

Speech at Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation Banquet

October 2, 2006

I am deeply grateful for the invitation to speak at this Celebrate Life Banquet this evening. I wish to begin by thanking you for your presence at this event which benefits the important work of the Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation, specifically its Educational Fund. The mission of the Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation to promote the dignity and value of human life from conception to natural death and to restore legal protection for the unborn is a noble one. I thank all the members of the Federation for your commitment and dedication in this great cause, the cause of life. Your service of life is a service of love. Standing against the forces of the culture of death, which sometimes seem to have the upper hand, you work tirelessly to promote the culture of life. Human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage. We need this federation in our commonwealth and your steadfast proclamation of the truth about abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, crimes against life which proponents of the culture of death try to justify in the name of the rights of individual freedom. I would like to speak this evening about freedom and about

democracy, guided particularly by the wisdom of the great Pope John Paul II, especially in relation to the issue of abortion and the right to life.

As Americans, we celebrate and we cherish our freedom. We work to promote and defend freedom at home and abroad and have opposed totalitarian regimes which have oppressed peoples and their rights as human beings. We promote democratic systems of government and are proud of our own constitutional democracy. The Catholic Church too greatly “values the democratic system as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.” (Centesimus Annus #46). We all know of Pope John Paul’s influence in the collapse of Communist totalitarianism in Poland, Eastern Europe, and eventually the Soviet Union. Shortly thereafter, in his great encyclical “Centesimus Annus”, he wrote about the harm and the errors of totalitarianism, particularly in its Marxist-Leninist form. He wrote that “totalitarianism arises out of a denial of truth in the objective sense. If

there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people.” What happens? “The force of power takes over” (CA 44). People are exploited. The Pope wrote: “the root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate – no individual, group, class, nation, or state” (CA 44). The totalitarian state fails. It “sets itself above all values.” It “cannot tolerate the affirmation of an objective criterion of good and evil beyond the will of those in power” (CA 45). So the Church values the democratic system. We as Americans are rightly proud of it.

At the same time, we must beware also in democracies, of embracing the fundamental error of totalitarianism: the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person. Our founding fathers recognized and proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence that there are objective truths and inalienable rights, laws of nature and nature’s God which governments are meant to serve. “We hold these

truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." The Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision violated these most noble ideals.

Pope John Paul II wrote, again in "Centesimus Annus": "Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person...if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism" (CA 46). "Freedom attains its full development only by accepting the truth" (CA 46). Democracy, to survive and to flourish, needs, as our founding fathers knew, and as Pope John Paul taught, "an authentic and solid foundation," the explicit recognition of human rights, the most important being the right to life.

The Catholic Church teaches in the Catechism that “the inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation” (CCC 2273). This right is not a concession by society or the state. The inalienable rights of the human person “belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin” (Donum Vitae III).

Pope John Paul elaborated on this theme again in his great encyclical “Evangelium Vitae” (“The Gospel of Life”). He again recalls the horrific crimes against humanity committed by totalitarian regimes in the 20th century. But he asks an important question. “When a parliamentary or social majority (I might add “a Supreme Court”) decrees that it is legal, at least under certain conditions, to kill unborn human life, is it not really making a ‘tyrannical’ decision with regard to the weakest and most defenseless of human beings?” (EV 70). The Pope warns against idolizing democracy “to the point of making it a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality.” He teaches us something extremely important, especially for us Americans. He writes: “Fundamentally, democracy is a ‘system’ and as such is a

means and not an end. Its 'moral' value is not automatic, but depends on conformity to the moral law to which it, like every other form of human behavior, must be subject: in other words, its morality depends on the morality of the ends which it pursues and of the means which it employs... The value of democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes" (EV 70).

Our founding fathers recognized what they called self-evident truths. They acknowledged an objective moral law. "The 'natural law', written in the human heart, is the obligatory point of reference for civil law itself" (EV 70). It is necessary, for the future of our democratic society, that civil law conform to this objective moral law. Pope John Paul courageously and wisely urged us and the world, for the sake of "the future of society and the development of a sound democracy, to rediscover those essential and innate human and moral values which flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person: values which no individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy but only acknowledge, respect and promote" (EV 71). Of

course, the value of the dignity of every human being from the moment of conception to natural death is the most fundamental.

We might ask: How is it that we in our great nation, the most famous example in the world of the democratic ideal, came to the point of authorizing, legalizing abortion and are moving in the direction of authorizing euthanasia? How has this happened? By fiat of the Supreme Court? But what about laws enacted by legislatures supporting abortion and euthanasia? What about the pro-choice opinions of many voters who support abortion or euthanasia, at least in certain circumstances? I believe that *Roe v. Wade* has in some respects erroneously led many people to accept that if something is declared legal, it is therefore right. Laws and Supreme Court decisions have a moral influence in forming people's opinions. That is why the educational efforts of the Church and of groups like the Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation are so essential and important.

The root problem it seems to me is two-fold: ethical relativism and a distorted notion of freedom in our society and culture.

Prior to the conclave which elected him Pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger delivered a stirring homily where he spoke about relativism, which he described in the words of Saint Paul as “letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine’.” He said: “We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s ego and desires.” The expression “dictatorship of relativism” became the sound-bite reported by the world media. The dictatorship of relativism today is a path into darkness and destruction, reminiscent of the totalitarian dictatorships of the 20th century. As John Paul noted in “Centesimus Annus,” totalitarianism arose out of a denial of truth in the objective sense. Such denial is “relativism.” Ethical relativism denies the existence of objective moral truths and binding norms. Ethical relativism “sanctions the decadence and disintegration of reason and the principle of the natural moral law... The history of the 20th century demonstrates that those citizens were right who recognized the falsehood of relativism, and with it, the notion that there is no moral law rooted in the nature of the human person, which must govern our understanding of man, the common good, and the state” (CDF 2002 Doctrinal Note). Pope

John Paul tackled this problem in another great encyclical, “Veritatis Splendor” (“The Splendor of Truth”). There he also treats the question of freedom and its relationship to truth. “According to Christian faith and the Church’s teaching, ‘only the freedom which submits to the Truth leads the human person to his true good. The good of the person is to be in the Truth and to do the Truth” (VS 84). In another encyclical, “Fides et Ratio”, Pope John Paul wrote: “Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery” (FR 90). Authentic freedom does not exist without the truth.

When we see contempt for human life in the name of freedom of choice, we see the urgency of this problem. This is a result of ethical relativism – the refusal to acknowledge the enduring absoluteness of the value of human life and its inviolability. It is also a result of a distorted view of freedom. The authentic meaning and purpose of human freedom are found in this orientation to the true and the good (cf. EV 74). In “Veritatis Splendor”, Pope John Paul wrote: “Certain currents of modern thought have gone so far as to exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which

would then be the source of values.” The pro-choice movement has exalted freedom in this erroneous manner. What it promotes is abuse of freedom. The freedom to kill an innocent human being is not true freedom: it is license to do evil. Pope John Paul rightly insisted on freedom’s dependence on truth. God has endowed us with the gift of free will and the possibility of choosing between good and evil. Yet, as Pope John Paul reminded us in his homily in Baltimore back in 1995: “...freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.” The Catechism states: “The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to ‘the slavery of sin.’”

“Pro-choice” advocates not only deny the fundamental moral truth about the inviolability of the life of every human person (ethical relativism), they also distort the truth about human freedom. The choice to kill an unborn baby is an abuse of freedom and brings harm, not only to the innocent child whose life is taken, but also to all who participate or cooperate in the evil act. So many women who

have had abortions have suffered as a result, many having been deceived into thinking that the choice to abort was an exercise of their rightful freedom, to later discover that they were anything but free after the destruction of their unborn child. Our ministry to women who have had abortions is vitally important so that the wound left in their hearts is healed and true freedom restored through repentance and God's merciful love.

Perhaps what I have been saying can be summed up very simply in the words of Jesus: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). Freedom finds its fulfillment in the truth. I encourage you to continue to bear witness to the truth about the sacredness of human life and the inviolable right to life of the innocent unborn. This universal, objective and unchanging moral truth serves our true freedom as human beings. It is a truth known from within, through reason, "by its natural knowledge of God's eternal law" (cf. VS 43), the natural law written and engraved in the heart of every person. As a people of life and for life, we know that "unconditional respect for the right to life of every innocent person – from conception to natural death" is, as Pope John Paul taught, "one

of the pillars on which every civil society stands.” It is my hope and prayer that our nation will one day soon recognize, as our founding fathers did, that its primary duty is “the defense of the fundamental rights of the human person, especially of the weakest” among us (EV 101). “Only respect for life can be the foundation and guarantee of the most precious and essential goods of society, such as democracy and peace” (EV 101).

May God bless all of you and the Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation for your witness to life, your commitment to the truth and authentic freedom, and your love for all God’s children, especially the most vulnerable in our midst, the innocent unborn children waiting to be born.

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