



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

September 9, 2008

Saint Peter Claver, Apostle to the enslaved

*To the priests and deacons of the diocese, whose lives bear witness
to the truth of the Gospel, to the men and women religious whose lives bear witness
to the power of the Gospel, and to all the faithful of the Diocese,
committed - as I am - to our common struggle to preserve the sanctity of
all human life, from its natural conception to its natural death,
I sent my greetings in the Lord.*

Peace be with you!

In recent weeks, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Sen. Joe Biden have been asked by Tom Brokaw on Meet the Press to explain their personal opinions on the question of "When does Human Life Begin?" The essence of their views, which they both claim are developed from their experience as Catholics, is first, that the tradition is inconsistent (Pelosi), and second, that even if it is clear, it is a matter of personal faith which, in a democracy, ought not be imposed on others (Biden). Having made their views public, and by presenting themselves as Catholics, both Speaker Pelosi and Sen. Biden have invited a discussion about the legitimacy of their views.

I, and other bishops, have already stated that Speaker Pelosi's position is clearly inconsistent with Catholic teaching, and to promote such a view is scandalous. There are many witnesses in the tradition that clearly state the Catholic view in opposition to Speaker Pelosi.

In view of the absolute duty that we all have of protecting innocent human life, it is also necessary to respond publicly to Sen. Biden's remarks. In his interview, Sen. Biden explained that although he was prepared as a matter of faith to accept the teaching that life begins at the moment of conception, it would be wrong in a pluralistic society to impose that judgment on everyone else, who may be just as ardent as he is in their own faith. He remarked that abortion is "a personal and private issue."

Sen. Biden's remarks reflect two erroneous beliefs. It is plainly false to assert that the answer to the question of when human life begins is limited to the realm of personal and private faith and that therefore there is no basis for preferring one position over another. While it is true that Christian revelation provides a framework for understanding human nature, there is also biological evidence on when human life begins, that all persons of good will, and not just Christians, may examine. Also, the division that Sen. Biden creates between privacy and social responsibility is tenuous. He supposes that social responsibility ends at the point that we turn the decision over to individuals.

Modern science clearly proves that human life begins at conception. At the moment when DNA from the mother and the father combine, a new, unique human being, who will develop continuously until death, is created. From then on, the early zygote functions as a human being. It has specifically human enzymes and proteins, and, over time, it develops complex human tissues and organs. After this genetic transfer, it can never develop into any other kind of being. Even as it develops through the process of pregnancy, the human

nature of the zygote, embryo, fetus, or baby never changes. It is this nature that directs and causes the miraculous physical transformation that takes place during the pregnancy.

In fact, the desire of some persons to destroy embryos in order to harvest stem cells is dependent upon the reality that they are already biologically human. Sen. Biden's support for increased federal funding of embryonic stem cell research would therefore be at odds with his stated belief that life begins at conception. Contrary to some misconceptions, the early human embryo is not a vague collection of tissues without specificity. In fact the exact opposite is true. The first cells of this new human being contain all of the information that will guide its development throughout life. The process of embryonic and fetal development involves "switching off" the complete power of the early cells so that they only take on one function, like being a heart cell.

While there are some members of our society who would like to define this biological human being as someone who does not share our basic human rights, such as the right to its own existence, this is a dangerous path. We, as a human society, have gone this way before, with disastrous results. Inevitably, it ends with the act of murdering those whom we objectify, as we have seen with the lynching of African Americans from our own racism, or the Holocaust, or the countless other genocides of the 20th century. Whenever we treat another human being as an object, a thing, that we may do with as we please, rather than as a human person made in the image and likeness of God, we diminish, and inevitably destroy that being, and ourselves.

It is also paradoxical to suggest that by throwing the cloak of "privacy" over the act of abortion, that individual choice can transform an evil act into something that is good, or even tolerable. If, as Sen. Biden believes, human life begins at conception, it is difficult to see how that view can be reconciled with the position that we, as a society, should legally allow individual persons to decide on their own if murder is wrong.

The modern day notion of "privacy" assumes that there is a neat division between the individual who makes a decision, and the rest of the human community. A "private" decision is one that is limited to the individual. However, in the case of abortion, this decision has implications not only for the mother, but also for the father, both of their immediate families, and, in fact, for all of our society. The mother and the father loses a child, the family a niece or nephew, or grandchild, and the rest of us, a companion in life. How we protect, or ignore, these smallest members of our human community defines who we are as human persons.

A democracy, in order to flourish, must attend to the defense of the values that are essential to the human community. Ignoring this hard work and simply relegating abortion to the sphere of individual choice allows a cancer to eat at our very core, as we permit some human persons to sacrifice the lives of others for their own personal reasons. As Catholics, we cannot accept the premise that in the name of "privacy" all choices are equally right.

Sen. Biden has opposed federal funding of abortions and backed the ban on partial birth abortions, and for that he should be commended. Yet, his justification for continuing to allow *Roe v. Wade* to stand as the law of the United States is incompatible with Catholic teaching.

Once an evil is truly seen for what it is, neither can an emphasis on "privacy" excuse one's moral responsibility to act to stop it, nor can defining murder as a "right to choose" change what it is that is actually chosen.

Trusting always in the protection of Our Blessed Lady, whose immaculate womb first tabernacled the Word made Flesh, and asking for your prayers, I am

In Domino



Edward J. Slattery
Bishop of Tulsa