



Mass for Life Homily
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October 2, 2011 ~ Respect Life Sunday
Cathedral of St. Joseph

Someone said creation is God's vineyard; we are the stewards of all that we see. In the first reading from Isaiah, the story is told of a vineyard that was planted on fertile ground, properly cared for and protected. Yet the result was not what was expected. Wild grapes were produced, bitter to the taste. So the vineyard was abandoned. Scripture scholars tell us this describes the nation of Israel without justice. Where there is no justice there ultimately is destruction. On this Respect Life Sunday, we should ask is there justice in our day?

In the Gospel Jesus tells of the vineyard that was well cared for by tenants as temporary stewards. Good fruit was produced but the tenants used their temporary power selfishly, refusing to give the owner his just due, even killing his son. On this Respect Life Sunday, we should ask do we as individuals and as a nation give God the Father and Creator his due?

The theme for Respect Life Sunday this year is "I came so that all might have life and have it to the full." This underlines the truth that every person from natural conception to natural death is ordained by God to have the opportunity to live his or her life as God created them to do. Pope Benedict XVI once put it so simply: "Each of us is willed; each of us is loved; each of us is necessary, because each of us is the result of a thought of God." How beautiful an image: God thought of each of us.

Sadly, government through court decisions, laws and regulations, and individuals in self-centered decisions giving in to the culture of death, prevent the most vulnerable from living at all, let alone living to the full.

We must focus on the issue of abortion and embryonic stem cell research at the beginning of life because without being born no other issues apply. We also must focus on end of life challenges including euthanasia and so-called assisted suicide because dying with dignity really means dying enveloped in the love of God. Respecting life is in fact a principle also to be applied to whether people can live with dignity in the years in-between. Thus issues such as abuse, racism, poverty, hunger, housing and health care must be raised as well. However the overarching threat we must consider is who is in charge. It is an issue of power and authority, the power of man and the authority of God. The Church teaches that human life is a gift from God over which we humans have no authority to create or to take. We do have power to destroy but that is a power inherently unjust and therefore will lead to destruction.

The storm clouds are here, that power to destroy is being exercised by some in our government in a menacing way. No longer is the debate simply about differences of opinion on individual issues of life. It is about religious freedom itself and whether the teachings of Christ are even allowed in the public square. Friday I had the privilege of celebrating Mass as we noted the 50th anniversary of O’Gorman High School. I quoted from the sermon Bishop Lambert Hoch gave 50 years ago in which he spoke of the threat to religious freedom in his day. He said, “We are all quite aware of the tremendous threat of communism, of atheistic communism, today which would destroy everything we cherish as Christians, everything we cherish as Catholics, and that which we cherish as Americans.” It seems so outdated. However the threat to what we cherish remains because the threat to religious liberty remains. Chicago’s Cardinal George recently wrote: “The purpose of communism and of contemporary secularism is the same: to create a society where God cannot appear in public, to erase any evidence of religious belief from public life and to prevent the church from acting in history, confining the Church’s mission to private worship, carrier of a belief system that can

have no influence on society except on secularist terms. In this sense, secularists in this country and elsewhere are successors of the communists of the last century.”

Case in point is the recently proposed mandate by the US Department of Health and Human Services that will force private insurance plans to cover contraception, chemical abortions and sterilizations, with a “religious employers” exception so narrow that the General Counsel for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops called it “an unprecedented attack on religious liberty.” One bishop has stated that under the exemption “even the ministry of Jesus and the early Christian Church would not qualify as “religious,” because they did not confine their ministry to their co-religionists or engage only in a preaching ministry.”

Though talked about in Washington, its impact will be felt here in South Dakota as well, affecting all Catholic organizations that offer health insurance as a way to live out Catholic social teaching. It will affect all Catholic institutions including hospitals, colleges, schools, monasteries and parishes that provide health insurance to their employees.

There are other examples such as in Illinois where the state government is forcing Catholic Charities to no longer place foster children unless it agrees to place children with couples who are unmarried whatever the sexual preference.

What these secularist government officials are essentially saying is that we do not have a right to the free exercise of religion, but rather the Church is simply another special interest and government has the right to define what privileges the church can exercise.

Although there are several versions to the story, it was reported that in the fifth century, gladiator competitions to the death were still held in Rome to the amusement of crowds. One day a Christian monk named Telemachus jumped into the arena and threw himself between the fighting gladiators. He urged them in the name of Christ to stop their fighting, but one of them as the story goes struck him with a sword and he fell to the ground dead. The 80,000 spectators who had been jeering him for interfering in their fun became silent. We are told the games never occurred again.

The moral to the story is that to respect life sometimes means we must wake up to what we are doing or condoning other to do in our name, then jump into the fray and call for a higher moral standard. We must not pull back from standing up for the truth, or living Gospel values or defending our right to the free exercise of religion. Deep down we know that injustice and disrespect, treating others as objects or obstacles or economic tools is wrong, and we must declare it even if inconvenient.

Creation is God's vineyard. We are the stewards of all that we see. May we have the wisdom and courage each day to do what we can to seek justice and to assure that those who act on our behalf give God the creator his due, so that all who are a thought of God may have life and have it to the full.