

October 5, 2008

Each year on the first Sunday of October, we celebrate Respect Life Sunday. It is the occasion for us to thank God for the great gift of life and to renew our determination to promote a culture which fully honors the dignity and right to life for every individual. Our Catholic teaching is based upon the fact that each person is created by God in His image and likeness and possesses a dignity that comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment, not from race or gender or economic status.

Our respect of every human person as a gift from God, as sacred and inviolable, challenges us to protect and respect every human life from conception until natural death. It challenges us to promote laws and social policies that protect human life and promote human dignity. Laws that legitimize abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, cloning and the destruction of human embryos for research purposes are profoundly unjust and immoral.

Our culture has evolved to the current diminished regard for the integrity of every human life because of a misunderstanding of freedom. Freedom has become almost a synonym for independence, autonomy, the ability of each person to decide for himself or herself what they will think, do, and what they will be.

This mistaken notion of freedom is demonstrated very clearly in the majority opinion of the Supreme Court decision in “Planned Parenthood v. Casey” (1992). The majority opinion, seeking to support abortion as a right, declared: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe and of human life.”

That is truly alarming. Could not Hitler have claimed the right to define human existence in a way that denied Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals the right to life? As Cardinal Dulles claimed: "Once freedom operates in a moral vacuum, it becomes meaningless. If each choice is as good as every other, there is nothing worth living or striving for. In such a situation, society decays." With notable exceptions, is not our society gravitating toward moral chaos?

Freedom cannot be divorced from truth. Freedom is the quality of choices that are made responsibly with a view to goodness and truth.

In Psalm 19, we read: "The law of God is perfect, refreshing the soul. The decree of the Lord is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple." God reveals His laws, His purposes for us and for all of creation in the Scriptures. God's revelation is fulfilled most perfectly in Jesus, who is truly God and truly man. Jesus, who is truth itself, teaches us that the truth will make us free (Jn 8:32).

We are all tempted to follow our passions, our bad habits, or even our addictions. It is Jesus who can set us free, who teaches us God's will and purpose for our life. Jesus shows us the way to true freedom in following His ways, living in His love and with a sense of responsibility.

The Church guides us in ways that are true to the teachings of the Lord Jesus. It helps us understand the unfolding of God's revelation in the Scriptures. It helps us interpret new situations and developments in society in light of those teachings.

The Church is truly a beacon in society. It helps shape the moral character of society by sharing the vision of life revealed to us in Sacred Scripture and in tradition. It is from that mission given us by Jesus that we urgently speak out about the dignity of human life with persistence and clarity. We must, as people of faith and reason, bring the essential truth about human life and dignity to public

discussions. We must speak out against abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, cloning, and the destruction of human embryos as pre-eminent threats to human life and dignity and, therefore, gravely immoral.

Every life is a gift to be lived in a spirit of joy and thanksgiving to our good and gracious God. Let us rejoice in the gift we have been given and resolve to build in our society a culture that values this most basic of gifts.