

Pro-Life Homily

In recent months I have publicly addressed such current issues as racism, religious freedom, especially in Europe, justice and peace in the Middle East and in Central America, and ecological concerns. Today I turn to an issue daily featured in the news media, the issue of human life. In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah speaks of how those “who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” (Is. 9:1) In the gospel passage, the Evangelist Matthew (cf. Mt. 4:15-16) sees this prophecy fulfilled in Jesus, the “light of the world.” (cf. Jn. 1:4) Our culture is filled with contrasts of light and darkness. It brightens our day with new ways to amass, analyze, and communicate swiftly information, new ways to cure disease and preserve life. But darkness comes as well when life is cheapened and confusion sown through the same marvelous technology. Some months ago men and women from across Maryland spoke of their concern about how people are bombarded, almost without realizing it, by messages which distort reality and sway feelings to sell a vision of life in which the lives of others — the unborn, the severely handicapped, the seriously ill — are placed in peril. If these lives are judged “inconvenient,” they can be regarded as disposable, to be thrown away like used and crumpled tissue. Thus, in the abortion discussion, the unborn child is described with the medical term “fetus.” What has begun at conception to develop marvelously, with the genetic qualities of a new and unique human being, different from those of both mother and father, is dismissed as a “cluster of cells.” Yet within 21 days of conception, scientists tell us, the tiny heart begins to beat. About three weeks later, every internal organ the child will ever have has begun to form and, before another week is up, brain waves can be detected. Some expectant mothers can now see through sonograms this wonderful continuum of life. Some have had their preborn children helped by surgery employed or treatment given to the little one within the womb. But for others have come new pressures from the society in which we live: to pursue a career, to finish an education, to accommodate another’s wish or counsel. Each such pressure seeks to overcome the quiet, inner voice of a mother’s conscience, urging, “Life is the natural choice. Give it a chance!” Some indeed speak of a right to choose, but this approach denies any choice but death to the voiceless one in the womb. It is a sad and scandalous choice in a land where hundreds of thousands of childless couples are looking to adopt a child. In our defense of human life, we are participating, we know,

as American citizens in a civil rights movement of the highest order. Emotions run deep, as they ran deep in the days before the Civil War, when the United States Supreme Court, in the Dred Scott Decision, denied American citizenship, in effect, personhood in the law, to those held by the slave States not to be persons before the law. In the halls of Congress, some politicians sought by speech and compromise to halt the spread of slavery while others strove to maintain it as a way of life. The movement to abolish slavery was a human rights movement, but many of its leaders and members — probably most of them — acted out of religious conviction and motivation. They were profoundly religious men and women of faith, in seeking to secure dignity and freedom for those brothers and sisters they believed made in the image and likeness of a loving Creator. Today we stand together for another human right, the right to life. It is a secular cause, as Doctor Bernard Nathanson, the former abortionist, and Nat Hentoff, the civil libertarian, repeatedly remind us. Yet we, like those who fought slavery, like those who, with the Rev. Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., fought discrimination, we too are inspired to push ahead by our faith. Science, common sense, even the Hippocratic Oath, all speak of innocent human life as sacred and not to be destroyed.