

Right to Life Mass during the Day

We all know that a picture is worth a thousand words. We have witnessed that fact once again as our hearts have been wrenched by the images coming from Haiti after the terrible earthquake. The human suffering, our helplessness, and the destruction leave no one unmoved. Our faith urges us to respond in any situation of suffering, injustice, poverty, or a host of other contemporary ills.

That faith convoked us last night to gather in prayer and preparation for another activity: our annual witness to the importance and dignity of human life. We recognize that we cannot stand by idly while the innocent are eliminated by abortion or euthanasia. The prophet Ezekiel uses the image of a watchman to describe our obligation. We gather in this perfect prayer this morning to give thanks. We want to render understandable and welcome the message we transmit.

So often we have been accused in the discussion of life issues of foisting our beliefs on others or trying to promote legislation that reflects only our religious convictions. We believe that the right to life is inscribed in the conscience of humanity. It is not merely a Catholic issue, but a human one. We also believe that in baptism we received a mission to teach and promote not only those Gospel values, but also respect for basic human rights. This belief has been a part of the Catholic tradition from the very beginning. The *Didache*, the oldest non-biblical Christian writing we have, tells us: "The way of death is this: ... they show no compassion for the poor, they do not suffer with the suffering, they do not acknowledge their Creator, they kill their children and by abortion cause God's creatures to perish; they drive away the needy, oppress the suffering, they are advocates of the rich and unjust judges of the poor; they are filled with every sin".¹ If a Catholic organization such as Catholic Relief Services had the largest capability to respond on the ground to the misery in Haiti, it is not only the realization of the social teaching of the Church, but also the fundamental human response to the needs of our brothers and sisters in concrete ways.

If we have been chosen by God, as St. Paul reminds us, then we cannot fail to warn our brothers and sisters when a fundamental error has been made. We would be held responsible for that error, if we did not teach the truth effectively in love. The words of the first reading this morning leave no doubt. [If] "you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his wicked conduct so that he may live: the wicked man shall die for his sins, but I will hold you responsible for his death."²

The privilege of being called – of receiving the Christian vocation—includes the duty to work effectively in the defense of the defenseless; to show the right path; and to contribute to a world more clearly patterned on the golden potential endowed on the human person, created in the image and likeness of Almighty God.

¹ *Didache*, II, 1-2; V, 1 and 3.

² Ez. 3:18.

This morning we gather in the unique sacrifice of Jesus Christ to acknowledge His centrality in our lives and mission. Our baptismal vocation includes the obligation to announce Kingdom of God, as did Ezekiel, the Apostles, and Paul. We try to offer credible signs of our commitment. We want to be effective images that communicate a fundamental value, in this case, the right to life and the dignity of every human person. Christ did not tell His disciples in detail what to say, but what to be. In St. Luke He sends them out with nothing to show that the messenger is totally committed both in word and deed. In every moment we make that demonstration clear by our fidelity in our work, commitments, word, family and civic responsibilities. We are called to show a path to men and women who seek it desperately, often without knowing that they are seeking.

We must be confident as Paul teaches us. He tells us of our election before creation, so great is God's love for us. Christ's sacrifice for us frees us from sin and reveals the divine plan: that all might be united under one head, God our Father. The initiative is God's and we are asked only to adhere to the plan and cooperate with divine grace. It is as if he has endowed us with all of the skills to excel on the basketball court and now we are working as a team to achieve an important victory, but it is not a game. It is life itself.

What do we learn from the Gospel this morning which is taken from Jesus' last journey up to Jerusalem? The lepers who are outcasts of society, but are also on a pilgrimage of faith make a request. They are, we could say without life and without human dignity. Their rights have been forfeited because of their physical condition.

Jesus is a Jewish pilgrim: faithful to Mosaic Law. He sends them to the priests for certification of a cure. However, He is fearless in reaching out to touch these lost men. He will not allow the taboos of a man-made law prevent Him from asserting the fundamental dignity of every human person. In the same way, we cannot allow unjust laws or misguided decisions of a merely human tribunal to deny the fundamental dignity of every human person from the moment of conception to his or her natural death. We must be like St. Vincent of Saragossa, whose memorial falls today, ready and willing to sacrifice ourselves to convince others of the right path. He was a martyr, which Greek expression means a witness. With confirmation we also became witnesses.

We know that we are pilgrims. We will demonstrate it very shortly by marching. We know that before God everyone is a pilgrim and no one can claim privileges. In the Semitic vision of things there was a link between leprosy and unbelief. It was viewed as a sign of jealousy, which occasioned condemnation, non-communion, exclusion, etc.,.

My dear brothers and sisters, the Church is populated by ex – lepers. Everyone who is called here is only here by grace. None of us has any special title of merit. Yet, the Lord has called us and His love urges us to go out to our brothers and sisters and spread the message of life. Our gratitude for unmerited gifts is expressed in our willingness to serve as the watchman and to find effective ways to make this word of life alive in the hearts of all.

We celebrate the fact that Christ is ever present for us in our constant need. Even

without a specific gift, He has assumed the same condition of the person in need: He has become like him to open him to salvation. There is a subtle reminder to Israel regarding the gift of election. It is also a gift not to be presumed, but often forgotten under too many formalisms of law. It was a gift offered in service to all humanity as the later writings of the Old Testament make very clear,

You and I are called to be constantly aware of the salvation we have received in Jesus Christ. We recall many other gifts for which we are grateful. There are personal reasons such as our health, events in school, the visit of a loved one, the joy of a happy family, or anything else that reminds you of the goodness of God. The implied challenge this morning is to recognize God as author and give thanks. There is similarity and even a relationship between the one graced and the gratuitous giver. Christ, who even before giving something, has assumed the condition of the person in need. He has reached out to that one in his great poverty.

Gratitude is really the only quality that humanity can offer to God. Fundamentally, today's invitation is to be grateful for the salvation received by the Blood of Christ. We cannot forget that only the Samaritan leper returned to hear the saving words of Christ: "Stand up and go. Your faith has saved you."³ We can say that his gratitude was an additional reward. He is a symbol of the new saving time begun in the ministry of Jesus.

We are all called to participate in this new time. Gratitude then is also a means of preaching the Gospel. The great Apostle Paul even looked on his imprisonment as an occasion to preach the Gospel. It is a great gift of grace and serious responsibility. It is a call to remember that the word of God cannot be chained, despite our limitations.

That brings us to a final word. We must look for ways to communicate the message effectively. Remember when the prophet Nathan confronted David about his immoral behavior with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah? How did he communicate the divine message? There was no frontal assault. There was a story about a poor man with one lamb stolen by a rich man with abundant flocks. David reacted to the message and then Nathan told him: you are that man. For thirty-seven years we have been seeking to lead the men and women of our time to recognize the dignity of the human person. I remember marching with some people from the parish where I was an associate pastor thirty-two years ago. We have been faithful, but there is more.

We must insure that our message is communicated authentically. We must look for the best way to win the hearts of our hearers. That may well mean that our confrontation is clear, but not direct. Our words must always be charitable. We must seek to persuade those in power and those on the street that no one has the power to take away the life given by the Lord. We, too, must avoid violence, offense to the dignity of the same human person that we struggle to protect, or anything that does not lead to a change of heart. We are men and women on fire for the truth. That fire must first purify us and then inspire others.

³ Lk. 17:19b.

The Gospel has always been most effectively preached by the example of those who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ. When His presence permeates us, then we live different lives. The women and men who saw the example of the early Christians began to ask questions, to draw near, and finally to meet the Lord who changed their lives.

We never take for granted the knowledge that we have of God. The Lord invites us to rediscover that He alone is our God. It means tossing out the other gods that occupy space in our hearts. What is the first and most powerful idol in the human heart? The almighty I. We pray this morning that Almighty God will make us able to convert our existence into a pure and complete Eucharist, a perennial thanksgiving. We pray that our lives, words, and example might be such that we become that picture which is worth a thousand words. May the prophetic dimension of our baptism prevail in our mission today and everyday!

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