

PRO-LIFE MASS

January 13, 2007

Cardinal William Keeler, Archbishop of Baltimore and past chair of the USCCB's Pro-Life Activities Committee, reports that he was asked this question by a reporter: "Why do you take public positions against abortion?" The Cardinal answered, "If even one mother carrying a child beneath her heart realizes that there is a child's heart beating beneath her own, then any effort we make is worthwhile."

Any effort we make is worthwhile. I begin with these words of Cardinal Keeler because the first thing I want to do is to affirm you and thank you for the efforts you make to lift up the sanctity of human life, to turn back the tide of the culture of death in our nation. We all know that it can seem agonizingly slow at times. The frustrations are many. But the task is a holy one. And it continues to be an urgent one as well. That is why it is so good that we are here together today.

Abortion and so-called euthanasia and embryonic stem-cell research are clearly not the only evils of our time. Catholic teaching holds to what is called the "consistent ethic of life," a coherent, unified moral vision that calls us to respect and defend human life in all of its ages, stages and situations. Thus the Catholic bishops of the United States have issued pastoral letters through the years on many issues affecting human life and dignity: war and peace, economic justice, right treatment of refugees, to name a few. Being pro-life means being committed to the defense of human life across the entire spectrum of life issues.

Having said that, let me be clear about one thing: While there are many evils rampant in our time, many threats to human life and dignity, and while we must be concerned about them all, I remain convinced that abortion can rightly be called the primal evil of our time. It is always gravely immoral. Its victims are among the most vulnerable and defenseless members of the human family. Since *Roe v. Wade*, 47 million human lives have been destroyed before birth or during the birth process. Hundreds of thousands of women have been traumatized by abortion. Many men grieve because they could not protect an unborn child they helped to bring into being. Abortion is the most striking and profound symptom of the abyss into which the ethics of much of the United States, indeed, the world, has fallen.

The so-called right to abortion and the practice of abortion are becoming embedded in the fabric of all that is acceptable in our society. We need to counter the relativistic thinking so rampant in our day and affirm again and

again that some behaviors are always wrong. The direct taking of innocent human life prior to or during birth is always wrong. The deliberate destruction of human embryos for any purpose is always wrong. Assisted suicide and euthanasia are always wrong...just as terrorist acts and rape and sexual abuse of any kind are always wrong.

The fact of the matter is that a policy that results each year in 1.3 million deaths from abortion (and many thousands of them aborted after the 21st week in their mothers' wombs) is bound to weaken respect for life in other areas. As the U.S. bishops have said, "Precisely because all issues involving human life are interdependent, a society which destroys human life by abortion under the mantle of law unavoidably undermines respect for life in all contexts. Likewise, protection in law and practice of unborn human life will benefit all life, not only the lives of the unborn."

I assume that most if not all of us who gather here today come at this problem as people who believe in God, and in God's revelation. For us, the human person is created in God's own image. For us, human life is God's precious gift. This is the message God gives us in the Genesis reading we have just now heard. For us, the way we treat human life will be part of the evidence presented on judgment day as to how we have lived our lives. Most of us, perhaps all of us, have profound reasons of faith that prompt us, require us, energize us to work for the defense of life. To our brothers and sisters of faith, we need to continue to make the pro-life argument on the basis of the ethics that flow from faith conviction.

But there is more, Our best chance of transforming the culture of death into a civilization of life and love is to join with others who may not share our faith but are able to share our conviction about life's sacredness. They come to this conviction not from faith, but from the exercise of their own powers of reason.

When I was chaplain at Harvard University, I knew a doctoral student who was a self-professed atheist. He was also vigorously pro-life. One time he said to me, "You don't have to be a Christian to be pro-life, you know. My own reasoning, and my scientific studies, are what make me pro-life." He was making an important point. My simple point is that while our religion provides the rationale for our lives and our moral values, we must be able to put forth the argument in behalf of human life in terms that are compelling to those who do not share our faith. We must appeal to their reason, educating from what is known from science apart from revelation. And we can work side by side with people like my grad student friend from Harvard. He had a pro-life passion that was truly God-given...even though he didn't recognize that part of it.

This approach to the defense of life from what is knowable from reason, from sheer science, also brings us to the problem of embryonic stem-cell research. We know that there is a strong argument now from those who would seek to heal human diseases through research that involves the deliberate destruction of human embryos, embryos often created by in-vitro fertilization in laboratories. The State of California a couple of years ago approved the expenditure of 3 billion dollars for this research. Massachusetts has approved it. Legislators here in Augusta are currently proposing support for stem-cell research in Maine. We cheer the state of South Dakota for passing legislation that bans all research destructive of human embryos.

Again, human reason comes to our aid as we seek the truth. You may have heard the name of Father Tad Pacholczyk, director of education at the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia. He is a stem-cell research expert who holds a doctorate in neuroscience from Yale University as well as degrees in theology and bioethics. He asserts that the very claim that embryonic stem-cell research shows the greatest promise for curing disease is “vastly oversold.” No one has been cured by such cells, he says. True cures are coming from adult and umbilical cord stem-cells, a form of research that is perfectly moral because it does not involve the destruction of human embryonic life. Our argument is strengthened by the very recent announcement that amniotic fluid provides stem-cells that are very promising for medical research. We support this work strongly even as we condemn the use of stem-cells harvested from unborn human life.

We must not let our energies dissipate into frustration and discouragement. There are encouraging signs. The rates of abortion are steadily dropping. More Americans identify themselves as pro-life. The pro-life movement continues to be one of the largest and most effective grassroots movements in the country. State legislatures have enacted measures restricting abortion and rejecting assisted suicide initiatives. Hospice and other programs are providing care to those who are terminally ill.

There are groups like Doctors for Life, Nurses for Life, Lawyers for Life, Cops for Life, Feminists for Life and many others. The number of teens, college students and other young adults becoming convinced pro-life advocates is growing by leaps and bounds. Our seminarians are deeply committed. I am so grateful to the Knights of Columbus for their support of these seminarians, and for their promotion of pro-life work in so many ways.

The challenges are before us, to be sure. We know that. The most important question is, where do we go from here? Just a few thoughts.

First, education, education, education! Terri Weaver, U.S. national director for Birthright International, a pregnancy service in its 39th year, said that many of the thousands of abortion-related calls her organization received in 2003 came from women or girls who do not believe that what is growing inside of them is a baby. Even though, happily, the humanity of the unborn child is questioned less and less by pro-abortion groups, Weaver says she does not think that our message is getting through to girls and women facing a crisis pregnancy. Her recommendation is that we make stronger efforts to preach and teach the Gospel of Life in our faith communities, our parishes and schools and other organizations. I accept that challenge, and will continue to engage it in our diocese in my work with clergy, Catholic school teachers, catechists, youth ministers and others...including Catholics in elected office. It is not that we have not been doing that. We need to pump up the volume of our message. We must educate our people to what is at stake, and embolden them to get involved.

We need to assist women with problems related to pregnancy, and support post-abortion ministry. We must monitor the media's treatment of pro-life issues, and be prepared to respond. We have to support services for those who are chronically ill, disabled, or dying, and their families.

There are so many ways to contribute to the work. Let me quote Cardinal Keeler's words spoken in a homily at the Pro-Life Mass at the National Shrine in Washington:

Unified in spirit, we bring many gifts to our continuing pilgrimage for life. We must put them to work. Can you write? Then write—write letters to lawmakers and newspaper editors. Can you organize? Then organize—organize a right-to-life rally, or a petition drive, or letter writing campaign. Are you blessed with material things? Then use your wealth in the right-to-life cause—buy needed materials for a pregnancy center, help staff a pro-life advocacy office, support the campaigns of pro-life political candidates. Have you time to give? Then give time—answer phones of your local pro-life pregnancy center, volunteer for parish pro-life work, join pro-life organizations.

Finally, you and I know that without prayer, prayer for life, we will accomplish little. As the late John Paul II wrote in *Evangelium Vitae*, “Let us...discover anew the humility and the courage to pray and fast so that the power from on high will break down the walls of lies and deceit: the walls

which conceal from the sight of so many...the evil practices and laws which are hostile to life.”

The U.S. Bishops echo the same call for prayer in our pro-life pastoral plan. I conclude with their words: “Our efforts—whether educational, pastoral or legislative—will be less than fully fruitful if we do not change hearts and if we do not ourselves overcome our own spiritual blindness. Only with prayer—prayer that storms the heavens for justice and mercy, prayer that cleanses our hearts and our souls—will the culture of death that surrounds us today be replaced with a culture of life.”

On that note, thank you so very much for your commitment to life!