

Human life precious

Dearly beloved in Christ:

Two years have passed since the U.S. Supreme Court issued its abortion decisions permitting destruction of unborn human life virtually on request. The court's action has eroded respect for human life and established a climate of social permissiveness that has dramatically increased the number of abortions in the United States. It is estimated that there were perhaps 1.8 million abortions throughout the U.S. in 1974, and that the figure will increase to 2.4 million by 1980. This means that there will be one abortion for every two live births, a figure that has already been surpassed in the District of Columbia where officials estimate that the number of abortions is equal to that of live births.

One cannot be insensitive to this callous destruction of human life. There is no justification for such killing. The unpleasant fact is that the vast majority of abortions have nothing to do with preserving the life of the mother, but are performed for reasons of convenience. Perhaps the most tragic result of the Supreme Court's abortion decisions is the denial of protection for unborn human life during the earliest stage of its development on the grounds that such human life is somehow less meaningful than other human life. The "meaningful life" ethic has already demonstrated its effectiveness for the destruction of life in the hands of the Nazis and other exponents of totalitarianism.

Nonetheless, we affirm once again that human life is precious and beyond simple material valuation. It is a gift from God which must be protected and sustained at every point of its existence. Particularly during the nine months of pregnancy the life of the child should be given special care and legal protection. Science provides ample evidence that the life initiated at conception is the life of a human individual who will pass through the stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age unless destroyed prematurely by violence or disease. Scientific data abound to show the link between life and human development in the womb and the process of growth and maturity during the succeeding stages of human life.

These are some of the realities of human life that the Supreme Court chose to ignore in its death-dealing abortion decisions. Its closed-mindedness led the court to withdraw constitutional protection for the right to life of the unborn at the very time in history when mankind is otherwise particularly sensitive to violations of fundamental human rights.

These reasons among others have prompted the Catholic bishops to call for an amendment to the Constitution of the United States that will assign legal personhood to the unborn child and assure the protection of the constitution to each and every unborn human being from conception on. In testimony presented to the United States Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, the United States Catholic Conference explained the reasons and motivations for amending the Constitution:

"As Americans, and as religious leaders, we have been committed to a society governed by a system of law that protects the rights of individuals and

maintains the common good. As our founding fathers believed, we hold that all law is ultimately based on Divine Law, and that a just system of civil law cannot be in conflict with the Law of God. The American system of constitutional law has proven to be a workable system of law, and one that has generally responded to the delicate balancing between defending the common good and human rights on the one hand, and according a due enjoyment of personal freedom on the other.

"After much consideration and study, we have come to the conclusion that the only feasible way to reverse the decision of the Court and to provide some constitutional base for the legal protection of the unborn child is by amending the Constitution. Moreover, this is a legal option consistent with the democratic process. It reflects the commitment to human rights that must be at the heart of all human law, international as well as national, and because human life is such an eminent value, the effort to pass an amendment is a moral imperative of the highest order."

Since the Supreme Court decisions, the need for a constitutional amendment has become only more pressing. Attempts have been made to deny the constitutional protection normally accorded to doctors, nurses and hospitals for conscientious refusal to participate in abortion procedures. There is increasing pressure from some members of the scientific community to permit the use of aborted fetuses in laboratory research, free of any restrictions whatsoever. The courts continue to strike down laws, even those protective and regulatory measures considered by state legislatures to be within the parameters of the Supreme Court opinions. In the face of all this, the easy availability of abortion on request frustrates educational efforts that emphasize the value of unborn human life, and it further erodes respect for human dignity in our society. The violation of the right to life becomes acceptable, and in some cases, socially respectable.

It is increasingly evident that only a constitutional amendment offers any real hope to correct this situation. The passage of such an amendment remains the first order of business as a new Congress assembles for its legislative work. But political activity on the part of those who favor such an amendment must accelerate so as to keep the issue prominently before the Congress and other legislative bodies.

On this second annual observance of the fateful Supreme Court decisions, we must renew our determination to reverse the Supreme Court's abortion on demand decisions, to advocate the rights of the unborn in all our social and political processes, and to increase educational and humanitarian efforts to sustain and protect human life at every stage of its existence.

William D. Borders

Archbishop of Baltimore

+ Cf Declaration on Abortion, Sacred Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, November 18, 1974, Nos. 5, 8-13, 27.

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