



## ***Respect Life Mass***

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**October 5, 2014**

**Cathedral of Saint Joseph**

October is Respect Life Month and on the first Sunday we pray this Respect Life Mass. We do so to remind us of the core belief that all persons are gifted by God with life and from conception to natural death deserve to live with dignity and to be treated with respect.

The theme for Respect Life this year is: "Each of us is a Masterpiece of God's Creation." The dictionary defines a masterpiece as a work of genius, a stunning success, a work of art. This theme is drawn from the words of Pope Francis who said: "Even the weakest and most vulnerable, the sick, the old, the unborn and the poor, are masterpieces of God's creation, made in his own image, destined to live forever, and deserving of the upmost reverence and respect."<sup>1</sup>

We rightly emphasize respect for the unborn because if one is not allowed to live, there are no other issues to contemplate. We pray that our civil laws and personal decisions may allow God's masterpieces to live. For those of us allowed to breathe the breath of life there are many issues to contemplate, about ourselves and about those who share our world.

In recent days we have been horrified by the sight of the beheading of innocent persons not only in war torn areas but in our own country. "How anyone could do such a thing to innocents and, to make it worse, celebrate such decadent acts?" we ask. Our hearts are touched and we weep because we see the image of the horror. It is a graphic example of what happens when man substitutes himself for God.

There are many less-violent and less-apparent horrors of man upon man that occur every day, as the Holy Father's words detail. The fact that year after year we raise up Respect Life testifies that reverence and respect are lacking for the unborn, yes, but also for others weak and vulnerable which is not limited to the physical but to the debilitating corruption of power in its many forms where others are used and abused for selfish reasons.

Many of us know how challenging it is to maintain a garden. How much more so would it be to maintain a vineyard. That challenge is described in both the first reading from Isaiah<sup>2</sup> and the Gospel reading from Matthew<sup>3</sup>. In the Gospel the landowner gave his vineyard into the care of tenants expecting them to fulfill their responsibilities to care for it and then share in its fruits. But those in whose care was placed the vineyard decided that they wanted to be the owners themselves. They decided to take into their own hands that which was not theirs. The vineyard became a culture of death with the landowner's servants beaten, stoned and killed. "They will certainly respect my son", the landowner thought. He too they killed.

The culture of death does not respect anyone except oneself; that is reflected in our day's horror of abortion, euthanasia, abuse in its many forms, human trafficking, enticement to drugs, pornography and other addictive practices. These are present here in our own diocese, communities and homes.

We can subtly be drawn into that mentality. It occurs when we focus as the secular culture preaches “me and mine” not God’s. Pope Francis referred to the vineyard in this reading as God’s dream and those tenants sent to care for it are you and me, especially those privileged with leadership or special blessings. Are we good stewards of the dream of God for a world of peace and joy? Sadly we are fallen and sinners and so we struggle to recall that Christ was sent to help us and remains with us on our hard journey toward holiness.

The vineyard seems so vast that we may wonder “what little can I, we, do that will matter?” May I suggest three ways we can be good stewards of the gift of life:

The first is by becoming disciples of Christ, having a personal relationship with him. It is shown by living each day in the little moments of life with reverence and respect. Recently I have spent a lot of time in airports and on airplanes. Reverence and respect are challenged when squeezed into limited containers with little leg room. On a recent flight a man demanded from the flight assistant a large Coke. He was given the drink in the standard cup. “I said I want a large Coke,” he declared in a loud voice. “This is how it is served”, he was told. He became belligerent, pounding the seat in front of him, scaring and paying no attention to the persons around him. Obviously he was a troubled man, but his overt actions raise a question for us: are we aware of the impact of our words and actions on those around us, especially in our families?

A nobleman wrote that one morning his servant did not appear at the scheduled time. No water was drawn, no clothes laid out, no breakfast prepared. As time passed the man became angry and thought about appropriate punishments. The man wrote, “at last he came, late in the morning, and bowed low. I called out angrily, ‘Go forth from my presence and never see my face again.’ He looked at me, and remained silent, and then said in a low, husky voice: ‘My little daughter died last night, and without another word he went to this daily task.’” The nobleman too was quiet.

We show reverence and respect by being aware of those around us by recognizing that we may not know all there is that motivates others, by showing patience in awkward circumstances, and on occasion by accepting inconveniences even without knowing why.

Secondly, as disciples of Christ we are to be evangelizers; the joy of knowing Christ is to be shared by being present to others to mentor, to assist, to encourage and to just show we care always with charity and humility. Pope Pius X, whose relics are placed in our altar here at this Cathedral, as an assistant pastor in Italy in the 1880s noted that most young men did not know how to read or write yet they had to work during the day. He decided to start a night school for the youth. When one of the fortunate students asked him how they could pay him for this gift, he reportedly replied, “Don’t worry. The pay will consist in your not swearing.” He reached out to address a need and taught reverence and respect as well.

Another caring gesture is to refer those we encounter who are hurting to appropriate outreach and support programs. Our diocese offers personal, marriage and grief counseling, retreats for individuals and couples for spiritual renewal, online and in classroom education to deepen understanding of the teachings of Christ. We can encourage those hurting to take advantage of the Mother Teresa Fund which assists pregnant mothers, the St. Raphael Fund which assists those in the military and their families, Project Rachael which assists after abortions, crisis pregnancy counseling and adoption assistance, and, in the near future, those needing a helping hand or a place to rest to visit the Bishop Dudley Hospitality House. Reaching out and lifting up is showing reverence and respect for life.

The third way to show reverence and respect is to pray. So often prayer is seen as not doing anything. In fact it is doing something out of this world, referring life and one another to God the creator. Here at the Cathedral the Adoration Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament pray continually for your intentions and for us all. The Carmelite sisters in Alexandria do the same. Following this Mass we will pray through exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, Eucharistic procession in the world expressed in the north end neighborhood, and conclude with Benediction, an age-old, powerful and humbling prayer.

Pray also that the Blessed Mother may intercede on the behalf of those weakest and vulnerable who deserve but are not receiving reverence and respect. I have recounted this true story before, but it moves me so deeply.

Amy, only 40, was brought to an emergency room with both lungs collapsed. She was in a coma. Days went by in intensive care with no response from her; hope was weakening. Words like “brain dead” and “persistent vegetative state” were spoken. Amy’s mother, however, would not give up. She prayed constantly and quietly, as did others including many on the hospital staff. A housekeeper said as she stood at the door of Amy’s room praying for her, she saw an angel at Amy’s bedside. Another staffer while praying was overcome with a feeling of assurance that Amy was going to be all right.

One day Amy’s mother felt how cold Amy’s legs were. She massaged them while praying a mother’s prayer, “take my warmth, take my life.” Then she cradled Amy into her arms and prayed again. At that moment Amy’s sister walked into the room and Amy woke up. She said that she had gone a little distance away. “Where were you, Amy?” her sister asked. She said she had gone to meet their grandmother who had died several years before. She recounted her experience: “Why are you here, Amy?,” her grandmother asked her. Amy told her “I have come to get my candle.” Her grandmother replied, “it is not yet time.” Then Amy said, “grandmother took me by the hand and led me to the Virgin Mary. Mary said I was safe now and led me back here.” The medical personnel who told this story, commented, “prayer and care healed our patient. Prayer and care can sustain us and lift us.” The Blessed Mother models hope and trust. She walks with us.<sup>4</sup>

Prayer and care describe good stewardship of life. Through care and prayer, respect and reverence for all life are realized. “Each of us is a Masterpiece of God’s Creation.” May we believe it and live it each day.

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1 – *Day For Life* Greeting, 2013, Pope Francis

2 – Isaiah 5: 1-7

3 – Matthew 21:33-43

4 – “Sacred Stories”, Catholic Health Initiatives, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition