

Mass for Parents of Deceased Infants
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – C
November 7, 2010
Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien

The life of World War II hero and French president, Charles de Gaulle, is known to many of us. He was a giant in every respect and a man of strong Catholic Faith.

What is less known to many is that he and his wife Evonnnne were the parents of a Down's syndrome child who was a treasure to them. Despite the demanding affairs of state, Charles arranged his responsibilities so that he and Evonne would spend some daily time with their infant daughter. They would pray with her before she went to bed at night, and after the child had fallen asleep, Evonne would often ask, "O Charles, why couldn't she have been like the others?"

As was forewarned them by physicians, their daughter died very young. There was a Mass at graveside and as the mourners had started to depart, Evonne lingered at the little casket, finding it hard to return home. Finally, Charles took her by the arm and quietly said, "Time to leave, now Evonne. Did you not hear what the priest reassured us? Now she is like the others."

During this November, the month in which we pray for all the souls who have gone before us, it is fitting and helpful that we remember those babies who have died—always prematurely, whether in the womb or at any early age—whatever the cause of death. Many of you are here as parents who have lost such a child and might still be experiencing, perhaps, the heaviest weight you have yet to bear. Faith has sustained you in this challenge and all of us pray for an increase of grace in your lives and for the reassurance of Christ who embraces each of your young loved ones in heaven as he did so often while he walked this earth. And now he implores each of us, let the children come to me for this is now their kingdom.

Not many people are familiar with the extraordinary first reading of today's Mass. It talks of seven courageous Jewish brothers. They faced the wrath of the pagan king Antiochus who conquered Israel and made every effort to suppress Judaism. One by one, each brother resisted violating Jewish dietary laws and one after the other willingly went to his death after the cruelest of tortures.

Their words ring through the centuries and in many areas of the world are still echoing in the lives of modern-day martyrs:

You are depriving us of this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up to live again forever.

From heaven, I have received this tongue and these hands. To keep the law of God, I surrender them, for from God I hope to receive them again.

The whole seventh chapter of the second book of Maccabees makes for reading as inspiring as any in the Old Testament. The king as a last resort approaches the son's mother, requesting that she persuade them to compromise. She feigns doing so within earshot of the king, but then whispers to each:

Son, have pity on me who carried you in my womb for nine months... Do not be afraid of this executioner, but be worthy of your brothers and accept death, so that in time of mercy (heaven), I may receive you again with them.

Indeed, our lives are God's first, not our own, and every human life created by God is ultimately destined for God. Bold rhetoric, indeed, credible only when lived out, witnessed to by heroic believers in a secular world today similar to that of the Maccabees.

It is altogether possible that Jesus had this story of the seven brothers in mind in today's Gospel when he addressed the petty quarrel between the Sadducees who rejected belief in an afterlife and the Pharisees who supported belief in next life. In telling the absurd story of seven brothers who died and successively married the same wife, the Sadducees were suggesting the absurdity of the idea of resurrection. As always, Jesus takes them on.

"You all believe that your fathers, Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are with God. So God is a God of the living, not the dead."

And so we, today, firmly believe: our God is not a God of the cemetery, but of life, eternal life.

Yes, there is a life hereafter, and an entirely new way of existence, not a mere continuation of this life. Jesus calls us to live life on earth as witnesses to the life to come. He invites some of us, for example, willingly to surrender the joys of

marriage and family, here, in order to announce, to witness, to the future kingdom where there will be no marriage.

To married couples, Jesus invites: lift up, fix your eyes on heaven in your life-long commitment to spousal love and family life. In doing so, you have begun building a kingdom on earth which will be fully realized in heaven. There, where the deepest and most passionate love will be infinitely caught up in the love of God.

To fix our eyes on heaven while deeply involved in things of earth allows us to bear some of the otherwise unbearable heartaches which many of you still bear, with the certain strength that comes from God through prayer and the sacraments.

Our Church will never allow us to lose sight of the paradox of dust and divinity that we are: dust, unto dust we will return; divinity, from the first moment of conception, every child of God made in the image and likeness of God, loved by God, claimed by God, embraced by God for all eternity.

With St. Paul's wish we conclude in prayer:

“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, through his grace, encourage your hearts and strengthen others in every good deed and word”

so that in the endurance of Christ, we will one day be reunited with all our loved ones in the joy that will never end.