



Third Sunday in Ordinary Time Mass
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
January 22, 2012
Cathedral of St. Joseph

Offered on the thirty-ninth anniversary of the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision which legalized abortion in the United States.

Repent and believe in the Gospel¹. These are the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Mark. There is a reason for that. We ought to take note. What do repent and believe the Gospel really mean?

Repent. Some translations use the word reform. Convert is another alternative. It means more than simply being sorry for what we have done in the past. It means to be willing to change, change our minds, our actions and our lives.

To repent is to reflect on ourselves honestly, to ask what am I doing or more importantly whom am I hurting and more specifically who am I missing. Then after honest reflection sometimes with tears, abandon our old ways and follow Jesus.

Repent and believe in the Gospel. To repent is not enough. We need to fill the vacuum of what we turned away from with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior which the Gospel proclaims. Repentance will not last unless the one who calls us to it becomes part of our lives. A four year old listened to the old nursery story of Humpty Dumpty. "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the kings' horses and all the kings' men could not put Humpty Dumpty back together again." The boy thought for a while and declared: "Jesus could have done it." What a wonderful summary of how we might believe in the Gospel. To believe is to accept him at his word and to trust that Jesus can and will restore the fallen, the broken, us all if we open our hearts to him. Such reform or conversion requires learning, accepting and living Gospel values, the teachings of Christ. Each of us is called through our baptisms as were the Apostles to follow him by becoming instruments of his healing love.

We as a nation have much about which to repent. We as citizens have come perhaps too often to rely on the king's men to determine what is right or wrong. A glaring example is respect for life. Today is the anniversary of the United States Supreme Court decision allowing abortions on demand. We Bishops in the

United States annually declare this a day of penance for violations to the dignity of human persons committed through acts of abortion and of prayer for the full restoration of the legal guarantee of the right to life. We include each of us in our own ways among those in need of penance and forgiveness for those times we have been less than forthright in declaring respect for life, not only for the unborn children but also for mothers in need; for those times we have been judgmental rather than merciful; and for those time we have deferred to the kings of government in all its branches rather than to the King of Kings.

We raise this issue of respect for life continually as a matter of justice and out of love, love for the unborn child, but also out of love for those mothers often caught in a dizzying time of fear, anxiety and loneliness, love for family members affected in often subtle ways, and love of our country founded on the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The result since Roe v. Wade has been a technologically directed endorsement of violence as a means of dealing with difficult problems or difficult people. Too often we make surface judgments on who is worthy of life. I don't know about you but I often regret my snap or surface judgments.

While the issue of life is often portrayed as a matter of political freedom, it really is an issue of core morality and how we view each other. Over the years since Roe, the slippery slope of casualness for one another has grown steeper. The World Health Organization recently reported that there are over 40 million abortions every year around the world, some 800 here in South Dakota. Taking the lives of little ones has become a multi-billion dollar business. It has been reported that in India some 50,000 abortions occur every month based on gender selection; little girls are not wanted. Technology has developed to the point that if twins or triplets are conceived one or both of the "excess babies" can be selectively aborted. At the same time there are so many who would love to have the option of adoption.

The slope toward dehumanization gets slipperier. Just last Friday, the US Department of Health and Human Services announced new regulations that will require religiously based institutions like Avera Health and the Sioux Falls Catholic Schools to fund for free abortion inducing tools if they offer health insurance to employees. It is a challenge not only to the personal conscience of individuals but to religious liberty of the Church itself. I will address this threat in more detail in the future.

That life is sacred from conception to natural death is not simply a teaching of the Church. It is inherent in the creative hand of God. The Catechism reminds us:

Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning to its end; no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being. (CCC 2258)

That is the core value from which flows our thoughts, our prayers and our actions. That value leads us to oppose abortion, the death penalty, embryonic stem cell research, and euthanasia. It leads us to support those actions that enhance the dignity of all people, especially the poor, the immigrant and the vulnerable, including the mentally and physically disabled. It is a value grounded on our call to love our neighbor and our concern for the sanctity of souls, their future in the life to come. We care about the souls of all.

One lesson we learn from this history of the last years is that civil law will not be sufficient to bring our nation to repentance. Civil law is a powerful teacher; many believe that if it is lawful it must be morally okay or government would not have sanctioned. Experience proves that government can sanction unjust laws which must be opposed to be true of our belief in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We will continue to do. The ultimate solution however can come only through conversion, the changing of hearts to accept the reality that God is the giver of life, to Him alone is the power of life and death. Jesus calls us to repent and believe in the Gospel. That begins with each of us.

There was a story in Catholic Digest a few years ago about a woman who gave birth to a beautiful little girl. While still in the hospital she was diagnosed with cancer. She wrote: “I was amazed at how everything could be so right and yet so wrong at the same time”. She couldn’t sleep. A nurse put her arm around her and assured her that she would soon be sleeping as soundly as her newborn. The ailing and scared new mother wrote, “The nurse asked me to close my eyes and picture something that brought me peace. I thought of Jesus and Mary. I thought of my husband and my baby whose round pink face reminded me of a candle burning brightly in a darkened room. While I thought about these images, the nurse spoke softly and lovingly as a mother soothes her child. Eventually I drifted off. The long arduous journey to become cancer free started at the hands of a caring nurse who went beyond the call of duty to calm a frightened young mother at her darkest hour.” That is believing in the Gospel in action. That reminds us that we are all can respect life and that we all are in need of being respected ourselves. Repent and believe in the Gospel. Love one another as he has loved us.

¹ – Mark 1:15