

Homily, Mass for Life  
January 22, 2008  
St. Joseph Cathedral  
Most Reverend Paul J. Swain  
Bishop of Sioux Falls

For the Catholic Church in the United States today is a day of penance for the violations to the dignity of the human person committed through acts of abortion, and of prayer for the full restoration of the legal guarantee of the right to life. We do penance and pray not with heavy hearts but as people of hope. Our hope is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth and who made each person, those born and those unborn, who cares for us still.

Last November the Bishops of the United States summarized the principle that guides us in the document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. We write: : "Human life is sacred. The dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Direct attacks on innocent persons are never morally acceptable, at any stage or in any condition. In our society, human life is especially under attack from abortion. Other direct threats to the sanctity of human life include euthanasia, human cloning, and the destruction of human embryos for research." (44) Human life is sacred because God is the giver of life. John the Baptist declared he was not worthy to untie the sandal strap of Jesus; how much less worthy are we then to attack God's creation. Yet that is what we as a nation and too often as individuals do.

Thirty five years ago today the first in a series of decisions by the United States Supreme Court compounded by laws and referenda have essentially resulted in abortion on demand in our state and country. It is estimated that over those years 50 million little ones, too often unnoticed and uncared about, have not been allowed to become who God created them to be. For that we do penance. In that same time many expectant mothers, too often unnoticed or uncared about, often under pressure from others anguished and struggled about what was the right decision. For them we do penance.

A recent news story noted that half the abortions in our country are by those 25 and older, many are poor and that they often make this choice because in their minds bearing a child creates an economic strain, or forces them to choose between caring for their unborn child or their born children. For those times we as a society have not done what we could to reassure and to the extent possible alleviate such pressures, we do penance. For when we as a country and we as citizens have trusted more in the kingdom of man over the Kingdom of God, to use the words of Pope Benedict XVI, we do penance.

We judge the health of a tree by its fruits. After 35 years is our society healthier? Happier? More loving? More at peace? In fact most would agree that it is the reverse and in fact we worry about the future for those privileged enough to be born. It is reflected in the acceptance of violence as a means to deal with problems. It is reflected in the break down of families and the multi-billion dollar pornography industry. It is reflected in the use or misuse of language. For instance, an unborn child is now antiseptically called a fetus. I heard a television reporter once read a news story

referring to a fetus and then later relate the joy she felt knowing she was to have a baby. Technological advances now show us by graphic picture early on that this is not a laboratory specimen but a beating heart ready to be loved and to love.

Because these attacks against life have been sanctioned in civil law, many throughout the past 35 years have courageously worked and prayed for the restoration of the moral vision for our society which respects the dignity and sacredness of all human life. I thank all who have worked for this restoration of the Culture of Life in our country. That work continues in many ways, most importantly in prayer and in witness.

In our state, a petition drive has begun to place on the November election ballot a proposed law that would prohibit abortions except in the cases of rape, incest and certain dangers to the health of the mother.

As brothers and sisters we should all feel great compassion and empathy for those who become pregnant as a result of the horrible violence of rape or incest. We should always be concerned about the health of the mother, not only during her pregnancy but beyond as well. Let me restate as strongly as I can what has been true of our diocese for many years, no one should have an abortion because they cannot afford the health care necessary to bring a child to birth. Come to the diocese and we will help you. No one hurting from the aftermath of abortion need be alone. Come to the diocese and we will help you find healing. One way we can do penance in a practical way is by supporting the Mother Teresa Endowment Fund which offers financial help for pregnant women, and Catholic Family Services which offers counseling, adoption services and programs that assist in post-abortion healing.

Motivated by this same compassion and concern, we must continue to do all we can to protect those who have no voice, the unborn now unprotected in civil law. Certainly that intention underlines the proposed referendum.

It is clear that there is lack of agreement about this initiative among those who have labored so long to end abortion about this initiative. It is not for the Church or me as bishop to speculate about legal theories or political strategies. Rather the Church's role is to help inform the conscience of all who participate in the public square.

The recent bishop's statement noted the principle of gradualism, writing "Pope John Paul II taught that when a government official who fully opposes abortion cannot succeed in completely overturning a pro-abortion law, he or she may work to improve protection for unborn human life, 'limiting the harm done by such a law,' and lessening its negative impact as much as possible (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 73). Such incremental improvements in the law are acceptable as steps toward the full restoration of justice. However, Catholics must never abandon the moral requirement to seek full protection for all human life from the moment of conception until natural death." (*ibid.* 32)

I will be issuing a more complete statement on this issue. Suffice it to say that all Catholics are called to the fullness of the Church's teaching that all life is sacred and that the taking of life in abortion is a grave evil. No exceptions can be endorsed as a good in themselves. However, a Catholic may after adequate study and prayer support this referendum under the principle of gradualism as long as he or she does not accept exceptions as a good and, and as Pope John Paul II put it "never abandon the moral requirement to seek full protection for all human life." A Catholic may also oppose this referendum because it does not reflect the fullness of the Church's teaching on the sanctity of all human life due to the acceptance of exceptions. As Catholics prayerfully

consider this complex issue, we should also pray for humility and charity. We must all support the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. We may differ on occasion about how to enshrine that truth into secular law. We are called when we differ in opinion to respect one another.

Regardless of one's position on this referendum, we all must recommit ever more fully to work together to do what we can to assure respect for all human life. As I said in my homily at the Mass for Life last January: "One lesson we should learn from this (the 2006 defeat) is the fragility of civil law and how quickly it can be changed.

The reality of all these 35 years of trying to change laws and hearts might lead us to wonder if it is worth it, ponder giving up or letting up. This we must not do. What can motivate us and inspire us is the hope that comes in Christ. Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "Let us put it very simply: man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope . . . a kingdom of man alone-inevitably ends up as the 'perverse end' of all things . . . we have seen it and we see it over and over again. . ." (Spe Salvi) The kingdom of man which Roe v. Wade so sadly symbolizes has resulted in a weakening of the moral fabric of our society and has led us to the perverse end of things, the culture of death . We can never give up the fight to call us to the higher values. It is not about winning political battles or besting someone else. It is about living out our faith with hope.

There is a poem that catches for me the real choice before us all  
To every man there openeth, / A way. And ways and a way. And the High Soul climbs the High Way/  
and the Low Soul gropes the low/ and in between, on the misty flats/ the rest drift to and fro./  
But to every man there openeth/ the high and the low, / and every man decideth / the Way that his soul shall go. (John Oxenham)

We must and we will continue do penance because we are sinners. We must and we will continue to pray because we are believers who care about others especially those who drift to and fro. We must and will continue to strive to restore the culture of life to our country. We can do so because we choose that our souls climb the High Way to Christ. . We will do so because our faith, our trust, our hope is in the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus Christ who became one with us through the pregnancy of the Blessed Mother Mary. By the Father's plan He was allowed to be born into the world as a little one to be loved. He showed His love for us on the cross. In Him is our hope. May we as a nation choose the high way to his love.

May Mary, the mother of Life and Star of hope, be with you all.