried women, were often victims of poverty and abuse. In almost every case, family members, friends, and medical professionals urged them to get an abortion as the "solution" to a "problem" child ... a child who was likely to be born with an abnormality, or conversely, a perfectly healthy child who would be born into poverty and lack of equity. To many of them, it seemed that their only option was to have an abortion, but deep within, they knew it was a tragic choice with lasting consequences. What is needed so badly in all such situations is a witness to love and to life!

Through the years, the Church in the United States has developed ministries to help expectant mothers and couples who face difficult pregnancies, and those who find it difficult to care for their children after they are born. This evening, I would like to salute those who carry forward such ministries, beginning with Mother Agnes Mary Donovan, Superior General of the Sisters of Life, a growing religious community of women who, by their way of life, bear witness to the beauty and dignity of every human life. This they do as they welcome pregnant women into their homes and provide life-changing spiritual resources to women in crisis. Another beautiful and rapidly growing ministry is "Walking with Moms in Need", a ministry sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. This parish-based ministry helps open the eyes of parishioners to pregnant and parenting moms in their local communities. It enables parishioners to know these mothers, to listen to them, and along the way, to help them obtain the necessities of life for themselves and their children, including medical care as well as emotional and spiritual support. "Walking with Moms in Need" is a way we can help millions of mothers! It is also a way parishes can respond to Pope Francis' challenge to be "islands of mercy in a sea of indifference." (Manila, January 28, 2015). Let me also raise up the ministry of pro-life pregnancy centers in the United States, centers that welcome women in crisis with compassionate counseling, and through ultrasound technology – often supplied by the Knights of Columbus – enable them to glimpse the humanity of their unborn children. Most of the time, these mothers elect to bring their babies to term because they have seen their features and heard their heartbeat . . . In what they see and hear, they touch "the Word of life". (Cf. 1 John 1:1)

Nor does the Church give up on women and couples who have chosen abortion and then find themselves in emotional and spiritual turmoil. Here I salute Project Rachel and other pioneering ministries that provide healing and spiritual renewal to women and couples after an abortion. In

all these ways and more, the Church seeks to bring light, healing, and hope, thus witnessing to the beauty of life, and “building a culture of life”, one mother and one child at a time.

II

Warrant from the Scriptures

This evening’s Scripture readings provide a beautiful foundation for such ministries. Perhaps it was Mary, who first exemplified “Walking with Moms in Need”. When she learned from the Angel that her cousin Elizabeth – well-past the age of child-bearing – was in her 6th month ... Mary hastened to her side. Mary’s journey through the hill-country was a dangerous trek of some 90 miles. But she went the distance to reach out in love to Elizabeth in her hour of need. When Mary arrived, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leapt for joy, and filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth cried out in words that we repeat every day: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb”, viz., Jesus! Elizabeth went further: she addressed Mary as “the mother of my Lord”, the Messiah.

To those who judged only by appearances, the pregnancies of both Mary and Elizabeth seemed unbelievable, a cause for questioning and fodder for gossip. Yet, as was true of Jeremiah the prophet and even more so, God had a plan for the children and the mothers who bore them. From across the centuries, echoed the words of Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.” (Jer. 1:5) While still unborn, the God-given destiny of these children began to unfold – John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, and Jesus, the Messiah, and Lord.

But in God’s eyes, all human life is sacred! God has a plan for each person! This evening we proclaim with the Psalmist that God endows each person with dignity & worth from the moment of conception! With the Psalmist we say, “Truly you have formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb. I give you thanks that I am wonderfully, fearfully made” (Ps. 139:13-14) But not just you and I – each and every child! . . . Pope Francis captures the Psalmist’s appreciation for the gift of life when he writes that “our defense of the unborn...needs to be clear, firm, and passionate...” [and that] “equally sacred...are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking” (G&E, no. 101) Yes, our loving defense of the most vulnerable, viz., the unborn, continually overflows into love and respect for their mothers and families, and for all those whose life, dignity, and freedom are degraded by injustice and indifference.

III

Towards a More Just Society

This evening, let us be clear. For us as Catholics, justice is not a matter of faith; it is a matter of reason. St. Thos. Aquinas teaches that a law is ‘an ordinance of reason for the common good.’ In other words, precisely because laws should be made for the common good – that is, because they should be made for the benefit of everyone – they must be based on reason. And reason tells us that every human being, at every stage of life, should be treated with respect, protected, and cared for.

As we celebrate this Pro-Life Vigil Mass, we are deeply conscious that the Supreme Court is weighing *Dobbs vs. Jackson*. This case gives the High Court an opportunity to undo the grave injustice it did in 1973 when in *Roe vs. Wade* it decided that a whole class of human beings, the

unborn, are outside the protection of the law, and thus “non-persons”. Since that tragic decision, more than 60 million innocent lives have been taken. If Roe is overturned, states will again be able to protect the lives of unborn children. If legal protection is accompanied by more care for mothers and their children, then it will be more and more clear to more and more of our fellow citizens that choosing life does not hinder happiness or burden society. On the contrary, choosing life creates a society that looks to the future with hope, a society where a woman is never forced to choose between her future and the life of her child!

If, later this year, the Supreme Court does overturn Roe, in whole or in part, what should we as Catholics be prepared to do? First, we must be a clear and united voice that says our society and laws can and must protect and care for both women and their children. As a matter of fundamental justice, we must work to protect in law the lives of the unborn, society’s most vulnerable and defenseless members. And we must redouble our efforts to accompany women and couples who are facing unexpected or difficult pregnancies, offering them loving & compassionate care through ministries such as Walking with Moms in Need and many others.

Tomorrow, we march. Tomorrow, our voice will again be heard in our Nation’s Capital and in many other places throughout the United States. Many of you have traveled afar & sacrificed greatly to join this year’s March for Life. This evening, I ask those here present and those who have joined us electronically, to go forth from this Mass with renewed resolve to reach out to a family member, a neighbor, or a fellow parishioner and encourage them to join in this great cause for life – not in an abstract way – but to reach out in a personal way to help a woman and a child in need. This is our time to create a new culture of life in America. Let us go forth with hope, courage, and compassion, sure in the conviction that “here on earth, God’s work must surely be our own.” (JFK Inaugural Address)