

Homily of Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley
Archbishop of Boston and Chair of the USCCB Pro-Life Committee
7:30 p.m., Thursday, January 24, 2013
Opening Mass of the National Prayer Vigil for Life
Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

What a great joy and privilege to be here with all of you. Bishops, priests, religious, deacons, seminarians and faithful. For all of us it is an immense consolation to have so many of our young Catholics here tonight. We are also very pleased and humbled to be able to welcome the Orthodox Metropolitan Bishops and clergy joining us here at the Basilica.

This year we are saddened that Nellie Gray is not with us, as she has been for 40 years. I call her the Joan of Arc of the Gospel of Life. As a young priest working here at the Spanish Center in Washington, I heard about Nellie, who had left her career as a lawyer, like the Apostles leaving their boats and nets, to embrace a special vocation to work on behalf of pre-born children. It was my privilege to help her organize those first marches, and I have come to every march since the beginning. Nellie Gray has been an inspiration to me and countless others. Surely she continues to pray for us from her place in eternity. We all owe her an enormous debt of gratitude, and tonight we lift her up in prayer in this Eucharist, which she loved so much.

I am always a little surprised when I'm invited to preach here. You see, many years ago as a young priest I was preaching at a big Mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral. It was the Independence Day for Argentina during a very difficult period of their history. I spoke on John Paul the Second's teachings on human rights; and the whole congregation got up and left during the homily. Instinctively I knew that 800 people were not all going to the restroom. I was, of course, concerned what the Archbishop would do to me. When the affair was reported to Cardinal Baum, he said, "Whenever Friar Seán preaches, I want the collection taken up before the Gospel." It would appear that no one has warned them here tonight since the collection has not yet been taken up.

Today's Gospel, the second joyful mystery, is a great pro-life Gospel where two pregnant mothers appear together, filled with the radiance of faith and life. Elizabeth reports that John the Baptist leaps for joy in her womb when he hears Mary's voice. John dances in his mother's womb like David danced before the Ark of the Covenant. We too rejoice at Mary's voice. In the Gospel, Mary's first word is "fiat." It means "yes." Mary is saying yes to God, to life, to love, and even to the Cross.

When God was knocking on the door of humanity, it is Mary who says yes and who opens that door in our name, so that God can come into our world. The last words of Mary recorded in the Gospel are those spoken at the wedding feast of Cana: "Do whatever He tells you." Mary's last word is telling us to say yes to God, to life, to love. The Gospel of Life is an imperative for Christ's disciples. Christ, through His Church, is urging us to be defenders of life in the midst of the culture of death.

The term "culture of death," coined by John Paul II, is an accurate description of the drift of Western culture. Just last week, January 16, 2013, the newspapers reported a case of euthanasia in Belgium. Twin brothers, Marc and Eddie Verbessem, who were born deaf, were recently diagnosed with glaucoma which could eventually lead to blindness. Judging their future to be too burdensome, they presented themselves at the University Hospital of Bruxelles, and the forty-five year old brothers were both given a lethal injection.

We recently managed to defeat a ballot initiative in Massachusetts that would have legalized physician assisted suicide. The initial polls had us losing 70% to 30%, but thanks to much prayer, hard work and alliances with a broad collation of hospice, health care workers, faith groups, disabilities people, Catholic colleges, and the hard work of our Knights of Columbus councils and our priests and parishioners, along with aggressive advertising, we actually won. It was like the race between the tortoise and the hare. In our race we were the turtle that beat the rabbit. There is no doubt, however, that the next major assault on the Gospel of Life will come from those pushing physician assisted suicide and euthanasia. A society that allows parents to kill their children will allow children to kill their parents.

During the past forty years, pro-life Americans have felt the frustration of being disenfranchised by an activist Supreme Court which has denied us the right to vote about abortion policy. Nevertheless, pro-life activists have not ceased to wage a campaign of moral suasion on campuses, workplaces and neighborhoods. It is amazing to think of the tens of thousands of volunteers working in the some 3,000 pregnancy help centers that provide over 2.3 million women in difficult pregnancies with invaluable help: medical, material and spiritual.

Forty years ago when the Supreme Court handed down a second Dred Scott decision that renders unborn children, like people of African-American descent in the days of slavery, unprotected by the Constitution of the United States. Since 1973 there have been 55 million abortions – that is how many people there are in Italy, the United Kingdom or France. That translates into abortions for a quarter of all pregnancies. However, a study in New York City from last year shows that the abortion rate in New York City is actually over 40% and over 60% of black children are aborted. The same study showed a solid consensus that voters were shocked by the number of abortions, opposed tax payers funding of abortion and favored parental consent laws, waiting periods and accurate information about the abortion procedure and options. The same poll also indicated that 70% of the New Yorkers favored conscience rights for health care workers. I believe that this poll reflects the pulse of the majority of Americans. Sadly, the government is not listening to the people.

We now also face a grave challenge to religious liberty with the health care mandate that redefines religious institutions in a way that hinders our ability to continue the valuable services that the church offers to the greater community. Conscience rights and religious exemptions have been important features of our American democracy that

from the beginning has valued religious freedom and an authentic pluralism with a strong society based on solid families and committed marriages.

We have been wandering in the desert for 40 years but we are getting closer to the Promised Land. Austen Ivereigh has put it very well: “The direction of Western cultural history indelibly marked by Christianity is toward the eventual revelation of the humanity of the victim. Just as the voices of the slave, the ostracized foreigner, the battered housewife, the disabled, and the child abuse victim, have all eventually been heard, so will eventually the voice of the literally voiceless – the unborn child.”

As the latest issue of Time magazine states, the vast majority of Americans are opposed to the abortion policies as they exist and would favor limitations. The most encouraging fact is that younger Americans are more pro-life than older Americans. Pro choice activists insist that the abortion question is inherently a religious one and therefore safely beyond serious philosophic reflection or public debate. We hear Catholic politicians saying they are not in favor of abortion but do not want to impose their religious views on others in a pluralistic society. Abortion, like slavery, is not just a religious issue. It is a human rights issue.

This is most evident in our country where society has become more secular and far more socially liberal on a large range of questions, but the opposition to abortion is always growing, including among younger Americans who tend to be more liberal on other issues. Given the state of public opinion and the fact that 75% of Americans believe that abortion is at least the taking of human life, to change the public attitudes of support for “abortion as a necessary evil” will require educating Americans about abortion’s impact on women and changing attitudes toward adoption.

Too many Americans see abortion as a necessary evil. We need to educate the public on the damage done to women by abortion and show that abortion is not a necessary evil, but is simply evil. Increasingly, studies reveal the harm done to women, as well as men who suffer and remorse for many years. The abortion option is often used as a fulcrum to push women to do away with their child. The Medical Science Monitor reported that 64% of American women who abort feel pressured to do so. The doctors, boyfriends and insurers all have their reasons to push abortion. The boyfriend prefers paying for the procedure rather than providing child support, and if the woman refuses his generous offer to underwrite the abortion and instead gives birth, then it is her problem.

One of the great joys of being a priest is to be able to celebrate the sacraments for your own family: family weddings, baptisms, first communions, even funerals which are such important moments in the life of a family. A few years ago I had the joy of celebrating the wedding of my nephew, Tom O’Malley. Tom was adopted by my brother and sister-in-law as a baby. He is from Mexico, has jet black hair and dark skin. When he is introduced as an O’Malley it always causes a double take. I tell people that his freckles ran together.

His wedding was so beautiful at their parish church, Ave Maria. When I saw him so happy with his lovely bride and her sister, Diana, who was the maid of honor, I was so moved. Diana has Down syndrome. She was radiant, she exuded joy and excitement and she walked down the aisle in her beautiful gown. The adopted groom and the maid of honor who has Down syndrome were part of this extraordinary celebration because their mothers had the courage and the generosity to say yes to life. We know that an estimated 92% of all women who receive a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome choose to abort their child. (Research Dr. Brian Skotko, Children's Hospital, Boston.) In addition, less than 1% (one percent) of women with an unwanted pregnancy opt to place their child with an adoptive family. That translates into 86 abortions for each adoption.

One of the greatest challenges before us is to change women's perception of adoption as being a bad choice. I often point to the story of King Solomon who one day was called upon to settle a dispute between two women who claimed to be the mother of the same baby. At one point the wise king asked for a sword and offered to cut the baby in two. Immediately, the real mother shouted no and gave the baby to the other woman. Sometimes being a real mother means entrusting your child to someone else so that the child will live.

Paul Swope much studied article in First Things, Abortion: A Failure to Communicate, attempts to answer that question that baffles pro life activists. How can women and the public in general simultaneously hold that "abortion is killing" and "abortion should be legal"? The Vitae Caring Foundation produced a study with the intriguing name "The Least of Three Evils – Understanding the Psychological Dynamics of How Women Feel about Abortion." The report shows that unplanned motherhood is seen as a greater evil than abortion. An unwanted pregnancy is perceived as equivalent to a "death of self," a loss of control over one's present and future. Given this perspective, the choice of abortion becomes a lesser evil, a choice of self preservation, a much more defensible position both to the woman and to those supporting her decision to abort.

Tragically, adoption is seen as the most evil of the three options, as it is perceived as a kind of double death. First, the death of self by carrying the baby to term. The second death perceived by the woman is the death of the child thru "abandonment." A woman worries about her child being mistreated, abused, and neglected. She would perceive herself as a bad mother, one who gave her own child away to strangers. Basically the woman desperately wants a sense of resolution to her crisis, and in her mind adoption leaves the situation the most unresolved, with uncertainty and guilt for as far as she can see.

As much as we might like to see the slogan "Adoption, not Abortion" embraced by woman facing an unwanted pregnancy, studies suggest that in pitting adoption against abortion, adoption will be the hands-down loser. In fact while abortion itself is seen as something evil, the woman who is making that choice is seen as courageous, making a difficult but necessary decision.

The study goes on to show that abortion is considered the least of the three evils because it is perceived as offering the greatest hope to a woman to preserve her sense of self. This is why so many women deeply resent our pro-life movement which they perceive as uncaring and judgmental. We have consistently focused on the safety of the unborn child while the prochoice, pro-abortion activists focus on the woman in crisis. With almost 100 abortions for every adoption, we have so much more work to do. Obviously, we must never abandon our commitment to the unborn child, a precious human being made in the image and likeness of God. But we must learn to focus more on the woman in crisis. We must listen with empathy to be able to communicate the Gospel of Life. Pregnancy crisis centers, Project Rachel and an aggressive advertising campaign that communicates greater understanding of the situation of women facing an unwanted pregnancy are of paramount importance. The media can be a powerful tool in communicating a pro-life message.

The Vitae Foundation has had amazing results with their television advertising that has increased pro-life sentiments among the general population in the areas where they appeared. We must never lose sight of the fact that we must work to change the laws, to overturn the Roe vs. Wade decision, but we must work even harder to change people's hearts, to help Americans understand that abortion is evil and unnecessary. Spielberg's film, "Lincoln," shows the monumental struggle against slavery and Lincoln's resolve to pass the Thirteenth Amendment, but the law was only part of the struggle. The evil of racism perdured for over a century and the civil rights legislation and sacrifices of so many are contemporary realities in an ongoing struggle to live the ideals of our country. Changing hearts is always the hardest part. The laws will change. Hearts are harder to change.

We must never tire of clarifying misunderstanding and shedding light where there is myth and confusion, demonstrating empathy and compassion and a deeper vision. That is the method being presented by Catholic Voices. It is not just about the lucidity of our arguments; it is about the effect that our words have on others. Our task is to present the truth with civility, empathy and clarity. Being champions of the Gospel of Life is about building a civilization of love.

The New Evangelization is really about changing hearts. It begins with our heart, with our own conversion. Tomorrow, the day of the March for Life, is fittingly the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. His conversion was a great surprise that God had in store for the Church, like the conversion of Bernard Nathanson one of the founders of the pro-abortion movement who became a Catholic pro-life activist.

To be able to carry out them mission Christ has given us, we need to be better people, to grow in faith and to witness God's love by our service to the poor and the suffering and especially to women experiencing a challenging pregnancy. Gandhi once said that he would have become a Christian if he had ever met one. It's a shame he didn't live long enough to meet Mother Teresa of Calcutta. This Year of Faith is a call to a deeper conversion so that we can become effective apostles of the Gospel of Life in the New Evangelization.

Once I was invited to the White House for a State Dinner. The President of Brazil was there, and the White House wanted a Portuguese-speaking bishop to attend. Needless to say they were very surprised when an O'Malley showed up. They sat me between President Bush Sr., whom I recognized, and a lovely young lady who introduced herself as Gloria Estefan. When I asked her if she worked in the White House, she informed me that she was a famous singer. I said to her, "you obviously don't sing Gregorian chant." I hope she wasn't offended. I suspect she understood that a Friar wouldn't necessarily know who all the stars are. Our culture, on the other hand, is addicted to entertainment and lionized the celebrities. For us the real celebrities are the saints. The world needs saints and heroes to help us glimpse God's holiness and beauty.

Today we recall the pro-life saints and heroes like Blessed Mother Teresa, Saint Gianna Beretta Mola, Blessed John Paul II and our own darling, Nellie Gray. Pope John Paul II, the true hero of the Gospel of Life, once said that "if faith does not become culture, it is a faith that is not fully accepted, not intensely conceived, not faithfully lived." Our task is to live our faith so intensely that we will generate a culture of life, a society that welcomes the weak and the poor, that makes a place for every child at the table of life, where people are more important than money, and where the sick and the dying are cherished and cared for.

Today's Gospel gives us the first beatitude on the lips of Elizabeth; "Blessed are you because you believe." Faith brought blessedness, joy and peace to the heart of Mary, the woman of faith. May this Year of Faith, a gift from our beloved Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, be a time of growth in faith and love, a deepening of our personal conversion, and a renewed sense of our mission to be witnesses of the Gospel of Life. And like John the Baptist in his mother's womb, may we jump for joy each day to be in the presence of the Lord, making clear to the world that our faith is about joy, love, service to others and building a culture of life.