

Ascension: Fr. Eamon Tobin - Pastor's Column

In our first reading today, the not so well known prophet Habakkuk, who lived several hundred years before Christ, gives voice to the violence that he sees occurring. He also expresses his frustration with God for not doing something about it. Habakkuk writes:

How long, O Lord? I cry for help but you do not listen! I cry out to you "Violence!" but you do not intervene. Why do you let me see ruin, why must I look at misery? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife and clamorous discord.

A prayer like the above should give us all permission to express our frustration with our God when we feel that he is ignoring our plea. *Honest* expression of how we truly feel is so important for a healthy prayer life.

Today marks *Respect Life Sunday* for all Catholic Churches in the United States. It is a day when all of us are invited to reflect on and pray about how we, as a nation and as a global family, regard human life.

As Catholics, we teach and believe that all human life is sacred and precious to God because he created all life in his *image and likeness*. Whenever human life is not treated with reverence and respect, God is dishonored. We should speak out when we see human life destroyed, diminished and grossly disrespected, as in the following ways:

Abortion. Each day, over 4,000 pre-born infants are slaughtered, that is, over one million a year. Fr. John Powell, S.J., calls this phenomenon *The Silent Holocaust*.

Social Justice Issues. Last Sunday I spoke about the True Cost of Low Prices-the violence of globalization. Such economic practices daily show complete disregard for millions of workers.

Hunger is a crisis that is rising to epic proportions. In a world of plenty, allowing 30,000 people to die daily of *hunger* is a scandal.

Domestic Violence. About every 20 seconds, a woman is battered in our country. About two million children are abused each year by one or both parents or a relative. Thousands of elderly Americans are subjected to physical or verbal abuse each year. In our nation, people are more likely to be physically assaulted, beaten or even killed by a family member in their own home than any place else or by anyone else. Such violence occurs in families of all races, religions, education levels and income groups.

Human Trafficking is rampant involving children and adults for purposes of prostitution and slave labor .

Other important human life issues of concern to *Respect Life Sunday* include euthanasia, capital punishment, stem cell research, gang violence, war, and health care. (As regards health care, the sad fact is that over 40 million Americans have no insurance coverage.)

Today, or any other Sunday, we should ask ourselves where we stand on these issues.

Reflection question: Am I pro-life on some issues and anti-life or indifferent on others?

Fr. Frank Pavone writes:

While no one person or group can be expected to be actively involved in all of the above issues, no one person or group is free to be unconcerned about any attack on the dignity of human life, nor are we free to ignore the interdependence of all the efforts on behalf of human life. There are numerous activities being carried out in defense of human dignity. While there may not be room for all of them in our schedule, there must be room for all of them in our heart.

Reflection question: How is my conscience formed when it comes to life issues-through reflection on the scriptures, church teaching or through the prevailing opinion of the culture?

In Newark in 1995, the late Pope John Paul II spoke these words to all Americans:

Your country stands upon the world scene as a model of a democratic society at an advanced stage of development. Your power of example carries with it heavy responsibilities. Use it well, America!

Reflection question: Am I *more* loyal to my political party on some moral issues than I am to church teaching?

On some or even many issues in life, we can "agree to disagree" as, for instance, on the type of church music we prefer. But when it comes to respect and care for the human person, born and unborn, we *cannot* agree to disagree. We are either pro-life, that is, from womb to tomb (all the way, not half-way) or we are anti-life. As Fr. Pavone states above, we may not have room in our schedules for all of the human life issues, but we must have room in our hearts.

Living the Gospel of Life. Almost ten years ago, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral statement called *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*. The following are a few excerpts which includes a quote from Pope John Paul II on the occasion of his visit to Baltimore in 1995.

This nobility of the American spirit endures today in those who struggle for social justice and equal opportunity for the disadvantaged. The United States has thrived because, at its best, it embodies a commitment to human freedom, human rights and human dignity. This is why the Holy Father tells us: "...As Americans, you are rightly proud of your country's great achievements. (Giant Stadium, 1995)

But success often bears the seeds of failure. U.S. economic and military power has sometimes led to great injustices abroad. At home, it has fueled self-absorption, indifference and consumerist excess. Overconfidence in our power, made even more pronounced by advances in science and technology, has created the illusion of a life without natural boundaries and actions without consequences. The standards of the marketplace, instead of being guided by sound morality, threaten to displace it. We are now witnessing the gradual restructuring of American culture according to ideals of utility, productivity and cost-effectiveness. It is a culture where moral questions are submerged by a river of goods and services and where the misuse of marketing and public relations subverts public life.

If it is not a baby, you are not pregnant.

Having commented on the many sad ways that we in this country disrespect life, the bishops write:

*It needn't be so. God, the Father of all nations, has blessed the American people with a tremendous reservoir of goodness. He has also graced our founders with the wisdom to establish political structures enabling all citizens to participate in promoting the inalienable rights of all. As Americans, as Catholics and as pastors of our people, we write therefore today **to call our fellow citizens back to our country's founding principles, and most especially to renew our national respect for the rights of those who are unborn, weak, disabled and terminally ill.** Real freedom rests on the inviolability of every person as a child of God. The inherent value of human life, at every stage and in every circumstance, is not a sectarian issue any more than the Declaration of Independence is a sectarian creed.*

Words of comfort. In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life), Pope John Paul II wrote these words of comfort for women who have had an abortion:

I would like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors that may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that, in many cases, it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly, what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try, rather, to understand what happened and face it honestly.

If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitely lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord. (#94)

A simple yet profound way each of us can live the Gospel of Life is by treating our own family, our neighbors, strangers, and especially the poor, with respect and dignity. If we speak to others in a disrespectful and rude manner, we have no right getting all hot about other life issues.

A PRAYER FOR LIFE

*Loving God, Creator of all,
we recognize that life is a gift from you.
Open our hearts to your Holy Spirit
and renew in us a deep respect for all persons:
the family, the unborn, the young, the adult,
the sick, the disabled, the abused, the imprisoned,
the aged, the dying, the homeless, the unemployed,
and the oppressed in any way.*

*Bless all of us and instill in us
a deep love for your gift of life.*

*Through the intercession of Mary, Mother and Virgin,
may all our words and actions
foster reverence for human life.*

*May we be true witnesses to the truth that all life is
precious and has sublime dignity.*

*Lead our nation and our world to this understanding
so that we may be a people dedicated
to the protection of all your sons and daughters.*

*We ask this through your Son, Jesus Christ, the Word
Who became flesh and lived among us.*

Amen.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Tobin

tobin2@live.com

St. John the Evangelist – Fr. Emmanuel’s Homily

Homily - 27th Sunday of the Year C

Today, we celebrate the Respect of Life Sunday. God is love; love and life go together. So we affirm that there is hope for everyone. The Church does not teach that anyone who has killed through any means is destined for hell. But Christ’s message is, “I tell you... unless you repent you will ... perish” (Luke 13:3, 5). This homily, then, is not an indictment to anyone; it is a “strong call” to repentance that all may receive the forgiveness and blessedness of God through Christ our Lord. Amen. Christ “came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10, RSV). If one cares about this abundant life, will it be fair for such a person to take a stand against the physical life of another? Certainly not! Then, follow the golden rule: “Whatever you wish that men [or God] would do to you, do so to them” (Matt 7:12).

This Sunday, therefore, calls for the need to prioritize human life in all its forms, from conception to natural death. We must shun capital punishment, euthanasia or assisted suicide, homicide, terrorism, genocide and the destruction of lives through incessant wars. It calls for disarmament and a halt to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction: nuclear, biological and chemical. The resources of the world should be employed toward the emancipation of the plight of the poor, starving, sick and dying. Also, governments should make adoptions services very easy so that “unwanted babies” need not be aborted anymore. Simply put, we need transformation and redemption from the “culture of death” to the “culture of life”. God is life! Choose life!

The First Reading (Hab 1:2-3; 2:2-4) represents the cry of all “possible victims” of the destruction of life: “How long, O LORD? I cry for help ... Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and clamorous discord.” The greatest problem of our time is that, perhaps without realizing it, many Christians are becoming “anti-Christ.” Christ asserts his authority in the Gospel passage (Lk 17:5-10), saying, “Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded? So.... when you have done all you have been commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.’”

Recently, the Holy Father, Pope Benedict, visited Great Britain. The media reported the scene of some distraught persons carried protest signs protesting the right to contraception, artificial birth control, etc. An invited guest of Fox News, commenting about the teaching of the Church and the papal magisterium against contraception, contended, “Those views are not shared by most British people; they are not shared by most British Catholics.” Beloved, these are not about “views” as if they are personal views. It is not about the pope. Not at all! They are about the “Gospel”. Jesus decrees “Go into the world make them my disciples...” He sets the terms. To the contrary, many are opting to become disciples of the “secular and liberal” world. Christ is saying, “Thou shall not kill” and the liberal and secular world is saying, “Thou shall have ‘Freedom of Choice’” [to kill or not]. And many Christians are rejecting Christ’s injunction, and deciding who lives and who dies. As Christ rightly stated, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Matt 15:8; Isa 29:13).

Remember the agitation of the Israelites to the Prophet Samuel. They rejected the theocratic nation model where God will be their king. They wanted the secular model of kingship and protested to Prophet Samuel, “Now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations” (1Sam 8:5). Samuel was greatly upset, but God said to him, “Hearken to the voice of the people ... for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them” (1Sam 8:7). Also, remember Pilate desperately wanting to release Jesus? He presented the people with the option between a murderer and the Saint and asked, “Will you have me release for you the King of the Jews?” (John 18:39). To his dismay, they answered, “Not this man, but Barab’bas!” (John 18:40) What a choice! The sad thing, my dear friends, is that the sound of this answer continues to reverberate through the ages in the choices against life. Indeed, as God laments, “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!” (Micah 6:3).

Beloved, God is the author of life. He conferred on humans a fundamental and inalienable right to life: "For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning... of every man's brother I will require the life of man... for God made man in his own image" (Gen 9:5-6). Accordingly, all human life is sacred from conception to natural death. Not even the abortion doctor is ignorant of what he or she is doing. Irrespective of whatever they call the baby in the womb, fetus or embryo, the fact remains that it is a destruction of life. The politician endorsing abortion knows this too. As "Uthman dan Fodio" declares, "Conscience is any open wound; only truth can heal it." Yes! The scientific advancement we have made with ultrasound imaging technology has demonstrated this beyond any reasonable doubt. In preparing this homily, I visited a website of one of the Women's Pregnancy Centers. What became clear to me was that medical abortion harms women. Some of the side effects include,

Excessive bleeding... for 15 to about 30 days... infections... pain... danger of tearing the uterus. [Then] the long term effects ... generally fall into about three categories: the psychological side effects are obvious and the depression rates are at least doubled in the next two to three years; substance abuse rates are doubled at least in many studies ... the ultimate abuse from depression is going to be suicide. The suicide rates for post aborted women in many studies is at least three to six time higher than in women who chose to have the baby. **In the long term it is going to be healthier for the woman to carry the child than to abort.** (http://wpctucson.com/2010/video/abortion_doctor.php).

Finally, beloved, it is one thing to sin and say to God, "Lord, I am very sorry for my sins"; it is quite another to sin, and say to God and man, "It is not a sin... I will continue to do it!" Such impunity is dangerous before God. Obviously, many Christians have lost their baptismal and confirmation anointing. We need to wake up. St. Paul enjoins us in the Second Reading (2 Tm 1:6-8, 13-14): "Stir into flame the gift of God that you have.... For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control.... Bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God..... Guard this rich trust with the help of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us." May God save his people through Christ our Lord. Amen.