



Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, South Dakota
Homily of Bishop Paul J. Swain

Mass for Life
St. Joseph Cathedral
January 22, 2007

We come together today on this the 34th anniversary of the United States Supreme Court decision allowing abortions on demand. The Bishops of the United States have declared this anniversary every year as a particular day of penance for violations to the dignity of human persons committed through acts of abortion, and of prayer for the full restoration of the legal guarantee of the right to life. We include ourselves among those in need of penance and forgiveness for those times we have been less than forthright in declaring respect for life, not only of the unborn child, but also of mothers in need; for those times we have been judgmental rather than merciful, for those times we have not been perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect.

We raise this issue of respect for life over and over again as a matter of justice and out of love, love for the child surely, but also love for those mothers often caught in a dizzying time of fear, anxiety, confusion, and for love for our country where degrading the sanctity of life has weakened human relationships and subtly but surely endorses violence as a means to solve problems.

That life is sacred from conception to natural death is not simply a teaching of the Church. It is inherent in the creative hand of God. The Catechism reminds us: *Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains for ever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning to its end; no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being. (2258)*

That is the core value from which flows our thoughts, our prayers and our actions. That value leads us to oppose abortion, the death penalty, embryonic stem cell research, and euthanasia. It leads us to support those actions that enhance the dignity of all people, especially the poor and vulnerable. It is a value grounded on our call to love our neighbor and our concern for the sanctity of souls, their future in the life to come. We care about the souls of all.

As we gather today we cannot but help recall the events of the past year when the legislature passed and the governor signed a bill that would prohibit essentially all abortions. It was entitled the Women's Health and Human Life Protection Act. Unfortunately it became known as Referred Law 6 which removed from common public conversation the worthy purpose of the law, concern for the unborn child **and** concern for the long term health of mothers. It recognized the special bond between mother and child that begins at conception which also needs protection from the devastating impact breaking that bond through abortion can bring.

This law of course was brought to the public in referendum and after spirited debate was defeated. Thank you for all you did in seeking to save the life of the unborn and the lives of mothers by supporting this law.

While the referendum was defeated at the polls, there was no defeat for the sanctity of life. Life comes from God. We humans can never by vote or by will vanquish his creative power. In my view, much good came from that effort. One of the most important was that so many people became better informed on the devastating impact abortion has on mother and child. Many who walked in darkness have seen a great light, though many remain in that darkness.

One lesson we should learn from this is the fragility of civil law and how quickly it can be changed. Civil law is a powerful teacher; many believe if it is lawful it must be morally okay or government would not have sanctioned it. We must seek to assure that the laws of society reflect moral truth. But the ultimate and continuing assurance will come only from conversion; the changing of hearts to accept the reality that God is the giver of life, to Him alone is the power of life and of death, regardless of what the law is.

We all feel great compassion and empathy for those who become pregnant as a result of the horrible violence of rape or incest. The church through caring ministers and supportive ministries reaches out to them in love. The fact that the Women's Health and Human Life Protection Act did not have exceptions for rape and incest became a deciding factor for many in how they voted.

Accepting the premise that a complete ban on abortions is not politically possible at this point, some ask whether Catholics could support legislation that allows exceptions for rape and incest. Without commenting on any specific proposal, there is in Catholic moral theology a principle of gradualism that would permit a Catholic in good conscience to support and vote for a lesser ban with the intention of diminishing as much evil as possible, and protecting the most life possible. It suggests while one would prefer to save all lives, saving nine out of ten lives if one is able is a good, of course deeply regretting that all ten cannot be saved. Supporting such a position must be done with the clear understanding that one is not compromising the principle of sanctity of all life, and that if and when the opportunity arises rescinding the exceptions would be sought. At some point I will write on this at greater length than this homily allows.

Some question the Church speaking out for respect for life in the political sphere. His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical *God is Love* that *the Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to awaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.* (28) The Church speaks out for life in the fight for justice for all and out of love for all.

St. Paul in the 2nd reading wrote to the church at Philippi to *keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in him. Then the God of peace will be with you.* What they knew from him were the teachings and call of Christ. We can be at peace when we live the teachings of the Christ, recalling the wise words of Blessed Mother Teresa that we are called not to be successful but to be faithful.

Therefore let us re-commit ourselves to continue to preach and seek in law and practice the sanctity of life from conception to natural death and all the years in between. Let us continue to do penance for violating the dignity of human persons and pray for the full restoration of the legal guarantee of the right to life. But most of all, in order to be faithful, let us individually and as Church, in our hearts and in our actions, respect life ourselves as children of God who gifted us with our lives.

Give Praise to the Lord.