

Pro-Life Conference Keynote Address

Good morning. This is the first opportunity I have had to take part in your annual conference since becoming Chairman of the Bishops' Pro-Life Committee. I am truly delighted to be here with you, and I bring with me the prayers and good wishes of all who serve on the Committee.

I must tell you: I am also somewhat awed to stand before you precisely because of what you do so well, day in and day out. Sixteen years ago, and I remember it as though it were yesterday, a reporter at a press conference asked me to say why I thought it important to make a public pro-life statement. He referred to some polls that said that Catholics seemed to be following the general population in attitudes toward abortion. I responded that much depended on how the question was put: if the question were asked, What do you think of taking the life of the unborn? Then the response would be unmistakably pro-life. But there was an additional factor: if even one expectant mother could be helped by our statement, and a report of it in the media, to realize that another heart was beating beneath her own, that another life was at stake in an abortion. And then, if she acted on her realization, the statement would have been more than worth the while. Suddenly I saw tears running down the face of the reporter. In your work you are touching hearts and lives in ways you cannot see now. You may not see the tears your words provoke, but the recording angel is keeping track of what you do so effectively, and I thank you for the ways in which, heart and soul, you act to bring the gospel of life to others.

All I can say to that is: what you are doing, and how you are doing it—don't stop now. Keep up the wonderful work!

Some may say we are powerful. What do we think? Do we feel powerful? Hopeful? Challenged? Tired? Frustrated? Maybe all of the above?

We are keenly aware of the past three decades' hard work. Nonetheless, what we see is the long road that looms ahead. Some days we ask ourselves: Will our nation see an end to abortion? Will the lives of all, born and unborn, ever again be protected in law and nurtured in life? Will our nation reject euthanasia and assisted suicide and instead provide care and compassion for all those who are sick or dying or otherwise vulnerable? Will our country ever recognize that killing those who have killed is no way to show that killing is wrong? Will what John Paul II calls the "culture of death" that surrounds us be replaced by a "culture of life?"

The answer to those questions, I believe very strongly, is a resounding YES — but not tomorrow. We have to keep at it, and be cheered by the thousands of young people now entering the movement. The Pro-Life Vigil Mass in Washington, with the enormous turnout and participation of young people, is part of this.

There is something that you and I both confront with some frequency. At least, I know I do. That something is criticism. It can come from friend or from foe. It can be constructive or not. We are told that We're too far to the "right"; we're too far to the "left"; we need to do more, or we need to do it differently; we talk too much about respect for life, or we don't say enough about it.

Now, none of us is above constructive criticism. And I certainly include myself in that. But I want to start this wonderful conference by pointing out things you have accomplished, and how I see them moving our society toward a culture of life. I have the deepest admiration and gratitude for all that you do for the cause of life. And I have very special admiration for our extremely able staff, led by Gail Quinn, and supported by a National Conference team with expertise in law, communications and relations with government.

In the midst of battle, it is perhaps impossible for you to step back and take stock. So I would like to tell you what I see.

Important Accomplishments

I see in every diocese in