

Guidelines and Reflections in Preparation for the March for Life

Theological Principles

The Dignity of the Human Person

Our starting point must be the Dignity of the Human Person. From the very beginning of creation, the human person was set apart from the rest of created reality according to the divine plan. In Genesis chapters 1-3 we see that Man and Woman were created in the divine image, i.e. in the image and likeness of God, Genesis 1:26-27. The teaching of the Church has been consistent in regard to these chapters of Genesis. A brief summation of the teaching would include:

- God is the source of all that is and every created thing is good.
- Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and have a special dignity and vocation as a result.
- God gave Man dominion over the rest of the creation
- Woman and man are equal partners and are complementary beings called to live in loving relationship
- Men and women were to be fruitful and multiply and 'subdue' the earth; as a result the goodness and beauty of sexual relationships within marriage is established and recognized
- Human beings were given the gift of free will and commanded to use it in accordance with the divine will.
- From the beginning human beings acted contrary to the divine will and sinned causing a rupture in the relationship between God and humanity and humanity and the rest of creation.
- God promised that despite the sin of Adam and Eve redemption would still be offered to the human race.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* addresses the Judeo-Christian teaching on the sacredness of all life and the dignity of the human person in Part Three, Section One, Chapter One, especially Articles 1-3, paragraphs 1700-1748.

Among the more salient points are:

- The dignity of the human person is rooted in the creation of humankind in the image and likeness of God. (1700)
- The human vocation is directed to divine beatitude and to freely strive for this fulfillment. (1700)
- The divine image is present in every person (1702)
- Every human person is endowed with a spiritual and immortal soul (1703)
- The human person participates in the life of the Divine Spirit and can understand
- The order of things established by the Creator and by free will direct himself toward his true good.

In Section Two, Chapter Two, Article 5, paragraphs 270-2275, the Catechism takes up the issue of abortion. It should be pointed out that abortion is treated under the Article dealing with the 5th Commandment. It is clear from this brief section that abortion is a great moral evil:

- Human life is to be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of creation (2270)

- From the first moments of existence a human being must be accorded the rights of a person (2270)
- The church's teaching on the evil of abortion dates from the first century and is unchangeable (2271)
- Participation in abortion is a grave offense (2272)
- The inalienable right to life of every innocent human being is a constitutive element of civil society
- If the state deprives a category of human beings such protection, it is denying the equality of all before the law.

Finally, Pope John Paul's *Theology of the Body* clearly establishes the dignity of the human person, the sacredness of sex within marriage, the sacredness of life in all its stages, and the centrality of the family as the foundation for understanding the Christian vocation in the modern world.

The History of Legalized Abortion in the United States

Prior to the *Roe v Wade* decision of January 22, 1973 by the Supreme Court, the immorality and illegality of abortion was generally accepted. Unfortunately, there have always been those who would resort to abortion prior to its legalization. But, until the middle of the 20th century, such practice was prohibited in every state of the Union and considered a violation of medical ethics and the practices of civil society. A few states began to legalize abortion in limited circumstances in the years prior to *Roe*, which made it legal in every state overnight despite state laws protecting the unborn.

While it was understood that women in difficult circumstances might resort to abortion in dealing with an unwanted or 'shameful' pregnancy, such action was usually hidden from the public view because of the strong moral and civil sanctions associated with it. There are and have been many reasons why abortion was and is seen as an alternative by some. Poverty, violence against women, and fear of disease or physical abnormality of the child have often played in the decisions of some in choosing to terminate a pregnancy through abortion. While such reasons can never be seen as any kind of justification for abortion, desperate people often resort to desperate measures. The compassion of Christ and the pastoral care of the Church must always be afforded to those people in such circumstance. But with the Supreme Court decision in 1973, there was a major shift in both the interpretation of the Constitution and rights of the individual person that signaled a break with both the moral and civil traditions of American society and culture.

The Supreme Court decision in *Roe v Wade* overturned the laws of all 50 states and the District of Columbia in one fell swoop. It established a legal right to abortion for any reason and changed social norms dramatically as well. Abortion for the sake of convenience or as a method of birth control could now be factored into the decision to terminate a pregnancy. Such a decision has become a watershed event, one that has marked a major shift in societal perception. This shift is particularly evident, as the term 'pro choice' has come to be exclusively associated with the so-called right to abortion. Both pop culture and the media use this term as a rallying cry and denigrate any individual or group who opposes abortion on demand as anti-choice.

In the thirty-seven years since *Roe v Wade* there have been millions of abortions in the United States. It is both tragic and sad that because of a judicial fiat, such social policy and practice has become perceived as a constitutional “right” accorded every woman as part of routine health care.

Roman Catholic Response to *Roe v. Wade*

So how are we to respond? There is still much controversy among the citizens of this country around whether or not abortion should be something that is seen as a right under the constitution. Even among people of faith, within different beliefs and denominations, there is not universal agreement.

Some people feel that the decision regarding abortion is a private matter and that religious prohibitions against it cannot be imposed on others.

In a similar vein, some would hold that abortion is a matter for State as opposed to Federal jurisdiction.

Others claim that until viability exists (the fetus can survive on its own), it is not a person and has no rights under the law.

Many proclaim that abortion is evil and undesirable, but have no stomach for its recriminalization and reverting abortion to a ‘back alley industry’ again.

Still others claim that the prohibition against abortion is not simply a religious belief, but something that is rooted in the Natural Law established by God for universal adherence.

Most everyone agrees that abortion on demand is terrible social policy. The majority of Americans would like to see the ‘need’ for an abortion such that the practice itself would be rare.

For Catholics the course of action should be clear. Abortion is a grave moral evil, one that is both contrary to divine and civil law. Pope John Paul II and the bishops of the world have consistently called for an end to abortion around the world. Each person is called to do everything in his or her power to bring an end to the tragedy of abortion. As for particular means to accomplish this task, there is again much difference of opinion. Some clearly want to have a Constitutional Amendment to prohibit abortion and thus overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Others point out that the battle to end abortion is a matter of winning hearts and minds and that legislation banning abortion will not put an end to its practice and, in fact, may create even more complex problems while doing very little to decrease the number of abortions. Wherever one lines up in this debate some particular actions have been recommended by the bishops of the United States.

Prayer- Each Catholic is called to pray for an end to abortion. They are also called to pray for:
all the victims of abortion,
those who have had or performed abortions,
for the unborn and all pregnant women, and

for politicians and judges

Learn- The bishops of the US have called for Catholics to educate themselves about the issue of abortion and church teaching on the Dignity of the Human Person and why the church is a consistent and stalwart opponent of the so-called right to abortion.

Communicate- While it is important to learn about abortion it is also important to be able to speak in an informed and reasonable way about it. Catholics are called to share the teaching of the church about the sacredness of all life at all its stages.

Serve- The Christian community should reach out to those who are contemplating abortion and work to put an end to the situations and circumstances that compel women to opt for abortion. Adoption alternatives are important for women who, for whatever reason, feel that they are unable to care for a child once it is born. Help for unwed mothers or women caught in poverty is essential. Many women need assistance in order to be able to make informed and moral choices that provide for their own welfare and the welfare of their children.

Organize- Participate in community and religious groups that actively seek to work for an end to abortion. Participation in political lobbying, grassroots organizations that promote pre and post natal care, and church groups who give witness to the Sacredness of Life are all ways to stand for life and work for an end to abortion on demand.