

Jesus teaches as one having authority. This right to teach flows from his God given mission in announcing that the Kingdom of God is at hand. I am reminded of the Papal visit of John Paul II to Washington DC in October of 1979.¹ I was a student in college at the time and able to listen to the broadcast of his Mass. When the Pope spoke, I found myself deeply inspired by his message. He spoke the truth. He spoke as one having authority.

October is Respect Life Month in the United States, so the Pope naturally spoke of the dignity of the human beginning with conception. Life is sacred through every stage of life. Jesus redeemed all human life. We see this even in our Gospel today where Jesus encounters a man who has been tormented by a demon. Jesus rebuked the demon and speaking with authority commanded, “‘Quiet! Come out of him!’ The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him” (Mk 1:25-26).

Pope John Paul II spoke to a nation that only 6 years earlier had struck down an abortion ban from the state of Texas. And once the cat was out of the bag, state after state allowed for legalizing abortion and putting limits on the gift of life freely given by God. “I do not hesitate to proclaim before you and before the world that all human life—from the moment of conception and through all subsequent stages—is sacred, because human life is created in the image and likeness of God. Nothing surpasses the greatness or dignity of a human person. Human life is not just an idea or an abstraction ... human life is the concrete reality of a being that is capable of love, and of service to humanity.”

When we attack the life of a child in his mother’s womb, we strike at the whole order of the moral fabric of society. Life is a gift from God to the individual, to the family, and to the larger community. God who is infinite gives a gift that is infinite. “When God gives life, it is forever.”

The gift of sexuality is meant to be expressed fully in the setting of marriage. Husband and wife have made a covenant with God to be fruitful and accept children if they are so blessed. Love within marriage calls the bride and groom to love each other generously. “The great danger for family life, in the midst of any society whose idols are pleasure, comfort and independence, lies in the fact that people close their hearts and become selfish. The fear of making permanent commitments can change the mutual love of husband and wife into two loves of self—two loves existing side by side, until they end in separation.”

In the sacrament of marriage, the bride and groom “have the duty of manifesting Christ’s attitudes in their lives.” Being fruitful is more than just bringing a child into the world. “The couple is also called to create a family atmosphere in which children can be happy, and lead full and worthy human and Christian lives. To maintain a joyful family requires much from both the parents and the children. Each member of the family has to become, in a special way, the servant of the others and share their burdens.” One lives not for one’s own selfish ends, but rather in loving sacrifice for the good of everyone in the family.

Some make the decision on how many children to have based on the idea of a comfortable living. “Reflecting upon this matter before God ... parents will remind themselves that it is certainly less serious to deny their children certain comforts or material advantages than to deprive them of the presence of brothers and sisters, who could help them to grow in humanity and to realize the beauty of life at all its ages and in all its variety.”

We are called to stand up for life and to value a person as unique and unrepeatable in the eyes of God. “When the sacredness of life before birth is attacked, we will stand up and proclaim that no one ever has the authority to destroy unborn life. When a child is described as a burden or is looked upon only as a means to satisfy an emotional need, we will stand up and

insist that every child is a unique and unrepeatable gift of God, with the right to a loving and united family. When the institution of marriage is abandoned to human selfishness or reduced to a temporary, conditional arrangement that can easily be terminated, we will stand up and affirm the indissolubility of the marriage bond. When the value of the family is threatened because of social and economic pressures, we will stand up and reaffirm that the family is necessary not only for the private good of every person, but also for the common good of every society, nation and state.” Social justice demands a preferential option for the poor. “When the sick, the aged or the dying are abandoned in loneliness, we will stand up and proclaim that they are worthy of love, care and respect.”

We stand up for the rights of minorities, for the mentally or physically handicapped, for all on the margins of society. When we help one person to stand up, we help all people and improve the moral climate of society. Courage is needed to speak the truth and to uphold the supreme dignity of all life. As Thomas Jefferson, once stated: “The care of human life and happiness and not their destruction is the just and only legitimate object of good government” (March 31, 1809).

ⁱ vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19791007_usa-washington.html