

“Building a Culture of Life, Love and Intimacy with God”
Homily at the Mass for the Walk for Life Westcoast
Memorial of Saints Timothy and Titus
January 26, 2019
Readings: 2 Tim 1:1-8; Ps 96; Lk 10:1-9

Introduction

Two months ago National Public Radio covered a news story about a very controversial genetic engineering technique known as “CRISPR.” The story told of a Chinese scientist who claimed to have altered human embryos such that he created a pair of twin girls who were resistant to the HIV infection. The story went on to speak about the concerns scientists in the field have about this kind of research proceeding too quickly before the debate about its ethics is sufficiently mature, pointing out that it could lead to the practice of creating “designer babies.” In the lead-in to the story, the reporter stated: “This claim is highly controversial with some scientists denouncing this work as unethical human experimentation.”

Revolution and Counter-Revolution

Did you catch that? The modification took place on embryos, and it is denounced as “unethical human experimentation.” In other words, the reporter here – likely unwittingly – acknowledges that human embryos are human beings, endowed with human dignity. Such an unguarded statement demonstrates that everyone really knows – despite powerful voices in our society who would have us believe otherwise – that human life really does begin at conception, and is therefore deserving of protection in the law and, even more importantly, in societal attitudes. This disturbing development, though, simply marks the latest further step in a revolutionary path begun a very long time ago, one which, among other things, decouples the procreative act from procreation: now, if that sounds nonsensical to you, well, that’s because it is.

Last year marked the 50th anniversary of the iconic year of that revolution: 1968. Think of all that happened in that very iconic year of social upheaval: the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the riot at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, students rioting on college campuses across the country in protest of the Vietnam War (I always found the idea of using violence to protest a war to be painfully ironic), the explosion of unfettered abuse of hallucinogenic drugs, the overturning of sexual mores and trust in the basic institutions of society. Yes, 1968 was emblematic of an age of revolution.

But it was also a year which witnessed the birth of a movement of counter-revolution. It was thought at the time to be a still birth, an irrational clinging to an oppressive idea that had at long last been relegated to the ash heap of history. But its fiftieth anniversary last year gave ample evidence that it has grown and even flourished, and even in the face of an aggressive and rapid deconstruction of the natural meaning of sex, marriage and procreation in all of the institutions of cultural influence: law, politics, education, academia, entertainment, media, the corporate world, and so forth – although you wouldn’t know it if your only sources of information came from those very institutions. I am referring to the dozens of conferences and symposia held last year in our country alone to mark the 50th anniversary of Pope Paul VI’s Encyclical on the responsible transmission of human life, *Humanae Vitae* (now St. Paul VI – it is certainly no coincidence that Pope Francis canonized him in the very year of the 50th anniversary of that Encyclical). It was a landmark Encyclical, and in it Pope Paul upheld the timeless and

universal teaching of the Catholic Church about God's plan for marriage and family, and that for the marital embrace to be truly what God intended it to be in all of its beauty and goodness it must be open to the transmission of life and unity of the spouses at all times and in every way. This, of course, flew in the face of the conventional thinking, which held that more contraception would reduce abortion. Sadly, this very superficial view is still with us today, despite the ample evidence to the contrary.

The problem is, when contraception is introduced into the picture and becomes the presumed norm for relations between the sexes – as it has now – it changes everything: one's entire world view and how one looks at the purpose of man and woman coming together. It ultimately leads to the disintegration of the natural unity of sex, marriage and procreation. If openness to life is just a sort of optional add-on to the meaning of the sexual union of a man and a woman rather than at the heart of its meaning as being for procreation and the unity of the spouses, so that a new child can be welcomed into the loving embrace of the child's father and mother, then it comes to mean something quite different: the gratification of an urge, the mere satisfying of an appetite – something, essentially, self-centered, rather than the act by which one expresses the total gift of self to the other and, through that, to God. Thus, abortion becomes a backup for failed contraception, a literal license to kill in order to avoid the consequences of one's self-indulgent actions. So you see, as big and complex as this problem is, the root of it lies at the spiritual level.

But this is just the beginning. As Archbishop Charles Chaput observes in his book *Strangers in a Strange Land*:

... the birth control pill was originally marketed as an aid to marriages and families. But detaching sex from fertility leads in unintended directions. One of them is artificial reproductive technology. It's worth remembering that in [Aldous] Huxley's novel [*Brave New World*], the words 'mother' and 'father' were vulgarisms – dirty words. Today, in modern practice, babies have no necessary link to sexual intimacy and romance. They can be created in a lab almost as easily as the old-fashioned way.¹

Conclusion: if they can be created in a lab, then why can they not be genetically altered in a lab as well?

The Role of Conscience

I say all this to make the point that what we are about today is part of a much bigger picture. Respect for life in the womb is not an isolated cause, but more like a golden thread that weaves its way all throughout a beautiful tapestry that is God's plan for life, love and intimacy – ultimately, with Him forever in heaven. Pulling away any one thread unravels the entire tapestry. To be pro-life in the true, complete and authentic sense of what that really means, then, is to understand, accept and live out this entire plan of God as St. Paul VI explains so well in *Humanae Vitae*, and it is ultimately for our own happiness in this life and in the next. Unfortunately, though, something else happened during these last five decades which gave people an excuse to separate out these different aspects of God's integral plan for our happiness with Him: a distorted understanding of the notion of conscience. Over these last fifty years

¹ Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., *Strangers in a Strange Land* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2017), p. 95.

conscience has come to be seen as simply the faculty to decide for oneself what is right and wrong, thus conveniently allowing one not to apply to oneself those parts of the truth of Christ that one finds especially burdensome.

This, though, is certainly not what St. Paul intended by what he wrote to his disciple Timothy. In our first reading for Mass today, the Memorial of Ss. Timothy and Titus, we heard him say: “I am grateful to God, whom I worship with a clear conscience . . . as I remember you constantly in my prayers, night and day.” Paul could claim a “clear conscience” because he had given his all for the sake of the Gospel, enduring by the grace of God hardships and sufferings that would otherwise be humanly unbearable. As St. John Paul II explains in his Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*: “According to Saint Paul, conscience in a certain sense confronts man with the law, and thus becomes a ‘witness’ for man: a witness of his own faithfulness or unfaithfulness with regard to the law, of his essential moral rectitude or iniquity.”²

That is quite different from how many people understand conscience today. In this novel way of thinking, John Paul says,

The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil. To the affirmation that one has a duty to follow one’s conscience is unduly added the affirmation that one’s moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience. But in this way the inescapable claims of truth disappear.”³

That is, if everyone decides for themselves what is true, then there is no truth. Instead, he explains the purpose of conscience in this way: “The judgment of conscience is a *practical judgment*, a judgment which makes known what man must do or not do It is a judgment which applies to a concrete situation the rational conviction that one must love and do good and avoid evil.”⁴ That is to say, conscience is *not* the internal faculty to decide for oneself what is right and wrong, but to discern the right thing from the wrong thing to do in a concrete situation based on what is objectively right and wrong.

Deciding for oneself what is right and wrong, independent of the truth claims that God has sown right into the created order: doesn’t this sound a lot like the Garden of Eden after the fall of our first parents? We keep making the same mistake, even though ever since then our human experience has shown, without exception, the unspeakable suffering that human beings bring into the world by making up their own rules in contradiction to God’s, harming especially the weak and the vulnerable. We are, in fact, witnessing this before our very eyes now, in our time; we are reaping the bitter fruit that has come from fifty years of cultural revolution: family fragmentation, and all of the social ills it has led to. But for those who are better off, this new, distorted sense of conscience is an excuse to succumb to self-indulgence, laziness, and spiritual mediocrity. This is demonstrated by those who, in unguarded moments, show that they know deep down inside what is right and wrong, but rather than allow their conscience to convict them they suppress it in order not to be convicted by the purveyors of the dominant cultural norms.

Keeping Communion with the Church

² VS, 57; emphasis original.

³ VS, 32.

⁴ VS, 59; emphasis original.

The question is, then, how can one live with the certainty of a correct conscience, and have the strength to live accordingly, and not succumb to the powerful voices of unreason and anti-science that force false beliefs on our society and even in our law, especially concerning the beginnings of human life? We can take our cue from the Gospel reading for this Mass of the Memorial of Ss. Timothy and Titus: our Lord sends out his disciples two-by-two. He sends them out on mission, but he is really forming his Church to carry out the Great Commission he would entrust to her after his victory over death and his return to his Heavenly Father in glory. It is by remaining within the communion of the Church that one can have this assurance, and mature into a person of spiritual excellence. There are the basics: Sunday Mass attendance without exception, frequent confession, daily prayer (especially the rosary), study of the Bible and the truths of our faith. And then there is putting it all into action: acts of charity and justice, such as we are doing today.

We need to maintain tight bonds of communion with the Church in order to acquire the wisdom to develop a rightly formed conscience and the strength to live by it. That second point is critical, because the world will hate us for it, and attack us for it. That's what happened to Pope Paul after *Humanae Vitae*. But we need look no further than the personal experience of many who bear public witness to the sanctity of life in the womb all across our country, from Washington, D.C. to here in San Francisco. This is exactly what St. Paul had in mind in writing to Timothy, where in this same passage he sheds light on what he understands conscience to mean: "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control. So do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord, ... but bear your share of hardship for the Gospel with the strength that comes from God." He could say this because he lived it. This is the same exact call to conscience that God is giving us today. So, do not be ashamed! On the contrary, bearing hardships for the sake of the Gospel, and the opprobrium that one will inevitably incur for fidelity to it, is God's gift of a clear conscience that bear Him testimony to all the world. Such people may be reviled by those who are content with spiritual mediocrity, but they give inspiration to those who desire spiritual excellence.

Conclusion

The revolution is waning: it is showing the inevitable signs of weariness, banality, boredom and vile vulgarity. In a word, it is pathetic. The counter-revolution is in full swing. Be a part of it! It never gets old, is never boring, but is always young, fresh, and plunges us into the depths of the human adventure. As we walk for life today, then, let us join our hearts, minds and bodies to a counter movement characterized not by mediocrity and hatred and destructive self-indulgence, but by power and love and self-control: for the glory of God and the building of a culture of life, love and intimacy with Him now, and forever in heaven. Amen!