

**Twenty-Sixth Sunday A/ Respect Life Sunday**  
**St. Joseph Church in Shawnee**  
**October 1, 2023**

**I**

**Respect Life Sunday**

For more than 50 years, the Catholic Church in the United States has observed October as Respect Life Month. During October, we remind ourselves that each and every human life is sacred because each human being is made in the Divine Image and of such worth that Jesus gave His life on Calvary.

Just gaze upon a Crucifix if you want to see a visual image of the worth that God places upon every human life, no matter age or stage of development, no matter the level of intellectual or physical gifts, no matter ethnicity or race, no matter poor or rich. In God's eyes, the embryo in the womb has the same dignity as an elite athlete; the elderly person with signs of dementia is no less valuable than a Rhodes Scholar; the child with Down syndrome has no less worth than the class valedictorian. Each and every human life is sacred, not because of what we can do or produce, but because we are children of God.

**II**

**Love them Both—Women Second Victims of Abortion**

I know that there are some, probably many in Church this morning, who have been directly impacted by abortion. Abortion has been sold to Americans by the Abortion Industry as a friend to women. It is not. As a priest, I have accompanied many parents dealing with the death of their child. I do not believe there is any more profound grief than that which results from the death of one's child.

Recently, I read another biography of Abraham Lincoln. President Lincoln and his wife, Mary, suffered the deaths of two of their children, one of them while Lincoln was President. Both Abraham and Mary Lincoln suffered profound depression as a result of these tragic deaths.

With abortion, parents, especially mothers, have to live with the much heavier burden that they chose the death of their child. It is not my desire to elevate the pain of those directly impacted by abortion. Rather, I ask you to please pray that the Holy Spirit will use my words to save the life of at least one child and to protect at least one mother from knowing the grief and guilt that ensues after abortion.

If you have been directly touched by abortion, I encourage women to contact Project Rachel Ministry and men to contact Project Joseph Ministry. God desires for you to experience healing, mercy and reconciliation that only He can provide.

In truth, mothers are the second victims of abortion. Our public policy places all of the responsibility for the abortion decision upon the mother. Our culture forms men to not take responsibility for the children that they have fathered. In my own involvement with Project

Rachel ministry, I have encountered so many women who were pressured by the child's Father and sometimes by her own parents to consent to the abortion.

### **III**

#### **The Aftermath of the Defeat of Value Them Both**

A little more than a year ago, the people of Kansas failed to pass the Value Them Both Amendment and thus allowed an absurd ruling of the Kansas State Supreme Court to remain. The Kansas Supreme Court asserted that more than 150 years ago, the authors of the Kansas State Constitution intended to grant a right for a Mother to kill the child in her womb up to the very moment of birth.

What were the consequences of the defeat of Value Them Both? The most recent abortion statistics from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment confirmed what supporters of Value Them Both projected and feared. Kansas now is a Midwest abortion destination State. Overall, abortions in Kansas increased by 57%. Abortions performed on minor girls increased by 49%. Chemical abortions, which are dangerous for the physical, mental and spiritual health of women and lethal for the unborn child, increased by 38%. Abortions on out-of-state residents more than doubled, increasing by 117%.

### **IV**

#### **Modern Child Sacrifice**

Sometimes people ask me: Why did God take the Holy Land, modern Palestine and Israel, away from its previous inhabitants and give it to Abraham and his descendants. Part of the explanation is discovered in the pagan fertility cults that were so prominent in Canaan. The worship of Moloch or Baal involved child sacrifice.

In Genesis, Abraham believes that God desires him to sacrifice His and Sarah's only son, Isaac. God sends an Angel to stop Abraham from sacrificing Isaac and makes clear that human sacrifice does not please the true God, but is offensive to Him.

Sadly, a form of human sacrifice has arisen in western secularized society. Children are not sacrificed today to please a tyrannical god represented in a pagan idol. We have not returned to fertility cults per se. In fact, secular materialism in many ways is hostile to fertility and fears too many children. However, modern secular materialism exalts the pursuit of pleasure, in particular sexual pleasure, while denying the meaning of sexual intimacy – a covenant of love between one man and one woman in which new human life can be welcomed and best nurtured and cared for.

Contemporary materialism desires the sacrifice of children, not to please an Idol or pagan god, but a new god of pleasure without responsibility. It promotes a counterfeit love where men and women use each other for pleasure, free from the emotional and financial burden of children.

The widespread use of contraception is not sufficient to protect this desire for sexual intimacy without commitment or responsibility. Planned Parenthood's own data reveals that roughly half of those seeking an abortion were contracepting. Abortion is necessary to make

possible the idol of pleasure without responsibility, sexual intimacy without what is sadly considered the burden of children.

Our overly sexualized culture, where sexual intimacy is tragically trivialized, must resort to a form of human sacrifice to eliminate one of the natural results of sexual intimacy, the conception of new life. The Bible reverences human life from the moment of conception, as evidenced in Jeremiah's declaration that God dedicated and appointed him to be a prophet while in the womb of his mother, [Jer. 1:5] or the author of Psalm 139's assertion that he was "fearfully, wonderfully" fashioned by God in His Mother's womb. Similarly, the life of Jesus begins within his conception in the womb of Mary or Luke's description of the unborn Jesus being recognized by the unborn John the Baptist, leaping in the womb of Elizabeth.

Cultures that trivialize the sanctity of human life in the womb of a mother or recently born will not survive. These are cultures with a death wish. They are as St. John Paul termed "Cultures of Death."

Just as American society in its first decades could not survive if it continued to permit the enslavement of human beings, 21<sup>st</sup> Century American society will not survive if it continues to permit and encourage the killing of its own children.

## V

### **Lives that Cannot Be Protected by Law Can Be Rescued by Love**

Respect for the Sanctity of Life is not first and foremost about changing laws or fashioning public policy. Laws and public policy reflect the priorities and values of a culture.

The Church's Respect Life efforts are about transforming culture. Culture of Life begins with promoting authentic love, love that respects the dignity of the beloved and seeks her or his welfare over one's own pleasure. It is a love that does not use the other person for gratification but cherishes the other and desires to give life, not destroy it.

Respect Life involves caring deeply about children in foster care and seeking to provide loving and nurturing homes for them. It is about communities of Faith surrounding foster parents with material, emotional and spiritual support for these heroic parents willing to welcome another child.

Respect Life has a special concern and care for children with disabilities and their families. Last night, I was at a wonderful event supporting the Embrace Foundation that seeks to help equip our Catholic Schools to be able to welcome and serve well children with disabilities and different styles of learning.

Respecting the Dignity of Life means being a Church that is eager to surround women experiencing a difficult or untimely pregnancy with a community of love. It means walking with Mothers, not just until a baby is born, but accompanying them for months or years so that mother and baby both thrive.

Respect Life requires accompanying adults with serious physical or intellectual disabilities. It means working hard to celebrate their gifts and providing opportunities where they cannot only provide for themselves but contribute to society.

Respect Life includes all of our efforts with Catholic Charities to serve the poor, provide dignified housing, food, and other necessities of life, create employment opportunities and advocate for the availability of quality health care.

Respect Life is cultivated by ministries like Donnelly College that opens the opportunity for higher education to individuals who are the first in their family to receive a college degree.

Respect Life also supports a place like Villa St. Francis to provide the highest quality skilled nursing for the elderly, no matter their ability to pay. It includes Catholic Hospice that accompanies individuals on the threshold of death, providing for their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. It means supporting families when a loved one is in the dying process as well as caring for those mourning the recent death of a loved one.

Respect Life also includes ministry to those who are imprisoned, bringing to them the love of Jesus and being eager to help them succeed when they are able to re-enter society.

## **VI**

### **The Challenge to Integrity**

The Gospel this morning challenges us to integrity of life. Jesus speaks this parable of the two sons to the religious leaders of his time – the Chief Priests and the Elders. He describes the Father requesting that the First Son go out into the vineyard and work. The First Son reacts defiantly declaring that he will not comply with the Father’s wish, but then reconsiders and does what the Father asked of him.

The Father makes the same request of the Second Son who immediately says “yes”, but whose word was hollow. The Gospel simply tells us that this Second Son, despite his affirmative reply, does not even go to the vineyard much less labor there. When Jesus asks which Son did the Father’s will, the Chief Priests and Elders give the obvious reply: “The First Son.”

Then, Jesus gives, what must certainly have been an unwelcome application of the parable, telling his important audience that notorious sinners – tax-collectors and prostitutes – are entering the Kingdom of God before them. Why? Because the Chief Priests and Elders are good at saying all the right things, but they are not doing what they are saying and what God is requesting of them.

Jesus makes clear that to be truly His disciple one must have integrity of life. We must be who we say we are. We must do what we profess to believe. In popular parlance, if we are going to talk the talk, then we must walk the walk.

## VII

### **Gospel of Mercy and Conversion**

The Gospel of Jesus is all about mercy and conversion. It is not about self-perfection where through sheer human discipline and will-power we perfect ourselves. The Gospel of Jesus is about allowing our lives to be transformed by encountering the love of Jesus for us.

St. Paul tells us that while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us. It is our experience of God's amazing and merciful grace revealed in His Son – Jesus Christ, that evokes from our hearts a profound gratitude. This gratitude creates a tremendous energy within us to live generous lives that bring the merciful love of Jesus to others.

When we come forward to receive the Eucharist this morning, we are making a profound profession of faith. We are professing our belief in Jesus Christ, as described in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, who did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at, but chose rather to be born as a helpless infant in the poverty of Bethlehem. We profess faith in Jesus who spent His public life and ministry seeking out those who were considered lost or on the edges of society: the lepers, the blind, the lame, the poor, the tax-collectors, the Samaritan woman at the well – married five times, even his executioners and Dismas crucified alongside Him.

It is this same Jesus who has sought us out with all of our weaknesses, failures and sins. It is the same Jesus who sees in us something so precious that He gave His life on Calvary for us. It is this same Jesus who gives us His life, eternal life, through the waters of baptism and who renews His life within us through this sacrament of His Body and His Blood.

Being a disciple of Jesus means, like Jesus, seeking ways to help and to bring God's love to the weak, the poor, the vulnerable, those on the margins of society. It means caring for the life and health of the unborn child as well as loving and assisting the young, unwed mother.

It means recognizing the immigrant as one for whom the Son of God gave His life, as a brother or sister in Christ. It means treating the frail elderly with a kindness and a respect for one who carries the life of God in a physical temple that may have become bent with years and worn by time.

To be a true disciple of Jesus, we cannot say "Amen" as we receive the Body of Christ in Church and then fail to say "yes" as we encounter a member of the Body of Christ in our homes or neighborhoods or workplaces. Being a disciple of Jesus means professing faith in a God who so loved the world that He sent His Son and therefore also committing ourselves to work to do everything we can to help others know their dignity and worth as one so esteemed that the Son of God died on Calvary.

The name Mass comes from the Latin Word, *Missa*, meaning to be sent. Each week, we are sent to proclaim by our lives the truth of God's love for us and to make that love present for others.

You and I, we bear the name Christian. We bear the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus has allowed us to take His name. The world will come to believe in Him or not believe in Him based on how we represent Him to the world.

Others will come to know His love or not know His love this week based on how we, His Disciples, choose to live our lives. It is our vocation, each one of us, to say “yes” (Amen) to the Lord in our prayer, but even more importantly to say “yes” to the Lord by the way we choose to live our lives.