

Being Proactively Pro-Life in Today's Society

Introduction: A Word of Thanks

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this evening about the crucial importance of being pro-actively pro-life in today's society. I appreciate your inviting me here to Catholic University. In the antediluvian days, back in 1982, I earned my doctorate here and more recently served on the Board of Trustees and also as its Chairman.

I'd also like to say a word of thanks to the CUA Knights of Columbus college council. I am grateful the Council here is robust and growing and I know it is a blessing for your members and for the whole university.

Pope John Paul II

Later this month I shall travel to Rome (along with 4 million other people) to be present for the canonization of Bl. John Paul II. For many reasons I look forward to that event with happy anticipation. When John Paul II was elected I was a young priest working here on my doctorate. In fact, I was engaged in teaching a graduate course when news of his election was received. I did not know much about Cardinal Karol Wojtyla except that he had visited Washington in the recent past. Pope John Paul II greatly influenced my entire priestly ministry and, in particular, he more than any other helped me to see what it truly means to be pro-life.

If you haven't already, I'd urge you to read John Paul II's, *The Gospel of Life*, which a friend of mine called 'the best thing written on the sanctity of life since the New Testament.' Even John Paul II might have winced at that description but it serves to highlight the beauty, depth, and breadth of the pro-life vision that Bl. John Paul II laid out for us.

Following his vision, let us begin with what it means to be pro-life; then how and why we should be proactively pro-life.

What It Means To Be Pro-Life

Let me begin with what it means to be pro-life. We live in a slogan-driven society where terms such as “pro-life”, “pro-choice”, “anti-abortion”, and “pro-abortion” are thrown around with reckless abandon. A good first step on the road to become pro-life is to become suspicious, very suspicious of the way these terms are described and used in politics, in the media, and in the entertainment industry. For example, the old “Hemlock Society” now calls itself “Compassion and Choices” but for this organization there is only really one choice it promotes, viz., the right to take one’s own life with or without the help of a physician. If you google “pro-life” the first listing is “anti-abortion movements”. Or take the notion of “pro-choice”. When originally devised, it had to do with a woman’s choice regarding her own body. What the phrase cloaks is that we’re dealing not merely with a choice but a child. Further, with constrictions on religious liberty, there is a growing danger that even those who conscientiously oppose abortion on moral and religious grounds, will be implicated in providing for abortion through health care insurance plans or in the use of their tax dollars, & so forth. Descriptions of the unborn child or the frail elderly are also designed to mask their humanity and to clear the way for them to be done away with.

Unfortunately, those who struggle to promote life, marriage, & religious freedom often allow themselves to be defined by the ascendant opinion-makers in the culture. Those who seek to promote & protect life are styled as opponents of women’s rights. They are also often portrayed as rigid and right wing, unconcerned about what happens to children once they are born or unconcerned about the burdens families face when caring for a family member in a persistent vegetative state, and so forth. Those who support laws which define marriage as between one man and one woman are characterized as bigots & the laws they support are seen as neo-“Jim Crow” laws. And those who promote religious liberty are zealots bent on imposing unreasonable, harmful religious beliefs & moral teachings on others. This past weekend *The Baltimore Sun* (& other *Tribune* papers) ran an editorial against the arguments of Hobby Lobby’s lawyers before the Supreme Court defending for-profit businesses against incursions on their religious beliefs. The editorial described those arguments as “faintly Talibanesque”.

I would say, “Welcome to the club” – except – that’s *not* our club! Indeed, the pro-life movement is too diverse to be thought of as “a club” or as a merely partisan effort or

as a haven for those longing for the 1950's. And that's not what I see when I come to the Basilica of the National Shrine for the Vigil Mass preceding the National March for Life. No, I see you and your classmates and friends and young people in ever greater numbers for all around the country; thank you! When I attend the Youth Mass at the Verizon Center downtown, I don't see a collection of people who are threatened, who are circling the wagons - no I see young people who are there to celebrate the gift of life. The same is true of the rally on the Mall - with each passing year it becomes a lot more like a youth rally, almost like a World Youth Day right here in our nation's capital. Many young people have become pro-life or at least have begun to lean that way because they have brothers and sisters who were aborted or because they realize that they were a choice before they were a child. Generations later, pro-choice rhetoric rings hollow.

Is the pro-life movement and opposition to the contraceptive mandate merely a men's preserve, a political "man-cave"? Ask Helen Alvaré; ask the 40,000 women who belong to her group called "Women Speak for Themselves" - they are young, professional women, of many faiths and none at all, of all political parties and those who are political agnostics, who are convinced from their experience as women that life should be protected, that religious freedom of individuals and church institutions should be promoted, and that no one, including the U.S. government, has the right to speak for all women.

And it's time we speak for ourselves, not allowing others to define us but rather defining ourselves as an emergent movement in our culture that is eminently reasonable, rooted in faith, young, joyful, and determined to make a profound difference in the years that lie ahead. A tall order? You did ask me to speak about being "pro-actively" pro-life. But first what does it really mean to be "pro-life"? And then, how will we spread that message not only to the like-minded but among those who are unaware of, unconcerned about or utterly opposed to the witness to the sanctity of human life, freedom, and dignity you are giving.

The Heart of Being Pro-Life

This brings us to the heart of what we think and believe and why we believe it. First, let's mention that pro-life convictions are reasonable; they are based on sound science and sound reasoning. The more one knows about the formation of the child

in the women, the less likely one is to dismiss the child in the womb as a mere mass of cells. The unmistakable signs of humanity are there, early on, such as brainwaves, DNA, a heartbeat, and so forth. Ultrasound has helped many women contemplating an abortion truly to glimpse something of the humanity of their unborn children. In the Archdiocese of Baltimore more and more pro-life crisis pregnancy centers are able to share this special gift with the women facing difficult pregnancies thanks to ultrasound machines, many of which were provided by the generosity of the Knights of Columbus.

Those who favor abortion and other assaults on human life see the same scientific evidence that we see, but they reach other conclusions. "Can't they see the signs of humanity?" we ask impatiently. Yes, they can see those signs and some who differ with us study them professionally. What accounts for the difference in how they are understood?

In fact, science alone will not settle this matter. Scientific evidence must be accompanied by sound analysis, not merely an empirical analysis but also a philosophical description which takes the empirical data seriously while making room for "something more". Clearly, people bring to the task of looking at the data, the signs of life, various understandings of what it means to be a human person. Let me suggest one major difference that separates the pro-life position from those who promote what we understand to be threats to innocent human life, whether through abortion, physician assisted suicide, or even capital punishment.

The difference is this: The authentic pro-life view sees life as having inherent value and dignity throughout its whole spectrum, from the moment of conception until natural death. This inviolable dignity does not depend on an ability to function independently - whether outside the mother's womb or outside the walls of a health care facility. This view is rooted in a deep intellectual instinct, an engrained intellectual habit, which led the Framers to acknowledge "the Law of Nature" and "Nature's God" - and to assert that all are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights, chief among them, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This suggests that human dignity is both inherent and transcendent.

Many people, however, take another view, a more utilitarian view. They too speak of

human dignity but do not agree that human dignity is inscribed in the human person by the Creator; they do not agree that there is a perduring, transcendent dignity at all stages of life. Instead of being inviolable, the right to life is seen as contingent on the ability of a human being to relate to other people and to live with a relative degree of independence. Human dignity is not “inbuilt” but rather is accorded by a mother who choose to have her baby or by a family who choose to provide life-sustaining measures for a member who is permanently impaired. A child in the womb until later in the pregnancy cannot survive on the outside. This child is dependent on the mother for life and survival. He or she cannot reason, speak, or relate non-verbally to others. Or take the case of someone in a persistent vegetative state (PVS). A person in the PVS is utterly dependent on others for all aspects of care, including artificial feeding and hydration. Such a person cannot live a useful life and such a person cannot relate to others in any meaningful way. More than a few would conclude that such a life is bereft of dignity. They would also conclude that those facing terminal illness can take their lives before they get to a stage in which they will become helpless and un-relational.

One’s being helpless and non-relational is thought to be the equivalent of his or her no longer being a moral subject capable of benefitting from the good actions of others. But is this really so? Does not an unborn child benefit from his or her mother’s love, including the care she takes of her own health and that of her unborn baby? Does not a wife who is in the persistent vegetative state benefit from her husband’s marital fidelity and even from his constant presence?

The Church, of course, recognizes that no treatment need be administered when it is harmful, useless, or burdensome to the patient, or on cutting edge. It also teaches that no one may take innocent life or withhold life-sustaining measures such as food and water, all because human beings have an inviolable, transcendent dignity given them not by the State or by family members or loved ones but by the Creator. Pope Francis, in his characteristically direct way, speaks about “a throw-away” culture ready to discard human persons who are not deemed useful or worthy of life. Think, for example, of the new law in Belgium that allows children to be euthanized.

Faith Confirms Reason

Our faith confirms that human dignity is given us by God, is transcendent &

inviolable. Pope John Paul II never tired of teaching not only the scientific and philosophical reasons for promoting & protecting life but indeed the deepest theological reasons for doing so, reasons that flow from the very heart of the Gospel... so much so that he entitled his encyclical on life, “The Gospel of Life”.

The basis of this teaching is found in *Gaudium et Spes*, para. no. 22, the Vatican II *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. It rests on the biblical truth that the human person was created male & female in God’s image & made for friendship with God and others. It also rests on the biblical truth that, in squandering God’s friendship, man’s dignity, though wounded by original sin and by actual sin, survived and that God’s plan was to rescue and redeem a wounded humanity by sending his only begotten Son into human history as redeemer. It states that when the eternal Son of God became man, when he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and took shape in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary he assumed our humanity, our human nature. In doing so he revealed the Father’s love not just for humanity in general but indeed for each person in particular, for in becoming one of us, Jesus in a certain sense united himself to each person. And by revealing the Father’s love for humanity and for each person, Christ has fully ‘revealed us to ourselves’ – he has revealed that human dignity is not merely a matter of science or philosophy but rather has its source and summit in God’s Triune love. In a magnificent way, faith has confirmed what reason teaches.

John Paul II’s encyclical letter, *The Gospel of Life* shows how all of Scripture brings to light the truth about the human person, created in God’s image and redeemed and restored by Christ. He shows how God is the author of human life and dignity and that no person or governmental authority has the right to take innocent human life but on the contrary must be at the service of fostering human life and dignity. And he lays out the full range of affronts against human life and dignity, beginning with the most egregious of all, the taking of innocent human life in the womb.

Bearing Witness to the Gospel of Life

Pope John Paul II did not lightly choose the title of his encyclical. It is indeed, *The Gospel of Life* – not a new gospel that he made up – rather he wanted to tell us that gift of human life and dignity is good news – good news that the world needs to hear. It is good news for the voiceless, the vulnerable and the poor. It is good news for the

disabled and chronically ill. It is good news for every person who faces both his dignity and his mortality. This is not welcomed in all quarters; far from it. John Paul II speaks about a prevailing “culture of death” that must be overcome by the creation of “a culture of life”. Although we may be heartened by improving poll numbers indicating that a solid majority of Americans identify themselves as “pro-life” – all of us realize how much work needs to be done.

But precisely because it is a *Gospel of Life* to which we are called to bear witness, then all that we do to promote the cause of life must be seen in the context of the New Evangelization. Once people’s hearts are opened to the Good News and in the grace of the Holy Spirit they encounter the Person of Christ who assumed our humanity, who preached the Good News, who died and rose – and come to believe that this Christ loves them, walks with them, and gives authentic meaning to the whole of their lives, then their hearts are opened to the truth about the human person, then their hearts are opened to the Gospel of Life in its fullness, including those parts of it that are countercultural.

Think about it. Your classmates on campus who go to Mass each Sunday, who participate in Eucharistic Adoration, who go to confession, who pray the Rosary now and again if not daily – is there any question where they are with regard to human life? The more we encounter Christ in prayer the more we discover the depth of his love for us, the more we discover the truth about human life and dignity. Conversely an eclipse of the sense of God heads to an eclipse of the sense of man.

No one bears witness to the Gospel solely on one’s own. It was not for nothing that Jesus sent out his disciples two by two. We need one another, we need the Church; we need the Lord if our witness to the Gospel of Life is to bear fruit, to change minds and hearts, and that very much includes the ministry of our Holy Father, Pope Francis. It will be important for you and me to see the continuity that exists between the Pontificates of John Paul II, Benedict, and Francis, even though many would say that Pope Francis has broken with his predecessors. Some have even accused Pope Francis of “soft-peddling” the defense of human life in favor of a “feel-good” version of Christianity more popular with the press.

Pope Francis is telling us that when we give the elevator speech as to why one

should be a robustly joyful Catholic, we should not lead off with the Church's counter-cultural moral teachings but rather with something that resembles John 3:16. And when we do address the Church's counter-cultural moral teachings, we should do so in the context of Christ and his love for us. In saying this Pope Francis is fully in continuity with Pope Benedict who reminded us that becoming Christian is not the result of an ethical choice but rather the result of an encounter with the Person of Christ. In saying this Pope Francis is fully in continuity with Pope John Paul II, the philosopher Pope, whose heart and mind were set in one direction, towards Christ, the Redeemer of Man! As our Worthy Supreme Knight has written, when the Cardinals elected Pope Francis, it is as if they were reading Pope Benedict's Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*!

The support we need to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ also includes the local bishop and diocesan structures, the parish, indeed, Pope Francis makes clear that every structure in the Church must be transformed by what he called "a missionary conversion" - put entirely at the service of the transmission of the Gospel and this can only be "good news" for the cause of life. And let's us recognize the role of campus ministry here at Catholic University and the immense role which the Knights of Columbus plays in evangelizing its own membership and families, in providing resources for knowing and loving the faith, and for all the fraternal support that it provides. Critical to this process as well is 'virtuous peer pressure' - for as a critical mass of students open their hearts to the Gospel, others will stop, look, and listen - and hopefully their hearts too will be opened to Christ.

The new evangelization, of course, does not mean making up a new Gospel that is supposedly more suited to the times in which we live - Rather it means that the Gospel the Church received from Christ is transmitted in its fullness with new ardor and new methods, and new urgency. The ardor part has nothing to do with partisan zealotry and cultural warrior-hood but rather with our having been overtaken by Christ's love for us, and ready to teach the faith in a manner that manifests its connection with our lives. We do not eschew teaching Catholic doctrine but we bear witness when we show how it changed our lives and give people hope that their lives too might be changed for the better. The new methods surely must include the social media and other ways in which the Gospel can be extended to those who feel no connection with Christ or the Church, including a big group who say they are

spiritual but not religious. And often it is old people like me who need to learn from you what these new methods are and how they can be put at the service of the Gospel. These new methods include more effective methods of advocacy in the public square, for while the Gospel is not “of” this world it is “in” this world, and must exert an influence in shaping a more just civilization. And there is a new urgency as we recognize with clear-eyed honesty how many people have yet to hear the good news of human life and dignity and are falling for views that appear to be compassionate on the surface but which, in reality, will lead to untold cruelty and suffering.

Conclusion: Mother of a Redeemed Humanity

Finally, whenever we speak of bearing witness to Christ, we must turn to Mary who bore Jesus in her womb with love beyond all telling. She is the New Eve, the mother of a redeemed humanity, the Mother of God and our Mother also; we need her maternal care. She was also the Lord’s first and most faithful disciple who lived the Gospel of life before it was preached, who stood beneath the Cross, opened her heart to the news of the Resurrection, prayed with the Apostles at Pentecost, and took part in the earliest celebrations of the Eucharist.

How could we hope to proclaim the truth about human life apart from her? How could we hope to evangelize apart from the Star of the New Evangelization? Thank you for your devotion to the Gospel, to the cause of life, to human dignity.

You give us all so much hope for the future. God bless you and keep you always in his love!