



Diocese of Belleville
Office of the Bishop

“Do Not be Ashamed of Your Testimony to Our Lord”

Homily on the Dignity of Every Human Life
by
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Delivered Sunday, October 6, 2019
Cathedral of St. Peter
10:30 AM Mass

Dear People of God:

At the heart of the mission of the Catholic Church, in keeping with the teaching of Christ Himself, is our commitment to defend the dignity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every year during the month of October, we are urged to listen, learn, think, pray and act in ways that demonstrate our respect for all human life.

St. Paul, in the words from his Letter to Timothy, just proclaimed, encouraged us to be faithful to that mission:

“I remind you, to stir into flame
the gift of God that you have.
**For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice
but rather of power and love and self-control.
So do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord.**”

The Catholic Church must take Paul’s words seriously. The Church has long been a powerful moral voice proclaiming the truth of Christian morality and the dignity and worth of every human life by opposing injustices, the violence of war, epidemic of gun violence in our country, unjust penal systems, capital punishment, euthanasia, abortion, racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice, the destruction of the environment in our common home and forms of oppression causing great harm to the most vulnerable, especially young children. The horror of the sexual abuse crisis has caused many people to close their ears to the voice of the Church which, in their view, no longer has moral credibility. Some Catholics may feel compelled to

withdraw from the Public Square and remain silent in the face of so many circumstances in which the value of human life is ignored.

However, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are not free to do that. We believe in the mercy and forgiveness of God. We believe that we should truly repent for our sins, seek forgiveness from those we have sinned against, and pray for the strength we need to be faithful to our repentance over and over again. Then, as redeemed sinners, we must humbly take our place in the Public Square proclaiming the dignity and worth of every human person.

Mrs. Wendy Fink, whom I recently appointed to lead the Respect Life Office of our Diocese, has reminded us all of 40 days for life, from Wednesday, September 25th through Sunday, November 3rd, 40 days of a peaceful, prayerful vigil not only for an end to abortion but also for an end to circumstances that lead expectant mothers to think they need an abortion. You can join in by visiting 40DaysForLife.com/Belleville.

You are also invited to join others for 1 or 2 hours, from 8 AM to 8 PM, at a peaceful prayer vigil in front of the Planned Parenthood Abortion facility at the corner of Frank Scott Parkway and Route 159 in Swansea. Support those who can participate with personal prayers and fasting in union with prayers and fasting of others throughout the United States. In addition, this Wednesday, October 9, at 5:30 p.m., there will be a Respect Life Rally and Prayer Service at 317 Salem Place in Fairview Heights, across the street from the new Planned Parenthood Center. **“Do not be Ashamed of Your Testimony to Our Lord.”**

As you know, the State of Illinois has approved Bills which significantly expand so called abortion “rights” in the state. The Reproductive Health Act and the Repeal of the Parental Notice of Abortion Act expand the “right” to abortion in the state. This new legislation makes access to an abortion a fundamental right. It repealed the Infant Born Alive Bill, as well as the law requiring parental notification before a minor can obtain an abortion. The legislation also forces insurance companies that provide maternity care to now also cover abortion with no co-pay. Ultimately, this Bill presumes to give a legal answer to the philosophical and theological question which has long been debated. Namely: Is developing fetal life in the womb human life or is it simply “tissue”? And if it is not human, at what stage in gestation does this developing fetal life become human? Not even Roe v. Wade presumed to answer this question, focusing instead on the mother’s “right to privacy.” But, Illinois law now states *“that a fertilized egg, embryo, or a fetus does not have independent rights under the law of the state of Illinois.”*

As I have frequently said and written, the Catholic Church, members of other faith traditions, and many thoughtful people who do not observe any religious tradition find this Illinois legislation morally unacceptable.

We can be grateful that the number and rate of abortions in the United States have plunged to their lowest levels since the procedure became legal nationwide in 1973, according to recent statistics. A research group counted 862,000 abortions in the U.S. in 2018. That’s down from 926,000 tallied in the group’s previous report for 2014, and from just over 1 million in 2011.

The new report illustrates that abortions are decreasing in all parts of the country. In the last two decades, the birth rate, as well as the abortion rate, declined significantly. According to the report, the 2018 abortion rate was 13 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-44 — the lowest rate

since the Supreme Court's 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion. Following that ruling, the number of abortions in the U.S. rose steadily — peaking at 1.6 million in 1990 before starting a steady and still-continuing decline. Fortunately, the abortion rate is now less than half of what it was in 1990.

At the same time, Planned Parenthood is taking a major step to increase access to abortions in the metro-east and the region with a new, large, state-of-the-art clinic scheduled to open later this month in Fairview Heights. Reproductive Health Services of Planned Parenthood of the St. Louis Region will expand abortion services in this new facility, providing both surgical and medication abortions. The facility is on Salem Place close to the intersection of Interstate 64 and Illinois 159. They are expecting to provide services for a large number of people. In addition to abortions, they will offer family planning services, annual exams, sexually transmitted infection testing and HIV AIDS prevention programs.

Planned Parenthood of the St. Louis Region and Southwest Missouri acknowledged that this facility was built in secret to protect the project from negative reaction. The location was chosen as a regional hub, possibly serving multiple states. Planned Parenthood says the facility is needed because now there is only one abortion clinic in the state of Missouri.

A spokesperson called Missouri the battle ground for reproductive health care and rights, saying “We are ready to keep fighting for our patients because we know access to comprehensive and medically-accurate reproductive health services is a fundamental right and imperative in order to achieve gender equity.” **“Do not be Ashamed of Your Testimony to Our Lord.”**

The teachings of the Church concerning abortion are clear. But, we must all acknowledge these teachings are a source of great division and countless arguments among the American people. We also know that some Catholics reject these teachings.

Nevertheless, the Church clearly teaches that human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person -- among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life. Since the first century, the Church has affirmed direct abortion is gravely contrary to the moral law: Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: abortion and infanticide are gravely immoral. As St. Paul writes, “you must guard this rich trust with the help of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us.”

Current Illinois law implicitly argues that the moral issues surrounding abortion are to be completely ignored or relegated to the individual mother's subjective, personal, moral and religious beliefs. Contrary to the flawed arguments of some politicians in the past that abortions should be “safe, legal and rare”, Illinois law argues that an abortion is a personal medical procedure no different than a mammogram or an appendectomy. It is simply a “right” that any mother has with no moral consequences because the fetal life that is aborted is “only tissue”. But, everyone knows that this so called tissue, left undisturbed, will develop into a recognizable innocent human being.

As you surely know, American society has become more and more pluralistic. This pluralism is significantly shaped by the “Secular Age” in which we can no longer assume that people believe in God, embrace the Ten Commandments, accept the existence of the human soul, or “expect the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

In this Secular Age, it would be incorrect to presume that your neighbors, friends and relatives share your opinions about the challenging moral issues that surround the question of abortion. (Again, statistical evidence indicates that while most Catholics believe abortion is wrong, all do not. There are some who believe they MUST make an exception if they were to learn that their young daughter was expecting a child! As one sincere “pro-life” father told me, “I know in my heart that God would not want to ruin my young daughter’s life with a baby!”) I urge you not to be fearful of sharing your views on these sensitive matters with others. **“Do not be Ashamed of Your Testimony to Our Lord.”**

At the same time, we must be mindful that our prayerful concern for developing human life in the womb must never blind us to the dignity of the life of the mother approaching an abortion clinic and the lives of the doctors and nurses who perform these procedures. It is a contradiction to say one respects life and at the same time condone the intimidation or even the harming of those who do not share our moral convictions. We should also remind ourselves that His Holiness, Pope Francis has recently strengthened the Church’s opposition to capital punishment, pleading for the respect for the life of the person convicted of murder. The Pontiff has reminded us that it is usually the very poor who are condemned to death and not infrequently the innocence of the condemned person comes to light after they have been put to death. More than that, the Church makes it clear that it is wrong to argue that a particular political party holds positions that are completely consistent with the teachings and beliefs of the Catholic Church on ALL issues concerning the dignity of every human life. Finally, we must NEVER forget our moral responsibility to respect our own human lives. We must eat a healthful diet, exercise, sleep sufficiently, shun illegal drugs, spurn deadly cancer causing cigarettes, avoid risks that endanger our safety, consult our physicians regularly, honor the gift of human sexuality, and respect the lives of others.

Share your views honestly and with good will, without being harsh or judgmental. I know from pastoral experience that people of good will, integrity, deeply held moral convictions and authentic Christian Faith can find themselves holding contradictory positions concerning vexing moral issues. In your prayerful conversations, always keep in mind that a particular human act may be legal. But, at the same time, it may still be wrong, that is, immoral. St. Paul to Timothy: “Have the COURAGE to bear our share of hardship for the Gospel with the strength that comes from God. Do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord.”

I know this is a sensitive, delicate topic but, as members of the Body of Christ, we cannot ignore it. Meditate on the dignity of every human person. Ponder the command of Jesus of Nazareth: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Who are our neighbors? Every man, woman and child on this earth, including the lives developing in the wombs of their mothers!”

“Do not be Ashamed of Your Testimony to Our Lord.”

PRAISE BE JESUS CHRIST.BOTH NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN!