

LIFE MATTERS: THE CALL TO GREATNESS

*Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.*¹

Deep within the heart of every young person is a desire to find happiness and fulfillment in this life. Much of the period between childhood and one's first "real job" is occupied with personal exploration and questioning: What do I believe? What really matters to me? What am I supposed to do with my life? With all the suffering and injustice in the world, what could I possibly do to make a difference?

Increasingly, those who were born in the post-*Roe* years have found the answers to those questions in the pro-life movement. They have given a voice to those who could have been their classmates and friends had they not been aborted. And they have discovered great joy in bearing witness to "the Gospel of life."

The heroic men and women who've been active in pro-life work in the forty years since the Supreme Court's decisions in *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* deserve gratitude for persevering in the long struggle to restore legal protection for unborn children. As caring neighbors and parishioners, as volunteers in pregnancy care centers, as advocates passing pro-life legislation and as sidewalk counselors, they've saved the lives of countless children, while sparing an equal number of mothers and families the pain and grief of losing a child in an abortion. But *Roe* is still law, the death toll remains high and the challenges can be discouraging.



At such a time, it is the youth who offer the Church and our nation a much needed witness of hope. Their whole-hearted response to the call of the Gospel energizes us to witness and work all the harder in renewing our culture. Whether they have just gone on their first march or walk for life, or they have chosen

pro-life work as their profession, it is fitting to recognize and encourage their contributions in bringing new life, new energy and new hope to the movement itself.

What ignited this fire in the hearts of so many young Americans to become involved in the great campaign in support of life? It took a man whose own youthful hope, idealism and courage were tested by the loss of all his family and by the brutal occupation of his homeland by the Nazis and later the Soviets—Blessed Pope John Paul II. It was a central task of his Pontificate to call all young people to embrace their great vocation to follow after Jesus Christ. His efforts began in earnest in 1985 when he instituted World Youth Day.²

In his homily at the eighth World Youth Day, held in Denver in 1993, Pope John Paul II spoke powerful words that energized young Americans to take up the cause of life:

*At this stage in history, the liberating message of the Gospel of life has been put into your hands. And the mission of proclaiming it to the ends of the earth is now passing to your generation.... Do not be afraid to go out on the streets and into public places like the first apostles, who preached Christ and the good news of salvation of the Gospel. Young people of World Youth Day, the church asks you to go, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to those who are near and those who are far away.... Share with them the freedom you have found in Christ.*³

Pope Benedict XVI has enthusiastically carried on the task begun by Blessed John Paul II to lead youth toward their greatness in Christ. On the day following his Inaugural Mass, Pope Benedict greeted young pilgrims from Germany who had travelled to Rome, telling them: "The ways of the Lord are not easy, but we were not created for an easy life, but for great things, for goodness."⁴ With this profound, yet simple challenge, Pope Benedict spoke to the deepest need and desire of the human heart and set the stage for the new wave of pro-life youth. He knew that young men and women seek to encounter a truth that will free them from a secularism that can never fulfill the human person.

In his message for the Twenty-Sixth World Youth Day, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed that:

Men and women were created for something great, for infinity. Nothing else will ever be enough. ... The desire for a more meaningful life is a sign that God created us and that we bear his "imprint." God is life, and that is why every creature reaches out towards life. ... To set God aside is to separate ourselves from that source and, inevitably, to deprive ourselves of fulfillment and joy.⁵

Pro-life youth have enthusiastically engaged in building a culture of life because they have discovered that "fulfillment and joy." Many young women and men have chosen the promotion of human life as their life's work. The organization *Generation Life*, for example, is led by young people who educate their peers on the message of pro-life and chastity. They believe that abortion will end by addressing root cause, through spreading the liberating message of chastity and love.⁶ One of the young missionaries shared a personal story about witnessing to high school students:

After a pro-life presentation at a high school in Philadelphia, a student told me that for his whole life he thought he was a mistake, that he had no value. But after the talk he understood that these were lies. How wonderful it is that a presentation on the dignity of all human life from conception to natural death could be the catalyst for transforming the life of a troubled teen.

Many young Catholics today have become youth ministers, religion teachers, lobbyists, speakers and leaders in their efforts to build a culture of life. We find them:

- Advocating against the death penalty
- Witnessing and counseling outside abortion facilities
- Leading campus pro-life and evangelization ministry groups
- Going out as missionaries in U.S. cities and in developing countries
- Visiting nursing homes and hospices
- Assisting boys and girls clubs and afterschool programs in low income areas
- Serving as coworkers with Catholic organizations and religious orders in pastoral care
- Working in pregnancy centers and post-abortion healing ministries
- Promoting marriage and family life

The task of building a culture of life does not belong only to such advocates, however. Every Christian is called to work for the common good and against the evils and injustices of their day. We all are called to

witness to life in whatever job and setting God places us.

While the struggle to defend human life in America and worldwide is far from over, pro-life youth today are showing us that the pro-life movement is in promising hands. These young people have chosen to live for greatness and great things. They will undoubtedly succeed.

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¹ 1 Timothy 4:12. Catholic Biblical Association of Great Britain, *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version—Catholic Edition* (Camden, NJ: Thomas Nelson Publ., 1966). Used with permission. All rights reserved.

² <http://worldyouthday.com/about-wyd/wyd-history>.

³ Pope John Paul II, homily, August 15, 1993.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, message, April 25, 2005.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://www.generationlife.org>.



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