

# Mass for Life

Isaiah, God's prophet, tells us how God touched his life, and how God touches us. God called him as a baby before birth, scarcely stirring in the womb, beneath his mother's heart. "The Lord called me before I was born, from my mother's womb he pronounced my name."

God's call to Isaiah was not a public call, for God hid him "in the shadow of his hand." A true call from God. A quiet call. The kind of call that beckons every person here tonight, and everyone who is with us through television. Young or old, white or black or brown, rich or poor, healthy or sick, each one of us has a name, a dignity, a call, indeed, a destiny which comes from the Lord who made us and is forever. You are here tonight in response to the very special call to defend human life, and in particular the lives of the littlest and the weakest among us.

Before God who has made and called us, we are as the Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 139) puts it, quite transparent:

"Lord, you examine me and know me, you know if I am standing or sitting, you read my thoughts from far away, whether I walk or lay down, you are watching."

We are transparent, yes, and called to be something more, to be totally, excitedly grateful:

"It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother's womb; for all these mysteries I thank you: for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works."

Tonight we gather as a people of faith transparent before our God. He knows our weaknesses, our failures, our frailties, our frustrations. But God also inspires our dreams and sets before us the mountain to be climbed and the promise of a path marked out and of energy which will not fail, both to begin the ascent and to achieve the summit.

We are transparent to our God, from the instant he first touched us, at the moment of conception in our mothers' wombs. Tonight we are grateful for the wonder of

God's love for us, in making us, in giving us life and in sending his son Jesus Christ to suffer, die and rise for us. We are grateful to God for pouring out his Holy Spirit into our hearts, so that we can pray to God as "Our Father" and praise him for the wonder of ourselves and of his works.

The path up the mountain is marked out by God's word, given on the mountaintop long ago through Moses in the Commandments and, as we heard again tonight, charted for us by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. Some of us bishops were asked some time ago what message from a spiritual leader touched us most. I thought immediately of what Pope John Paul II said to us American bishops in Chicago on his first visit to the United States. I had been ordained a bishop just two weeks earlier.

He gave us for our meditation the beatitudes of Jesus. He reminded us that the beatitudes are basic to the thinking and the praying of any disciple of Jesus. They can help us now as the Vigil of Prayer for Life begins. Remember that "blessed" means "happy," and that Jesus is teaching us that we are truly happy when we can identify with what he teaches us:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit"—poor so that our hearts are not pulled or cramped by what may be a passing fancy, a toy or trinket in comparison with what really counts with God. Those who are poor in fact are especially beloved by Jesus. In their faces he has taught us to try to see his own. The heart that is poor in spirit is open to the richness of God's marvelous gift of inner peace. It is a heart able to receive and to rejoice in the meaning of the gift of life.

"Blessed are they who mourn." Jesus speaks here of those who mourn sin, who can recognize evil and with the help of God's grace are eager to turn away from it. The devil is the master of camouflage. He tries to mask the reality of evil with neutral phrases, like "terminating a pregnancy" for the snuffing out of a human life, like "pro-choice" when the little one not yet born is deprived of any choice, like "death with dignity"