



**Mass for Life Homily**  
**Most Reverend Paul J. Swain**  
**Bishop of Sioux Falls**  
**January 22, 2010**  
**St Joseph Cathedral**

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” (Jer 1:5) Thus the Lord spoke to Jeremiah and speaks to us all. The Lord is the giver of life and goal of life. As a result of this truth written in our hearts, all life is sacred. Tragically that truth is not respected in law or in word or in deed in our day. And so we gather here to pray that the culture of life might become the law of the land and guide of our hearts.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly sets forth what we believe and are called to live, court decisions or legislative votes notwithstanding:

“Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person – among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.” (2270) “Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law.” (2271) “The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation.” (2273) “Since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed, as far as possible, like any other human being.” (2274)

Court decisions or legislative votes cannot make right what goes against the will and act of God. Yet such decisions and laws seek to do so and soil the law of the land. Today’s anniversary of the Supreme Court decision sanctioning abortion on demand is merely reflective of the greater life issues, how we relate to one another. Thirty seven years ago it seemed only about abortion. Today it is about so much more. Certainly euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, death penalty and war, but even more.

As Pope Benedict has written: “when society moves towards the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man’s true good. If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of a new life is lost, the other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away.”

When we survey the social landscape of our day, disrespect for life, disrespect for one another is reflected in the violence of relationships, in the breakup of families, in the unethical practices in economic entities, in the casualness of sexuality, in physical and material abuse. That social landscape brings us to our knees in prayer and penance, in supplication for God’s mercy, and a spiritual cry for conversion.

Today as the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, we come once again not to celebrate an anniversary of an accomplishment long ago, but to pray in penance for the violations to the dignity of the human person committed through acts of abortion, and for the full restoration of the legal guarantee of the right to life. We acknowledge a tragedy that continues to destroy. Yet in the midst of tragedy, we come together in hope, for our hope is in the name of the Lord. Prayer and penance by their very natures are expressions of hope.

We pray for and express our love for the over fifty million little ones who were not given the opportunity to live the life for which God consecrated them. What great deeds were not done as a result of their absence? We pray for and express our love for those mothers who were or are caught up in a bewildering time of fear, anxiety and loneliness. May they know God's love and His mercy for them. Our diocese is ready to offer a consoling arm and a helping hand to all who are contemplating abortion or agonizing in its aftermath. Come to us and we will help you find rest. We pray for and express our love for our country founded on the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. May it return to its roots of recognizing that all are created equal and endowed by their Creator with life.

This anniversary of the sad tragedy continuing on 41<sup>st</sup> street and beyond could lead to discouragement, especially given the changes in public policies this past year. We must never become discouraged. God is the giver of life; that can never be changed. God is with us, and therefore we must never give up or slow up in our witness to God's call to holiness reflected in respecting all life.

As we do so I would encourage us today to pray in a deeper way for conversion. What is at stake is not only a just society, but the salvation of souls. And so, let us pray for the conversion of brother and sister Catholics who minimize if not marginalize the importance of respecting the sanctity of life in all matters. That includes leaders of Catholic institutions who allow the business or public relations side of their work to trump moral teaching, misleading others and putting their souls at risk. Let us pray for the conversion of public officials including President Obama and those legislators who not only support the culture of death but seek to impose their deadly policies on those who do not. Sadly in our own legislature there are some who attend Catholic churches who endorse the effort to repeal embryonic stem cell research prohibitions. Let us pray for their conversion. Both Senator Johnson and Representative Herseth Sandlin have supported federal funding of abortion in health care legislation. Let us pray for their conversion. We thank Senator Thune for his strong pro-life stands. Let us pray for the conversion of those health care professionals who perform or assist in life taking procedures or look the other way. Let us pray for the conversion of those leaders of business and labor who look to the bottom line of profit or political power at the risk of the life to come. Let us pray for the conversion of ourselves, that we may never become complacent or discouraged or insensitive to the call of Christ to respect all life by showing love and mercy ourselves. Let us pray for conversion; it can happen.

There were forty soldiers in the famed Twelfth Legion of Rome who professed faith in Jesus Christ. One day they were informed that the Emperor had sent out an order commanding all soldiers to offer a sacrifice to pagan gods. They reached a pact, and said, "you can have our armor and even our bodies but our hearts allegiance belong to Jesus Christ." As a result they were marched out onto a frozen lake in the middle of winter and stripped of their clothes. At any time they could renounce Christ and be spared from freezing to death. Instead they huddled closely and sang a song of victory, "Forty martyrs for Christ." That night 39 of them fell to icy graves. The last one stumbled to the shore and renounced Christ. The officer in charge of guarding the men was so moved by their witness that he secretly came to believe in Christ. He then replaced the man who had broken the pact and walked out onto the ice, threw off his clothes and confessed faith in Jesus Christ. At sunrise the Roman soldiers found forty men who had given their all for the cause of Christ.

Let us pray for conversion of hearts and for the strength to witness our faith as did the Forty Martyrs for Christ.

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." The Lord is the giver of life and the goal of life. Give Praise to the Lord.