

Today is respect life Sunday, a day dedicated to promoting a culture of life in the United States and around the world. This gives me a bit of a dilemma because today's readings deal with another critical issue: divorce and remarriage. I think one critical topic per homily is enough so what I am going to do is preach on life today and put a draft of my marriage homily on the parish website. The topic of marriage comes up in the other three gospels so I am certain I'll get another opportunity to address it next year...but this year...life comes first.

One of the debates that seems to continually renew itself is over the question "when does life begin?" The teaching of the church is that life begins at the moment of conception. This isn't something the Church just made up, we find it in scripture. For example: The Lord said to the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you: before you were born, I dedicated you." God knew Jeremiah and had a plan for his life before Jeremiah was conceived in his mother's womb. God also knows each one of us and has a plan for our lives in the same way. If God knows us before we are conceived, what does that tell us about our lives from the moment of conception onward?

We also find evidence of this in the New Testament. After the archangel Gabriel told Mary that she was going to bear a son named Jesus, Mary went in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth who herself was six months pregnant with John the Baptist. What happened when Mary and Elizabeth met? John felt the presence of the recently conceived Jesus in Mary's womb and leapt for joy. Although we don't know how long it took for Mary to reach Elizabeth, can we really believe that there was a moment in which the newly conceived Jesus wasn't alive?

Are we the same at the moment of conception as we are nine months later or five years later or eighty-five years later? No. We continue to grow and develop throughout our lives; our stage of development in no way dictates how alive we are. From the moment of conception until death and even beyond, we are beloved children of God created in his image. Every human life must be protected from conception to natural death and every moment in between. It is not up to us to decide when life begins or ends; that power rests entirely in the hands of God.

Just as important is that we must do everything possible to ensure that every person created in God's image has access to what he or she needs in order to live a life worthy of the dignity of someone created in God's image. We must do everything we can to ensure that each child of God has access to adequate food, water and shelter. That same child of God needs to be able to have adequate and

dignified work. That child of God deserves a clean and healthy planet on which to live and to learn to know and love God through the good world that He created. I'm referring here to some of the principles of Catholic social teaching. The fundamental teaching is the protection of life from conception to natural death. Closely tied to this is respect for the dignity of the human person who is created in the image and likeness of God. The other principles of Catholic Social teaching are intended to support those first two principles. Catholic social teaching must be taken as a whole; the different principles must work together for the common good of all people ensuring that every conceived life is able to have a good and fruitful life.

We are all working to promote the kingdom of God and this means promoting a culture of life. All of us have strengths which lead us to serve God in different ways. One person might feel called to promote life by praying peacefully in front of abortion clinics. Another might be called to work with young single mothers in places like the Magdalene Home in Medford. Others are pro-life by working with the poor and homeless, especially in ministries like the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. Still others promote life by working to conserve the natural resources of our common home. Whatever your calling is--remember--we are all on the same team.

The entire month of October is devoted to the promotion of a culture of life. Here are some questions to think about. Do we realize how precious every person is? As we go about our day, do we treat the people we meet with the respect and dignity they deserve? How can we help those in our society who are struggling to welcome new life, like moms who are pregnant or parenting in difficult circumstances? How can we reach out to those having a hard time seeing the worth of their own lives? How do we reassure those at the end of life who are afraid they are a burden or feel like their lives don't have meaning?

Please spend some time today and throughout the month praying and even doing some extra fasting for all of those whose lives are in peril whether the threat comes at the beginning of life or at the end of life or at any point in between.