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Fortieth Anniversary of *Humane Vitae*

Mass with Parish Pro-Life Coordinators
St. Therese Parish - Kansas City, Missouri
August 13, 2008

Dear friends in Christ,

In today's First Reading (Ez 9:1-7; 10:18-22) the prophet Ezekiel presents a potent and unsettling image of the destiny of those who reject God's commands. He says that those who do not bemoan the abominations of the age will be summarily stuck down. This harsh image may make us wince. We prefer to think on the mercy of God, rather than our more serious responsibilities. We may want to apply to God the notion of "tolerance" – more consonant with our pluralistic society than with the authentic Gospel.

In fidelity and wisdom the Church listens to the Sacred Scriptures, the clear representation of revealed truth. She does not spare us the challenges of the Gospel, by which our Lord constantly calls us to conversion of heart and to conscientious living. The Magisterium of the Church, is clear and consistent about the demands of the Gospel of Life.

It is true, and also tragic, that individual baptized Catholics embrace positions across a wide spectrum of issues and values. We variously describe ourselves as pro-life, or even "pro-choice." Catholics are against Capital Punishment, and yet some support the application of the death penalty enthusiastically. Catholic men and women who practice their faith and would never think of missing Sunday Mass, will nonetheless take stands contrary to the Church's teaching against human embryonic stem cell research and human cloning.

For Ezekiel, it seems clear, our alliance with such "abominations" has an impact on our eternal salvation. The judgment concerning our eternal destiny is God's, who alone knows and reads hearts. But God writes on the human heart and immutable law. Through the Holy Spirit promised to the Apostles He provides us the substantive guidance we need for the formation of a right conscience.

In today's Gospel, (Mt 18: 15-20), Jesus tells the disciples that theirs is a solemn work of fraternal correction that has as its final arbiter the Church. We have a duty to be agents of an authentic moral truth. This obligation to correct what is false is real and demanding. It may cause uneasiness in ourselves or others. We cannot just be told that it is not acceptable to discuss these moral issues in our diocese or parish. Catholic moral principles cannot be "left outside" our pastoral gatherings, like a wet umbrella.

To be sure, our daily work and apostolate is not all about any single cause that is particularly dear to us. Our commitment to truth must be comprehensive and consistent. Matthew's Gospel today even gives guidance about the way we correct each other: first, privately and with great charity. If the matter is serious our communion in Christ may require us to speak, no matter the cost.

Forty years after the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, in which the Holy Father Pope Paul VI, spoke courageously about the beauty and integrity of human life, love and procreation, the message about the authentic meaning and purposes of marriage sustains and guides us in the midst of a very contrary culture.

When you and I gather each January to mark the U.S. Supreme Court's decisions *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*, we speak about a tragedy of jurisprudence when human life was diminished through an erroneous judgment, a confused homage to private choice.

On the other hand, in the commemoration of this great Papal encyclical on Human Life, we celebrate the prudence and fortitude of the Successor of Peter who rose above tremendous opposition to affirm what can never be changed: the inseparability and integrity of the "unitive" and "procreative" purposes of marriage. Thanks be to God!

If there is anything forty years later that needs to be reversed, it is not the constitutive statement of law expressed in *Humanae Vitae*, but rather the hardness of human hearts which reject the irrefutable truth and light of the Gospel. Struggle and persecution over this teaching remains today. But, with divine assistance and good instruction we can contribute meaningfully to the conversion of hearts that God's love makes possible. And we will.

I remember, years ago, summoning up my resolution to preach, for perhaps the first

time in my priesthood, about *Humanae Vitae* and the meaning of married love. I began to speak of the vocation of husbands and wives to find meaning in their love and union by participating in God's creative love. God wanted to share His goodness and called man and woman to give themselves to each other completely and forever. He made each husband for his wife; He gave two unique individuals the capacity to complete one another physically, emotionally and spiritually, and when the married couple comes together in this intimacy, Almighty God may reward them in the miracle of procreation, by which He entrusts a new life to them and enriches and prolongs the human race.

Husband and wife are cooperators with God Himself. They themselves provide the characteristics that will mark the new boy or girl, and God implants something that the father and mother cannot provide of themselves: He grants to the new person an immortal soul and a destiny and longing for eternity.

When couples come together in intimacy, but say a defiant "no" to God's plan for life, they are holding back something necessary for the full flowering of their married relationship: They are giving themselves only partially and without full trust, and they are consciously excluding God from their plans. They are denying one of the substantive elements of their partnership and one of the fundamental powers that the Creator has wanted them to share.

When I had preached this message, I was a bit sheepish about people's response, but something wonderful and unexpected happened. Several couples, of varying ages, came up to me and said "Thank you, Father. We have been trying to live this. It has not been easy at times. But we have wanted someone to help us – by a few words of encouragement – to reassure us that we were on the right track."

I remember thinking, "Well, now this is something!" I don't have to think only about getting people to stop using artificial contraception. All I have to do is realize and exercise my responsibility as a spiritual Father and a teacher to give couples who are trying to be faithful the support and encouragement they deserve.

Yes, friends, we deserve the joy and the light of the truth, and we want to hear it from one another as an inspiration and encouragement to persevere in faith.

The rejection of *Humanae Vitae* – particularly by priests, religious and theologians – forty years ago and also today – has been one of the most destructive forces in the Church and the culture. More than the divisive effects this dissent continues to have on Church unity, and the advancement and exaltation of a false notion of human conscience, it has promoted the severing of love from responsibility in millions and millions of human relationships.

The lack of responsibility, meaning and purpose in the practice of sexual intimacy, by-product of contraception, has, in accord with Pope Paul's intuitions in 1968, caused divorce and abortion to sky-rocket. Marriage has been diminished. Human life has been made optional.

Because of the way we have allowed the all-important unitive and procreative purposes of marriage to be separated from each other, same-sex friends have determined to masquerade as married partners, and scientists have attempted to take over the production of human life itself in the laboratory.

The widespread embrace of birth control, despite the warnings of the Holy Father and the magnificent image of married love which he provided us in his encyclical letter, was arguably the first giant step on the slippery slope whose end is the deep valley of the culture of death.

But, we are not without hope. The freedom God has given us in Jesus Christ is the freedom of the sons and daughters of God our Father. You and I can "choose" life. We can exercise the freedom of the truth, which of course is the only real freedom. We can choose to trust fully our Mother the Church as she teaches.

We can choose to live marriage faithfully and completely. Husbands and wives can decide to give themselves fully to their spouses – making all their choices together as faith-filled partners and as conscious and willing co-workers with God and His plan for happiness. We can learn the ways to life, freedom and responsibility.

Will there still be the Cross? Yes, Jesus promised it to those who would follow Him. But He has gone before us carrying the Cross through death - to the resurrection. He did this so that we would know, definitively, our final goal and the hope of eternal life.

Dear friends, I want to thank you for your faithfulness to the Church and your determination to work for and protect human life. You are necessary to my work as bishop and you bring me great joy and encouragement. You are instruments for the transformation of the culture. You are leaven: changing your parishes, our diocese, the world around us as Jesus promised you would.

The Solemnity of Mary's Assumption which we will celebrate on Friday, shows us the dignity that God entrusted to mankind; to a woman and mother. Mary is the greatest human person, the honor of the human race. She is the pattern of the Church come to perfection. She is our hope. She is the star of the New Evangelization, and in this she is lighting our way for the transformation of the culture of death into a civilization of light and life. I entrust you to her and know that if we take her hand she will not fail to lead us – in accord with our vocations – to the fullness of life in Christ. Mother of life, Mother of the Church, intercede for us!