

Homily of Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap.
Archbishop of Boston and Chair of the USCCB Pro-Life Committee
7:30 pm, Tuesday, January 21, 2014
Opening Mass of the National Prayer Vigil for Life
Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, DC

Almost 200 years ago the Danish writer Hans Christian Anderson wrote a wonderful story called "The Emperor's New Suit". It is the story of a very proud and vain king who thought so much of new clothes that he spent all of his money on his apparel. His only ambition was to be the best dressed. One day two swindlers arrived in the city and convinced the king to buy a new suit made of a magical material that was invisible. They told the king that those who could not see the cloth were stupid and unfit for office.

The king was quite deceived and paraded through the street of his capital to receive the ovations of his people. The crowds lined the streets and applauded when the king passed by. The crowd shouted compliments and congratulated the king on his magnificent clothing.

Suddenly a little child shouted, "But he has nothing on at all." The king continued on his way. His chamberlains walked with still greater dignity, as if they were carrying the train of his robe which did not exist.

"The King's New Clothes" today are called reproduction rights, termination of pregnancy, choice, and many other subterfuges that disguise the reality and the brutality that is abortion.

The crowd applauds the Kings' New Clothes, people are afraid to question. Those who do not applaud must be stupid, naïve, obstinate.

The voice of the Church is like the child who declares before the world that the new clothes are a lie, a humbug, a deception. The Church with the candor of a child must call out the uncomfortable truth. Abortion is wrong. Thou shall not kill.

Our first reading is from Deuteronomy. In this last sermon before he dies on Mt. Nebo, Moses tells God's people: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life then, that you and your descendants might live, by loving the Lord, obeying His voice, and holding fast to Him. That will be life for you.

"Choose Life", that is the message of the Church confronted by the King's New Clothes. Choose life.

John Paul II commented on the many declarations of human rights and many initiatives inspired by these ideals that seem to indicate a growing moral sensitivity, more alert to acknowledge the value and dignity of every individual as a human being, without any distinction of race, nationality, religion, political opinion or social class.

Sadly these noble proclamations are contradicted by a tragic repudiation of them in practice. This denial is still more distressing indeed more scandalous, precisely because it is occurring in a society which makes affirmation and protection of human rights its primary objective and its boast.

The Holy Father John Paul II asked “How can we reconcile these repeated declarations of human rights with the continual increase and widespread justification of attacks on human life? How can we reconcile these declarations with the refusal to accept those who are weak and needy, or elderly, or those who have just been conceived?” These attacks go directly against respect for life and they represent a direct threat to the entire culture of human rights. It jeopardizes the very meaning of democratic coexistence; rather than societies of “people living together”, our cities risk becoming societies of people who are rejected, marginalized, uprooted and oppressed.

When the Church raises a prophetic cry, “Choose Life”, we are performing a great service to all society. Life is sacred. Life is a mystery. Life must be protected, nurtured, respected. The Gospel of Life is the center piece of the Church’s social teaching.

When the value of life is compromised or diminished, all life is at risk. When we give the State the power to determine which human beings are worthy of living and which should be eliminated, what we are doing is opening a Pandora’s Box that unleashes every kind of injustice and violation of human dignity.

Life is precious. The transmission of life, sexuality, and marriage, which is the sanctuary of life, are all sacred. The Church’s consistent life ethic contrasts with the incoherent proclamation of human rights that fails to protect life when it is most vulnerable.

Human rights, without the right to life, are the Kings New Clothes – it’s a fraud, an exercise in self-deception.

When *Roe vs. Wade* was handed down 40 years ago, Archibald Cox, the Harvard University expert in constitutional law and Watergate prosecutor stated “This decision (*Roe vs. Wade*) fails even to consider what I suppose to be the most compelling interest of the State in prohibiting abortion: the interest in maintaining that respect for the paramount sanctity of human life which has always been at the center of Western Civilization.”

The Church’s pro-life message is a great service to all society. The culture of death flows out of the extreme individualism of our age. The Church’s antidote is community and solidarity. Pope Francis is always talking about a culture of encounter.

In his stunning Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes: “Among the vulnerable for whom the Church wishes to care with particular love and concern are unborn children, the most defenseless and innocent among us.” Pope Francis goes on

to say: "Frequently, attempts are made to ridicule the Church's efforts to defend the unborn. Attempts are made to present the Church's teaching as ideological, obscurantist and conservative. Yet this defense of unborn life is closely linked to the defense of each and every other human right."

The Holy Father laments the fact that we have done little to adequately accompany women in very difficult situations.

The Good News is that God never gives up on us. He never tires of loving us. He never tires of forgiving us, never tires of giving us another chance. The Pro-Life Movement needs to be the merciful face of God to women facing a difficult pregnancy. Being judgmental or condemnatory is not part of the Gospel of Life.

In pre-Revolutionary Cuba a Catholic radio play was broadcast that caused quite a bit of attention at the time. It was called: Muralla. It was the story of a middle-class Catholic Family, husband, wife and five children. Each Sunday the whole family went to Mass together. They all went to communion each Sunday with the exception of the father. This was a source of great anxiety to the whole family. The wife and children were always encouraging their Dad to go to confession and join them at the communion rail. He resisted all their pleading. The years passed. The man grew old. When he was dying, his wife sent for the priest who came and gave him the last sacraments and Extreme Unction - anointing of the sick for the dying. After making his confession and receiving communion, the man called his wife and children around his death bed and said, before I die, I want to tell you why I did not go to communion for all these years. When I was a young lawyer, I falsified a Will. All the money we have really should belong to a distant cousin. I knew that if I went to confession I would have to make restitution so I have waited until now. With that the man died, but now it was the wife and children who stopped going to communion because they did not want to make restitution either.

We are often quick to judge people because we have not walked in their moccasins. Until we find ourselves in the same situation we don't know, we might do the same thing that we judge others for.

Today's Gospel is one of the most dramatic scenes in the New Testament. The Pharisees are determined to impale Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. Should the woman caught in adultery be punished by death as the law demanded? If Jesus said "no" they would accuse him of neglecting to obey the law. If Jesus said "yes, kill her", He would turn people against Him for having the woman killed.

The Pharisees brought in the woman almost like a stage prop to use her for their political purposes. It is interesting to note that her partner has escaped punishment. It is only the woman who pays the price for their actions. She is filled with shame and is in fear for her life, with feelings of anger, despair, disappointment and a profound sense of loneliness.

It is curious to note that this is the only place in the Gospel where we see Jesus writing something. For Jesus, there was no need to publish or perish. We do not know for sure what Jesus was writing. Some of the Church's Fathers speculate that Jesus was writing the sins of those brave men, after telling them that the one who is without sin should cast the first stone. When the men see their sins, the stones fall from their hands and they begin to sneak away beginning with the oldest. Jesus is left alone with the woman; the crowd with their prurient curiosity and the Pharisees disarmed by Jesus, have slipped off. St. Augustine describes that Gospel scene as *miseria* and *misericordis*. Misery and mercy meet.

Jesus has come, not for the healthy, but for the sick. He has come to set up the field hospital. He is the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep behind to seek out the lost sheep. That gives Him more joy than the ninety-nine just people who do not need the Good Shepherd.

The feelings of the woman in the Gospel must be like the young woman caught in a crisis situation of an unwanted pregnancy. She feels overwhelmed, alone, afraid, confused.

We must never allow that woman to perceive the Pro-Life movement as a bunch of angry self-righteous Pharisees with stones in their hands, looking down on her and judging her. We want the woman to experience the merciful love of Christ. Jesus does not condone the woman's fall, but He does not condemn her. He invites her to make a new start, to know that she is forgiven and loved. Pope Francis urges us to practice "the art of accompaniment" which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other, in this case, the woman in crisis. This accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian Life. This is precisely what the Sisters of Life, Project Rachel and the Community of Jesus the Living Mercy are doing.

We are all here because we want to save the thousands of innocent children who are being executed by the very people whose mission should be to heal and protect life. The truth is that we can save those babies only by saving the mothers. When they experience God's loving mercy then they will become capable of showing mercy to their children. The Pro-Life Movement has to be about saving mothers. We need to focus on the women to try to understand what they are suffering.

The work of the pregnancy crisis centers has helped countless women to be able to choose Life. We owe a great debt of gratitude to all the volunteers and workers.

There are millions of women in our country who have had abortions, millions of men who pushed them, encourage them, and drove them to the abortion clinic. Wouldn't it be wonderful if some of them could accept John Paul II's challenge to those who have chosen abortion to commit themselves to life, "whether by accepting the birth of other children, or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them; to become promoters of a new way of looking at human life."

One person to take up this challenge was Dr. Bernard Nathanson, the founder of NARAL and the Pro Abortion Movement in the U.S. In the 1970's Dr. Nathanson ran an abortion clinic in New York City, which operated from 8:00am 'till midnight. He performed roughly 100 abortions a day.

But then after having promoted abortion and convincing people of its urgency, Bernard Nathanson, the tailor that produced the King's New Clothes in the United States, finally heard that child's voice pointing out the inconvenient truth. His conscience could no longer allow him to fool himself into believing – it was not a human being.

Dr. Bernard Nathanson became the most eloquent opponent of abortion and the abortion industry. In 1982 I invited him to come and speak to Black and Hispanic leaders in the Archdiocese of Washington, right here at Caldwell Hall. A few years later Dr. Nathanson accompanied me to Honduras where he presented his film, *The Silent Scream*, to the medical faculty, and on National television. He was very instrumental in getting the laws that legalized abortion in Honduras reversed. He spent the rest of his life trying to do the same in the United States.

God's grace turned Saul of Tarsus, the implacable persecutor of the Church, into the Apostle of the Gentiles; and that grace transformed Bernard Nathanson into an apostle of the Gospel of Life.

The antidote of abortion is solidarity; community where people are willing to care for each and for the most vulnerable.

The message of the Gospel of Life is, as Pope Francis tells us in *Evangelii Gaudium*, a message of Joy. The Holy Father writes: "to those who feel far from God and the Church, and to all who are fearful or indifferent I would like to say this: the Lord with great respect and love is also calling you to be part of His people. The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel. The very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others."

The challenge Pope Francis places before our young people to be evangelizers. To evangelize with beauty and joy. The Holy Father says: "To communicate the moral teachings that promote growth in the Gospel way of life, it is helpful to stress again and again the attractiveness and ideal of a life of wisdom, self fulfillment and enrichment. In light of that positive message our rejection of the evils which endanger that life can be better understood. Rather than experts in dire predictions, our judges bent on rooting out every threat and deviation, we should appear as joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shines forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel."

At Lampedusa Pope Francis cast a wreath into the sea where thousands of poor immigrants lost their lives at sea. He warned about the globalization of indifference.

We face this in the Pro-Life Movement. Just as with slavery in the past, today many Americans are repulsed by abortion but believe that it is a necessary evil. Our task is to show them that it is not necessary. It is an evil but it is not necessary.

Where there are community and solidarity, more humane solutions present themselves when there is a difficult pregnancy. When the abortion decision of the Supreme Court was handed down, the logical response of our Pro-Life Movement was a resolute call for "Adoption, not abortion". The truth is each year there are fewer and fewer adoptions while the number of abortions is over a million. Many young Americans don't know anyone who is adopted, and if they do know someone, it is probably someone from China, Russia or Guatemala – giving the impression that entrusting a child to an adoptive family is not something Americans do.

The history of adoption is not always a glorious one. There is a popular film in the theaters right now portraying some of the worst practices of the past. *Philomena*, portrayed by Dame Judi Dench, tells the story of a young girl forced to give up her baby. It is a tragic history.

We need people to hear the good stories of adoptions of courageous birth mothers and generous adoptive families that have truly provided a loving family for an adopted child. In Boston we are making adoption part of a pro-life curriculum for our young people.

The majority of women who succumb to abortion are poor. Poverty is a dehumanizing force that leads people to feel trapped and to make this horrible choice. The Gospel of Life demands that we work for economic justice in our country and in our world. In a society where the rich are getting ever richer and the poor poorer, abortion looms ever larger. Planned Parenthood was founded to eliminate the poor.

We can rescue unborn babies from abortion by rescuing their mothers from a life of poverty and hopelessness. Pope Francis challenges our complacency and indifference to the oppressive poverty that spawns so many abortions.

Yes, the Catholic Church's consistent life ethic is a great service to society. It is our task to witness to the truth that love, compassion and solidarity can build a just society that will be safer for the poor, the unborn and those on the periphery.

I often share with people the fact that on the island of Martha's Vineyard there is a beautiful church dedicated to St. Augustine. There are lovely stain glass windows that depict the seven sacraments. When the tourists enter the church, the first window they see is one that represents the sacrament of confession with the crossed keys, the priest's stole and the words: "Go and sin no more". But the church is not air conditioned so in the hot days of summer they open all the windows in the church. Well, the only pane of glass that opens on that window is the part where the words "no" appear. So tourists enter the church and see the window that says "Go and sin more".

In my ten years as Bishop there, not one person ever complained about the window. The irony is that many people think of us Catholics as people of No ----- don't do this, don't do that. In reality we are the people of Yes --- yes to God, yes to life, yes to compassion for the poor and suffering, yes to the solidarity and community that make us messengers of joy even in a valley of tears.

The Gospel of Life will always trump the King's New Clothes.