

God's Great Gift

Permit me to expand on my homily from Respect Life Sunday, as reported in last week's account of that Mass in these pages.

It was just a year ago this month when, through the mysterious, inscrutable providence of God, I stood in the pulpit of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen for the first time. On that joyful installation afternoon I struck several sobering themes, one of which is a central focus of our Church throughout the year, but most especially for Catholics here in the United States during this Respect Life Month.

In my installation homily last year, I said: "I shall make every possible effort to continue and intensify the defense of the right to life that has been waged by my predecessors. And I pledge more. No one has to have an abortion. To all of those in crisis pregnancies, I pledge our support and our financial help. Come to the Catholic Church. Let us walk with you through your time of trouble. Let us help you affirm life. Let us help you find a new life with your child, or let us help you place that child in a loving home. But please, I beg you: let us help you affirm life. Abortion need not be an 'answer' in this Archdiocese."

I don't know what difference those words have made, if any, in the lives of the oft-times young women in crisis pregnancies. But I repeat and reaffirm those words today in this column, for I am much more knowledgeable than I was a year ago of the thousands of individuals and dozens of agencies that stand ready throughout the Archdiocese to help a woman safely through the birth of her baby, to help her care for her newborn, or to find a loving adoptive family for her child.

The theme of this year's Respect Life Month is "Hope and Trust in Life," centered upon Pope Benedict XVI's message during his April visit to the United States. During his visit, the Holy Father emphasized that the Church and all its members "are called to proclaim the gift of life, to serve life, and to promote a culture of life. The proclamation of life, life in abundance, must be the heart of the new evangelization. For true life - our salvation - can only be found in the reconciliation, freedom and love which are God's gracious gifts. This is the message of hope we are called to proclaim and embody."

To those volunteers in the pro-life movement who proclaim the gift of life through efforts like *40 Days for Life*, I offer heartfelt thanks for their boundless energy in bringing to life and keeping alive the creed at the heart of our nation's identity – that all of us are created equal and endowed by our creator with the inalienable right to life.

How unfortunate it is that the pro-life movement comes across to some as angry, reproachful, or excessively judgmental. Unfortunate, too, that the clear and unchanged teaching of our Church from its earliest days has been so distorted in political debate and commentary.

The earliest book of Christian instruction, very possibly written as the New Testament was being formed, is called the *Didache*, or the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. It speaks of the two Ways of Life and Death and admonishes: "Thou shalt not procure an abortion, nor commit infanticide." This solemn teaching has never been in doubt since those earliest days.

The Church then, as do so many of good will of every religious persuasion and of no religious belief, because she sees the right to life as the basis of all other rights, has no choice, but with love and compassion for all, to speak out in defense of innocent human life.

To our elected officials who value innocent human life in the womb, a reminder and a plea: there are any number of ways within our Constitution to advance the protection of innocent human life. Is it not reasonable and honorable to take some steps, however small, to pursue that goal?

As disciples of Christ, we are but fruit in God's vineyard and thus are called – each of us – to cherish the divine within every human being made to the image and likeness of God from the first moment of conception to the last moment of natural death.

Those who claim we have a "right" to take innocent life usurp God's dominant claim on every human being. But in and through Christ and His Church, the vineyard owner will never give up. Nor must we as we sing of the beauty of His creation and of all those little ones in the vineyard, made to His image and likeness.

Ancient spiritual writers suggest that the owner of the new vineyard is pleased to share with his Church the rich fruit of the new vine, the work of human hands, which will become the life-giving Eucharistic blood of His Son. We thank the Lord for the gift of His life, streaming through His Body, the Church – a precious gift, divine evidence of His boundless love for us all.