

Friday of the 1st Week in Ordinary Time, Cycle I/ Mass with the Archdiocesan Delegation to the
March for Life
January 18, 2019
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Hebrews 4:1-5,11 Psalm 78 Mark 2:1-12

“Surely it is important for America that the moral truths which make freedom possible should be passed on to each new generation. Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.”¹

That quote of St. John Paul the Great, which he spoke just a bit north of here in Baltimore at the closing Mass of his final Apostolic Journey to the United States in 1995, or his last major one,² is among my favorite quotes of his.³ It highlights the great opportunity that we have in the United States to live in freedom, but it also highlights how the concept of freedom can be so easily distorted.

In today’s gospel passage we hear the story of four men who used the freedom, the gift of free will God gave them, not to do what they liked, but to do what they ought. They had a friend who needed help, who was in bondage, but who was being prevented from receiving the help he needed to live a freer life. So they went to extreme measures to get him help. They carried him on a primitive cot from a distance. They climbed a roof. They cut a hole in it and they lowered their friend down [to encounter Jesus]. One detail I never used to think about when I would hear this story before I started preaching on it is: just think how upset the owner of the house could have been with them for cutting a hole in the roof. We can only imagine that the devil would have been throwing fear at the four men about what the homeowner would think or do to them as they contemplated their next move when it was clear that they could not get their friend through the crowd to Jesus. But when they were able to get their friend to Jesus... their friend encountered truth incarnate... the truth made flesh... their friend encountered love incarnate, love made flesh, and he encountered the forgiveness of his sins. As a result, he experienced a whole new level of freedom in his life in his body and in his soul.

The story of these 4 men and what they did for their friend is not all that different than what God is inviting us to do in the pro-life movement. As I reflected on today’s gospel passage... and what we have experienced the past couple days [on this pilgrimage]... I suggest that God is giving us at least four dimensions in how He is inviting us to move forward... four sets of battles that He is calling us to in the fight for the protection of human life. That a simple gospel story like this one can provide us with so much to consider is also a beautiful reminder

¹ See: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19951008_baltimore.html

² He made a single stop in St. Louis in 1999 as he was coming back from Mexico. In fact when I watched coverage of his visit there, as I was staying at a different hotel in Crystal City than the Holiday Inn where we are staying, that I first came to realize John Paul’s physical decline had begun, that he was no longer the spry 58 year old young pope.. and that his physical suffering could serve as an inspiration for me to get up for 6:45 AM Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes Church (in Crystal City), even when I was tired and wanted to sleep longer.

³ I was so moved with that quote at the time that I included it on the dedication page of my MIT Master’s thesis, which I was then writing.

that the Holy Spirit has packed so much into the Bible that there are more Biblical insights than we can ever fully understand or exhaust in our lifetime.

The first dimension we can consider is to imagine an unborn baby lying on that cot as the friend being brought to Jesus. We are called to save babies, we are to bring them the freedom to live.

The second dimension is to consider a woman in a crisis pregnancy, laying on the cot, who is at risk of considering an abortion. We are called to bring her to the freedom of the truth which is lived out in love, in those cases in which women who, because of their circumstances and how the devil has sown lies of all different kinds in their lives, have come to believe they have no other choice but to kill their baby.

The third person to consider laying on the cot are those who have been involved in an abortion. We are called to bring the moms, the dads, the family members and the friends who have chosen or supported abortion decisions to the freedom of the mercy of Jesus. But let us not stop even there: we are also invited to bring the freedom of God's mercy to those in the abortion industry and those who have politically supported abortion. We do this remembering the words that Jesus spoke in yesterday's gospel passage, that Archbishop Hebda preached upon, that nothing is impossible for God. In fact, you may recall those words were spoke with respect to a discussion of who could be saved. Jesus came to save even those who seem unsaveable; all those who repent. That is why a number of us will be carrying Divine Mercy images today at the March.



I just touched upon those first three ways of what God is inviting us to do, because if I were to give each of them the discussion that they deserve, we might be here so long that we would miss the March, and there is another pilgrimage group coming in for Mass behind us.

The fourth call to action, which I will cover in more detail, is most connected with what we are doing here today.. is to consider our great nation as the one being on the cot: that we are to bring true freedom to our land in which we have placed ourselves in bondage to abortion. As so often happens when we errantly quest for freedom apart from God, we find ourselves bound to sin. We find ourselves offering human sacrifices, [60 million of] our very children, upon the altar of the gods of sexual freedom and self-actualization. We open ourselves to powerful forces of evil as a result. In the process we find ourselves inflicting terrible damage on the family...

terrible damage on our hearts... terrible damage on the great gift of our sexuality and fertility, the dimension of us in which we are the closest to our life-giving, loving God. As Jack Dorcey spoke about on our bus driving out here, the fight over abortion is clearly a spiritual battle. As I shared yesterday with a few people... I think at the end of the Holocaust Museum visit: when I came [to Washington] to counter-protest at the huge pro-abortion march that was held in the 2004 election year, it was one of the two times in my life when the presence of evil was palpable to me... the other being on my first visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camps, two of the biggest of the Nazi's, and where my personal hero, St. Maximilian Kolbe was martyred; where he sacrificially gave his life in love so that another could live.

Today we come to participate in what many can see as a political protest... In fact, there is an article about it in a *USA Today* newspaper this morning. Yet we have chosen to start our day with Mass this morning because while this is an event to influence politicians, there is much more to it than that. We come here to Mass to pray. Even before we came here this morning, many of us have spent time with Jesus in adoration, to refresh our souls as Archbishop Hebda spoke of on Wednesday in his homily as being important, because we realize that this is at the core a spiritual, not a political issue. In a democracy, ultimately the political decisions reflect the hearts of the people. As long as there are a large number of Americans who support abortion rights for whatever reason, whether it be through ignorance⁴ or by having their hearts hardened spiritually, abortion will continue in our country. It will ultimately be only through our prayers, only through our sacrifices, only through our own encounters with Jesus which, in turn, should lead us to want to serve, as we heard Peter's Mother-in-law do after she was healed in the gospel passage from Wednesday, that change will happen. Encountering Jesus will inspire us and help us to persevere through discouragement to cooperate with God to win this ultimate battle, in keeping with the message we heard in the first reading on the importance of hope.⁵ It is a battle upon which the very future of our country depends.

The pro-life cause is, in some ways, a rather self-less cause. It is like the men who brought their friend through the roof to Jesus. I want to make clear that the sacrifices we make pale in comparison to the tremendous sacrifices that our soldiers [and their families] make... But as we make the sacrifices to be here, we can also think of ourselves as following in the footsteps spiritually of the soldiers who have given their very lives to give us the freedoms we enjoy and to bring freedom to others around the world. One again, the sacrifices the soldiers have made, even to the point of death, far exceed what we are doing here: giving up a few days of our lives to be here, and riding overnight on a bus. Yet I was struck when our group visited the Korean War memorial yesterday, where is written powerful words: "our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met." We are here in part to save the lives of babies we will never meet... through our own sacrifices.

But it [the pro-life movement] is also a partially selfish cause because, if we understand the spiritual realities, we cannot live in a nation that continues to turn its back on the Lord as it

⁴ I was particularly struck by the following words in today's morning prayer: "They are without knowledge who bear wooden idols and pray to gods that cannot save" (Isaiah 45:20a).

⁵ As I heard the first reading proclaimed I realized I had missed some gold in there that would have enriched this homily on the importance of hope and perseverance in doing good... Fittingly, those words in the Letter to the Hebrews about hope followed from the reading which normally have been proclaimed the day before, for the 1st Thursday in Ordinary Time, which, if not supplanted by the readings for St. Anthony of the desert, would have included Hebrews 3:13, "encourage each other daily while it is still today"... the verse I used on my ordination prayer card.

offers up its young as human sacrifices and think our nation will continue to prosper. I was reminded of that reality when we visited the Museum of the Bible yesterday. There we were shown how even God's chosen people of Israel faced destruction when those in authority continually chose to ignore the Lord's truth... when they failed to love and respect the dignity of the most vulnerable in society. Many of our own country's founders saw our new nation as God's new Chosen People... that is not a Catholic theological understanding,⁶ but it was strongly in the minds of many founders. To the extent that God has richly blessed us Americans, we cannot expect a different fate if we follow the footsteps of the failures of God's first chosen people.

But least we become too discouraged about the future, the story of the People of Israel gives us an example of hope. The People of Israel faced a very different fate when King David humbled himself and sought forgiveness when his eyes were opened to the horrible set of actions he had done involving sins of sexuality and death of an innocent... In fact, yesterday when we visited the Bible Museum, I was really struck in a new way by the visual depiction in an animated movie of King David prostrating himself on the floor as he sought forgiveness and repented when his eyes were opened to the reality of what he had done. His repentance changed everything.⁷ Today we should pray for the day when the leaders of our country do the same: when the new generation of American leaders will repent of the sins of their predecessors. We can help to make that day happen through our prayers and through our courageously being prophets of the truth and love by our actions and our words.

My sisters and brothers, as we prepare to leave this church to embark upon the March, let us remember that it is, in fact, important to be engaged in the public discourse in democracy. But, at the same time, what we are engaged in is not merely a political movement, but more fundamentally a spiritual one. It will ultimately be God, through our turning to Him, seeking His protection and mercy, not our politicians, Who will save our country. Let us prepare for the March today, and every day as we seek to build a Civilization of Love, with that in mind. Let us seek to encounter God daily at the least in prayer, if not also at Mass and/or in adoration daily... Let us repent of our own sins... let us leave our encounters with Jesus prepared to serve,⁸ confident that nothing is impossible with God... And let us strive to live out our lives of promoting life in the four dimensions God invites us: to save babies from abortion... to bring God's love and truth to those who are contemplating abortion... to bring His healing mercy to those who have been involved in abortion... and by praying for and teaching our country... praying for the acceptance of ... and teaching through word and deed... the truths about human life and human dignity that a great saint reminded us when he came here two decades ago,⁹ "Surely it is important for America that the moral truths which make freedom possible should be passed on to each new generation. Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought."

⁶ The Catholic understanding is that the Church Jesus established, and its members, are those with whom God has made the New Covenant.

⁷ I have heard it said; although I have not verified, that David was the first main character in the Bible, chronologically, who immediately acknowledged his sin and asked forgiveness without denying it, sugar coating or giving excuses.

⁸ In keeping with the collect of this week's Masses: "Humbly we ask you, Almighty God, be graciously pleased to grant that those you renew with your Sacraments may also serve with lives pleasing to you. Through Christ our Lord."

⁹ During the year when he was named *Time's* "Person of the Year."