

Fr. Frank Pavone's Interview with Bishop Conley Bishop of Lincoln, Nebraska

Fr. Frank Pavone

Well hello friends, Father Frank Pavone here, national director of Priests for life.

Welcome to EndAbortion.TV.

We are glad to have you here for this episode where we are very, very happy to be joined by a long-time friend and a Bishop here in the United States.

He's the Bishop of the Diocese of Lincoln, NE and his name is Bishop James Conley.

Bishop Conley welcome to the program.

Bishop Conley

It's great to be with you, Frank. Great to be back with you again, so this is wonderful.

Fr. Frank Pavone

Yes, I want to first of all give a little a little introduction to you. You and I go back a very long time.

I remember meeting you. I guess it was in the 1990s, shortly after I took over Priests for Life and you were the Pro Life director there in the Diocese of Wichita, KS and we were out there. I remember praying in front of the abortion facility and doing all kinds of activities. And then not too many years later, we found ourselves together in Rome where we were both living at the Villa Stritch and working at the, we were working in different offices at that time at the Vatican.

Now I was at the Council for the family. Remind me which office were you in?

Bishop Conley

I was in the Congregation for Bishops, "Bishops R Us" as we like to say.

Fr. Frank Pavone

That's right, so we both worked there – Oh, what a blessed time that was. We were both working under Saint John Paul II.

And you know one of the things, of course, that I remember most about Rome were the occasions when whether it was meetings of the Dicastery with the Pope or opportunities when we would be invited to concelebrate with him in his private Chapel. Those were some of the most memorable aspects of working there in Rome.

You must have some great stories of encounters with John Paul II.

Bishop Conley

Oh yeah, I mean one of the things about him as you recall it was he was so accessible and he was just, he poured himself out for his flock, so you, you know was very common.

Many people have stories about being with him for his morning masses every day.

As a priest we you know you could always sign up in request to Concelebrate one of the morning masses. One of my greatest memories is when my parents came over in 1997, and they were celebrating their 50th anniversary of marriage, and so we were able to get in and have mass with him and he took great interest in them and he looks over at my dad and he goes "50 years, long time, no?"

And he was celebrating his 50th anniversary as a priest. So it was, you know, those are. Yeah, there's many, many, many stories about him that everybody you know tells, but it's it was just a wonderful time to be Rome

Fr. Frank Pavone

Yeah, you know it certainly was. It was a very special time. Of course we were all gearing up at that time for the third Millennium and the Church had those special themes those last three years of the second Millennium. Those special theological themes for each year. It was a beautiful time to be in Rome, indeed.

And then of course you were named Bishop which must have been a nice surprise and you have been serving the Diocese of Lincoln, NE, and that too is a special place. I know from my trips out your way just the strong, strong pro-life community that you have out there.

Bishop Conley

Correct, yeah, it was a surprise. When we get those phone calls you are never prepared for them but I first was, if you remember I was Auxiliary Bishop in Denver under Archbishop Chaput for four and a half years from 2008 to 2012 and that was a wonderful sort of training ground you might say under a great Bishop who was always a great inspiration to me. Archbishop Chaput. And then in 2012 I was appointed by Pope Benedict and both my appointments were from Pope Benedict, was appointed here to Lincoln and I was familiar with the Diocese of Lincoln.

But to come here and then to be the Bishop of Lincoln, I realized what a strong diocese this was and how I was really standing on the shoulders of giants with the Bishop Bruskewitz and Bishop Flavin before him.

And so it was a very much a blessing. I just thank the Lord all the time for having been given such a strong diocese and such. Especially during those kind of stormy post conciliar years. So yeah, it was a great joy to come here, and I've been here now nine years in fact I just celebrated -- I had a meeting with all of our priests I just celebrated on Tuesday, my 9th anniversary of being named the Bishop of Lincoln.

Fr. Frank Pavone

The years go by so fast.

Bishop Conley

Oh my Goodness, it's amazing.

Fr. Frank Pavone

They do. Well, you know, like I referred to already you've always been very involved in the Pro Life movement and as a priest you know lead people in this movement and that's how we

intersected. Tell us a little bit about your own observations... I mean this ongoing issue of abortion continues to be a priority for the church.

I mean, to me it's just common sense that it's the priority, because without life we don't have anything else.

How would you summarize your observations at this point in time that especially Catholics, should understand about this ongoing battle against abortion?

Bishop Conley

Well thank you, Father Frank. I always, oftentimes when you know give a talk or presentation I like to go back and quote the headlines of the New York Times on January 23rd, the day after the Roe V Wade announcement January 23rd, 1973 where it said something to the effect of "the Supreme Court puts an end to the abortion debate."

And you know people thinking well, it's all over. The Supreme Court has decided this and now we're going to go on to something else.

You know and here we are 50 years later, nearly 50 years later and you know it's still not decided and it's still in fact probably more undecided than ever before.

Fast forwarding 50 years and having been in the movement most all of my priesthood that's probably what strikes me the most and gives me the most hope, because for example, just take this on the scientific side.

You know, back when I was in high school, I remember that very well I was in high school in 73 that was my senior year in high school and I remember we had these debates in high school about it like high school kids do about current events and I wasn't too sure. I wasn't a Catholic at the time so I wasn't too sure what I felt about abortion. And of course it was always presented to us as just a little blob of tissue, and so I remember thinking, well, if it's just a little blob of tissue, then how could it be that bad? And so that's really what the Country thought because we didn't really know much about the science at that time.

Well, as we advanced in our understanding of life in the womb, and as you know, sonograms as we used to call them, ultrasound machines as we sort of able to focus in on the window in the room, and we realized when life begins.

Of course, we always believed theologically, it begins at conception. But we actually could see the developing child in the womb from early, early on and everything is formed. Everything is there and it's just a matter of time before it grows. So that scientific insight into the humanity of the child in the womb that became, I think, for me and I think for a lot of people ... you still cannot deny this. This is the kind of convincing proof that it's not a blob of tissue and as a result, people don't talk about it as a blob of tissue anymore because they know they can't. If they do talk about it, people say, well, no, it's not a blob of tissue. Look you can see it's got hands and feet, it's a baby.

That probably gives me the most hope.

We just opened a women's care center right across the street from Planned Parenthood here. We just opened it on December 8th and already the Lord has saved over 125 babies that were abortion bound. It's amazing and the key moment is that ultrasound.

When a woman sees this image of the child in her womb, no matter what her motives were for getting an abortion, she has a moment of truth and it really kind of becomes real for her that this is more than a blob of tissue. This is a little tiny baby.

So, young people I think are convinced by that, because you know how it is -- science is everything for this generation. And the science proves beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this is a baby.

So then they have to deal with, well, is it OK, to kill a baby? And then there's all kinds of "women's rights trump the death of a baby."

Now of course, the polls show that America is more pro-life -- you wouldn't know by the media, but more pro-life than it ever has been.

Fr. Frank Pavone

And that's certainly the case, and we know the numbers of abortions are going down, have been going down, as are the rate of abortions, and the ratio of abortions, that is, in relation to pregnancies.

Lots of lots of good things have been happening, and of course, we're dealing with this when it comes to the American scene with a with a very pro-abortion administration right now, a very pro-abortion leadership in Congress.

And yet we still continue to make progress because the people are waking up.

As you know, we have the silent no more campaign. People speaking out about their regret of abortion and that changes a lot of people's minds. We've got young people saying, hey, I was a survivor of abortion and there's nothing the other side can do about those dynamics, just like they can't do anything about the development of the science either.

So all these factors work in our favor.

But Bishop Conley, as a Bishop and with the controversy going on right now in in America about, you know what do we do with these politicians...

As we know, as you and I and all the clergy teach, the church herself has been given by the Lord Jesus a religious mission. We don't have as a church, a political mission, and yet we have the duty to speak into politics the moral implications of the Word of God.

Can you talk to us about that a little bit and how you see that playing out in America today and how it should play out?

Bishop Conley

Absolutely, it's a very important question -- I think vital for the leadership of the bishops in the country.

As you know we have reconfirmed that the abortion issue is the preeminent priority, is the language we used -- preeminent priority of all the issues. Like you said at the beginning of the show, you know if you don't have life you don't have anything, so what good are human rights if you don't exist?

So that is the very first point, and I think bishops by majority believe that, and in their dioceses they are trying to preach and teach the implications of that, making it a preeminent priority in how they preach and how they teach and how they talk to people.

The politicians who claim to be Catholics, even “devout” Catholics, and yet hold positions that are absolutely contradictory to what they believe -- that’s a problem that is very thorny and I think that we are moving towards some sort of resolution there.

As you know, we voted in June to approve, overwhelmingly, I think it was 155 to 38 or 48-- overwhelmingly to publish this document on Eucharistic coherence.

We need to do that anyway, not just because of this issue and because of politicians, but if the polls are correct, there’s a lot of people who just don’t believe in the real presence or their belief in the Eucharist is fuzzy. It’s not a solid understanding of what the Catholic Church teaches.

You know I mentioned before that I’m a convert to the Catholic faith and one of the things that drew me into the Catholic Church was the belief in the Eucharist, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist...

John 6: Unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have no life in you. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.

And when I came to understand that, that Jesus was speaking literally, really, that was a game changer for. I grew up in the Presbyterian Church and we didn’t claim to believe that Jesus was truly present. It’s was a symbol of the last Supper.

So if we really believe that Christ is truly present, body, blood, soul and divinity in the Holy Eucharist, then our lives need to be coherent. We need to be living in such a way that is harmonious with this belief.

And therefore, if you can’t stand up and claim yourself to be a Catholic and fly the Catholic flag if you believe in something that’s is totally contrary to what the church teaches.

So we voted on this document, which is in the process of being drafted now. There are meetings going on as we speak as a matter of fact so that in November we can vote on that. And in that document we are going to address...In this document it will probably be more in a generic way -- laying out the principles.

But we are going to address the fact that there’s an obligation and it’s not just on the abortion issue, it’s on other issues as well that you hold these positions to be true if you want to receive Holy Communion. Because in Holy Communion you’re saying to God I am in communion with the Catholic Church’s teaching on these fundamental priorities, these preeminent priorities, like abortion, and like the other teachings as well.

Then then it’s up to the local Bishop to meet with particular politicians and to talk to them about their position to try and win them over and it’s only after repeated dialogue and they continue to refuse that I think a Bishop, then, would say, well please don’t present yourself for Holy Communion.

I think that comes before a Bishop would say, well don’t **give** this person Holy Communion.

That actually happened kind of successfully in a way with the former governor of my home state Governor Sebelius in Kansas. The bishops there asked her and she and she complied with that. She didn't present herself for Holy Communion. My hope is that she's going to get this longing to be back in communion, and that's eventually want to come back and receive the Lord.

And then the final step would be if they're obstinate then you know, then I think a Bishop should say well, if this very notable person, that you can't mistake comes into the mass, then you have an obligation not to give them Holy Communion because not only would it not be good for their soul, but it would cause a scandal to the people in the congregation.

And people are already scandalized, Catholics and non-Catholics as well.

How can this person claim to be a Catholic, a devout Catholic and yet still hold these positions which are totally antithetical to what the Catholic Church teaches?

Fr. Frank Pavone

They are scandalized. We get a lot of that communication here to our office and we also hear, Bishop Conley, the encouragement that people all over the country receive when bishops like yourself are so visible as advocates for the unborn.

And I, I think you're quite aware that that witness goes far beyond the service you give to the people of your own diocese. It is a felt nationwide and appreciated nationwide.

To wrap up here -- and we thank you for being so generous with your time -- we want to thank you on behalf of Priests for Life, and I'd like you to invite you to say a word of encouragement. You're very familiar with Priests for Life. I think among the bishops you're one of the ones that's most familiar with our work over all these years.

Could you give a word of encouragement to the Priests for Life ministry, those that that are in it with us, those that support us as we continue to do what the Lord has given us to do.

Bishop Conley

Sure, I'm happy to do that.

I think back on Priests for Life when it whether it was in Wichita or here in Lincoln or in different places where we've been together and one of the things I think that I have seen both as a priest and as a bishop as a, a great value is, helping priests be able to preach and teach the pro-life message, giving us the courage, giving us the tools, the arguments, the information, to be able to, like you yourself do so well, Father Frank, to get up in front of people and speak about a subject that is uncomfortable.

You know It's uncomfortable. Nobody likes to preach about abortion, but to be able to preach about it in a loving and winning way that win hearts over to the life side. So that's been one of the greatest ... and continues to be because as young priests are coming up through the ranks, and I've found that our younger generation priests are really ready to step into the battle and to preach and teach the truth of the of the church. But to give them the tools like Priests Life does to be able to preach well and compassionately and with you know with eloquence, but also with passion and conviction -- that's really one of the great things that Priests for Life does.

And also ... when I was Pro-life director in Wichita I started project Rachel. So you know, as passionately as we preach against abortion at the same time, we have to preach the mercy for women and for fathers, mothers and fathers who've gone through the abortion experience and to reach out to the walking wounded and to have that compassion for them...

Because I think one time you said no one really chooses, no woman ever chooses to get an abortion. It's not a "choice." She feels forced into it and she's been pressured into it by those who really should be giving her good advice but who aren't.

And so reaching out to those who have suffered the trauma of an abortion either through Project Rachel or Rachel's Vineyard or Silent No More – all these things that Priests for Life do such a good job, and you can't ever lose that, that's such an important aspect of this whole thing.

So I have great hope, and I hope that the Priests for Life continues to flourish.

Fr. Frank Pavone

Thank you Bishop. It's so good to have you here on the program and you know, I as I talked to you, I think about all our brothers in the in the priesthood and now they're your brothers in the in the episcopacy, who were with us there in Rome?

I'm thinking of Archbishop Timothy Broglio, for example, Archbishop Bernie Hebda. Bishop David Ricken

There's a number of others that and we were all together there in the late 90s, and now it's so good to see those great men also serving as you are as bishops in our country.

So we thank you.

We pray for you and we look forward to continuing laboring side by side with you for the culture of life.

God bless you.

Bishop Conley

God bless you. Thank you, Frank.