

Finishing the Race

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien's column this week includes excerpts from his Respect Life Sunday homily.

What have we that is not from God?

Everything can disappear tomorrow and as we came into this world with nothing, so will we depart, and without pockets in our caskets or U-Hauls trailing our hearses.

Isn't that what is at the basis of our respect for all human life? Every life is a gift of God. Even as an increasingly secular culture banishes God and thinks itself autonomous, creating its own rules regarding the design of God from the very beginning - two become one flesh as the natural design for the begetting of offspring.

Depart for a moment from this biblical inspiration - two in one flesh - and take procreation into the laboratory rather than the marriage bed, even with the very best of understandable intentions to have a child - and begetting becomes manufacturing, human life a commodity. And an unconscionable corollary of the attempts to manufacture life, as one theologian accurately described it - millions of human embryos frozen in freezers, suspended in animation or disposed of in sewers and sinks, or otherwise destroyed in the name of random human experimentation.

The observation of Pope Benedict, made to the British parliament a month ago, should force all of us to examine the basis of ethical principles and confront the reality of the origin of human life:

"If the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident."

The Pope has frequently recalled his young years in Nazi Germany where the State claimed final, ultimate control of every aspect of life from its very beginnings. He spoke of a "sinister regime that thought it had all the answers. Its influence grew - infiltrating schools and civic bodies as well as politics and even religion - before it

was recognized for the monster it was. It banished God and thus became impervious to anything true and good.”

Did not the recent three-part PBS documentary “God In America” leave no doubt as to the role God and religion once unapologetically played in the private lives and public policies crafted by our nation’s founders?

What Benjamin Franklin claimed, that public religion was ultimately good and necessary for society, was summarized by Thomas Jefferson who claimed that God “watches over our country’s freedom and welfare ... (the) God who governs the affairs of men.” Dozens of such sentiments could be quoted from George Washington, through Abraham Lincoln and into recent times. God and his laws have never been strangers in America’s thought and history.

Why then, the attempts of secularists and atheists to demean religious values, to forbid the broad spectrum of religious voices from fully entering into America’s ongoing search for moral values? Recently, the Cardinal Archbishop of Quebec, a city once a center of Catholic culture, spoke of abortion as a “moral crime.” Cardinal Marc Ouellet was subsequently condemned by a unanimous vote of the parliament, one columnist calling him “Cardinal Ayatollah” and another wishing the cardinal to die “from a long and painful illness.”

Quebec is somewhat to the north of us geographically but not that far from us culturally.

The pro-life movement does have its strident voices. But let’s not mistake stridency with endurance and determination and persistence in promoting our pro-life causes. And, to the Catholic Church, pro-life means more than the political label the media has created. It means more than just promoting full-term pregnancies, something paramount but not exclusive to the goals of our pro-life “movement.” We support all life - from conception until natural death.

I know of no diocese in America with Catholic Charities programs as encompassing and effective in supporting life as those in our Archdiocese’s schools and residences for the physically and emotionally challenged. Our Daily Bread and dozens of food kitchens throughout Baltimore City and our nine counties are-pro-life initiatives

supported by Catholics, surely, but also by Protestant and Jewish communities and foundations, and by those of no particular faith-persuasion. Applause is merited all around for senior citizen housing all across the state - again, even government funding for such pro-life efforts - and the Esperanza Center, offering opportunities for education, medical and legal help to immigrants new to our shores, whether documented or not. They are human sisters and brothers are they not?

Then it comes to life in the womb. "No, Catholics and others" - such as those who generously volunteer for pregnancy counseling centers - "you must tack your sails on this one." Why? Because it's controversial we're told. There are differing opinions as to when life in the womb begins. And then, there's Roe v. Wade, you remember.

It is all the more reason to let our voices be heard - strong, peaceful voices, unrelenting pro-life voices.

We plead for the unborn child in whom, from the very beginning, life develops rapidly: as an embryo of 23 days already has developed a nervous system; at 42 days already has a sense of smell and clearly-visible hands; at 54 days has formed into a tiny baby with all of its major organs present; and at just 84 days has developed eyes and ears and has begun to suck its thumb.

This is the truth, the truth of life. And it cannot be hidden by pseudo-science or by those with secularist agendas.

I offer my thanks to all who are making the sacrifices to proclaim, yet again, that life is a gift endowed by our Creator. And I echo Paul's words in saying: You are competing well, finishing the race to the end and keeping the faith.