

Homily – Closing Mass  
National Prayer Vigil for Life  
January 19, 2024

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I also welcome you to this Basilica. I thank Monsignor Rossi for his kind words at the beginning of Mass. My dear brothers and sisters in religious life, seminarians, young people, all of you who have braved the snow, and those joining by television, live streaming and radio, to one and all, quoting the Lord Jesus, I say, "*Peace be with you.*"

We have gathered for this annual March for Life and we have listened to God's words: "*For unto us a child is born. Unto us, a Son is given. They shall call him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-forever, Prince of Peace.*" These words bring us great joy and consolation. They sound very familiar to us because they are proclaimed as the first reading at the Mass of midnight on Christmas. We spent all of Advent journeying with a woman, the Holy Virgin Mary, the patroness of this Basilica under the title of Immaculate Conception. Journeying, we are accompanying her, and she is accompanying us to celebrate the birth of her Son, who is the savior of the world. At the birth of a child, the whole world celebrated. The angels above cried out, "*Glory to God in the highest.*" The shepherds made haste to see and they saw the child and his mother. The Magi followed the light of the star and came to the mother and her child. Life was something to be celebrated. A great light had shone upon the whole world. The Messiah was here. Our salvation was at hand: the fulfillment of the heart's deepest longing.

In his encyclical letter, *the Gospel of Life*, Pope St. John Paul II said there are always lights and shadows. And from the first appearance of the savior, *the grace of God appeared* to us. There are always forces of darkness bent on extinguishing this light, destroying this life. One need only think of King Herod who ordered all the innocent children to be slaughtered, rather than rejoicing at the birth of a child. He cared little for life and cared only for his rights and his power. And so there was this dark force opposing the light. Yet we are consoled also by the words of the prologue of the Gospel of John: *The light shines in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome the light.*

Yes, *the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light* and sometimes we can interpret this even in light of our own experience, even in terms of politics. I was born in September of 1972, and in January of 1973, it was the infamous *Roe versus Wade* decision, and I lived with it for nearly 50 years. I would think about our empty churches and pews, our closed and shuttered seminaries and convents. I would look at empty desks and chairs in my classroom and look out on the playground hoping to see children, but there were none. And I wondered, which of my classmates should be here who is not, who would have enriched my life and those around me? And I wondered. And then we had the *Dobbs* decision, and I thought finally, *the people in darkness have seen a great light.*

But as Bishop Burbidge preached last night, sometimes you have victories and sometimes setbacks. In my own beloved state of Ohio, since the *Dobbs* decision, abortion has been enshrined in our state. We were defeated in a ballot initiative. Since *Dobbs* battles have been lost by pro-life forces, and sometimes we wonder, "How could this have happened?"

It is not unlike the Israelites when they were sent into exile in Babylon. And so, we must accept our responsibility for our failure at times to proclaim the Gospel of Life and the fullness of the Gospel in its integrity. We must accept responsibility and ask God for his mercy for the times that we not only have not treated unborn life with respect, but even the life of children and minors. We must accept responsibility for our failure to properly form consciences, especially of Catholics, because over 50 years of legalized abortion, the conscience has become dull. But in the light of these defeats, do we simply give up? I

remember my father often had my brothers and me meditate on Matthew 11:25-30, "*Come to me all you who are weary and find life burdensome and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, and your souls will find rest for themselves, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.*" And then my father would say, "You know, Jesus says my yoke is easy, my burden is light, but he fell three times under the weight of his cross. But he got back up." And so even after defeats, we get back up and we march for life in radical solidarity with women and children and radical solidarity with the unborn children, who are the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society. We must ask ourselves, "Why?" Because God is the author of life. He created man and woman in his image and likeness. All of us share the same human nature and have inherent dignity. Every person is willed by God, loved by God, created for love and to love. Every life matters. And that is why we march.

But I began to think about why else did we lose? Some people say because we were outmaneuvered politically. Perhaps we were foolish in placing too many eggs in the political basket, relying on winning victories in courts or in legislatures, but not winning the true battle, which is for hearts. We need to refocus on winning hearts and converting people more deeply to the love of Jesus Christ. We frame arguments about a woman's right to choose or when parental consent laws are involved about parents' rights. When we do so, we forget about the right to life of the child. What does abortion do to a child? It takes his or her life. That is the reality. Are we just going to stand by and do nothing? Or, in fact, will we say, "I will stand for life. I will protect the weak and the innocent."

Indeed, Pope Francis, in one of his Wednesday audiences, commenting on the Ten Commandments, poses another reason why. It is not simply that we haven't focused on conversion of heart. Focusing on the fifth commandment, *thou shalt not kill*, he says that indifference kills. Indifference says you do not matter to me. Do women matter to you? Do unborn children matter to you? Perhaps we think it's not my problem, or that she shouldn't have gotten pregnant anyway. Is that a solution protecting life? Perhaps we think I am too busy or it is somebody else's problem, like the Levite and the priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Levite and the priest ask, "What will happen to me if I stop to help? Perhaps I will be beaten and robbed. I will lose friends, lose respect." The Good Samaritan asks a different question: what will happen to him if I do not stop to help?

Indifference kills. We cannot be indifferent to the plight of unborn children or to mothers who are looking for help, looking for a network of support. I know that many of you have made the journey here from across the country. Day after day, men and women work tirelessly in crisis pregnancy centers. They dedicate themselves to serving the poorest of the poor. High school and college students do food drives and clothing drives. They collect diapers to help women and their children. Counselors try to help support women. Doctors and nurses offer compassionate care. These are the things that Catholics do each and every day, but we must encourage more of our brothers and sisters, not to be indifferent but to be true servants of the gift of life.

Sometimes our solutions have been too narrow. Our proposals, politics - that will solve it. Some people say, "Well, a child is a problem." Pope Francis is very clear and he uses very hard language, likening the abortionist to a hitman, who eliminates a problem rather than seeing a person who was created to be loved. We look for political solutions. We look for solutions of just eliminating problems. We are sometimes indifferent.

But I would suggest that yet another reason why we suffered defeat is fear. We are afraid to boldly proclaim the Gospel of Life. We are afraid that if we proclaim it, we will lose family members and friends. We will not be well thought of, we will give in to human respect. But I ask you, did St. John the Baptist remain silent when Herod took his brother's wife? Or did he speak the truth in love? On the other hand, what did Herod say? He liked to listen to John. He knew John was a prophet; he knew John was speaking the truth, and yet because of the oaths that he had sworn, because of the crowds, because of his friends, he asked for the head of John the Baptist. But John the Baptist bore witness to the Redeemer in life and in death. He was bold and courageous and yet we are afraid. What impact will this have on my family, on my work? What if I do speak out?

But sometimes we are also afraid because of our lack of credibility. Our own failure to live the Christian faith day in and day out. How can I possibly speak to others about Christ and his Gospel if I am not living this way of life? The apostles probably felt the same way. After all, Judas betrayed his Lord and master for 30 pieces of silver. Simon Peter had denied Jesus three times and wept bitterly for his sins. All the apostles fled except for the beloved disciple, the youngest one, who stood faithfully with Mary by the foot of the cross.

And then we have today's Gospel: Jesus' encounter with the apostles. They were locked behind closed doors in fear. All their hopes and dreams seemingly had been dashed. They had seemingly failed. They had let Jesus down and themselves down as well. But the risen Lord, who is the victor over the forces of death, passes through those locked doors and he says, "*Peace be with you,*" not once, but twice. And *he showed them his hands and his side*. He who was crucified at Calvary is not dead. He is alive.

For the Jews, the hands were a place of great intimacy. It says in the Old Testament, "*Your names are written on the palms of my hands.*" Yes, God knows us intimately and he says it is as if you have done this to me, but see, I come to you, I forgive you, I love you, I give you my gift of peace. And *the disciples rejoiced to see the risen Lord* and he said to them again, "*Peace be with you.*" And then he breathed on them, saying, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" Just as he had breathed the breath of life into Adam and made him a living being, just as the Spirit had hovered over the waters at the dawn of creation, just as Ezekiel has prophesied to the spirit and the dry bones came back to life, Jesus brings us back from sin and death to life and holiness. He gives His Apostles the power to bind and loose sins, his Church to show mercy. But He also says, "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" My brothers and sisters in Christ, how was Jesus sent? Not in glory and power and majesty, but in weakness and vulnerability, born as a child, born of the Virgin. To whom was Jesus sent? He proclaimed glad tidings to the poor. He made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the mute to speak, the lame to leap up like stags.

*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.* Jesus demonstrated how He was sent when He bent low and washed his own disciples' feet, knowing well what they were to do. And this is how we are to serve our brothers and sisters, women and their children, unborn children - the way Jesus did. *As the Father has sent me, so I send you* to be called - and we have been called through our baptism - is also to be sent as missionaries of charity, as apostles of life. We are to be sent to those who have no one, who think there is no other solution than death, and to increase their possibilities in light of Christ, the risen Lord, the victor over sin and death.

You might think, "Well, who me? Little old me?" Think of what Jesus did with some simple fishermen and tax collectors and zealots, and if He can do it in them, He can do it in you. In the back of this Basilica is the beautiful marble relief of the Universal Call to Holiness. Every one of us is called to sanctify this world, to imbue this world with the Gospel, not to become more worldly, but to bring the Gospel to culture, to change our culture from one of death to a culture of life and a civilization of love. You might say, "Who? Me?" Yes, you. This is not just the task of bishops, priests and religious.

My dear young people, I appeal to you, to your goodness and to your generosity. I am a young bishop, but I have lived too long under the shadow of death, and so many others, so many women are so wounded. So many children in the womb long for the breath of life, and they need you and your goodness and your talents and your gifts in ordinary everyday life.

My father was a great man and he was a physician. It will be five years in July since he passed. He spent every waking hour trying to care for his family but also for his patients. I remember when I was about 10 years old, he came back from the hospital one day and was sitting at the table and he kept on running his hand through his hair and I said, "Dad, what's the matter? What's wrong?" And he says, "Well, I have a patient and she's expecting triplets," and I said, "Oh, great, three babies." And he said, "Yeah, but she's not really my patient and they want me to transfer her to another hospital because triplets are very complicated. They want me to transfer her to another hospital to take two babies out." I said, in my child's voice, "Take

two babies out?" And he lowered his head. And then he looked up from the table and looked at me and he said, "But I'm not going to do it. I don't care if they take my license. I'm not going to do it."

And he went back to the hospital the next day and he talked to the woman and said, "Ma'am, do you want to have your three children?"

And she said, "Certainly, doctor."

"Would you mind if I was your doctor? I promise you that I will come and visit you every day."

"Yes, doctor, I'd like that very much."

And my father did go into the hospital every day and did visit her and did accompany her through a difficult and challenging pregnancy. And she gave birth to three baby boys. And the woman was so happy, she named the first one Sydney after my father, and they took a picture, and they put it up on the wall of the hospital. And I remember walking through the hospital one day, they had all the chiefs of staff and my dad's picture was up there. I was proud of him, and then I came to the picture of the three boys, and I thought to myself, "My dad, he's a hero." And I went up to him and I said to myself, "I'm going to tell him." And I said, "Dad, you're a hero. You saved those three babies." And he looked at me very sternly and he said, "I'm not a hero. I only did what I had to do. I did my duty."

That is what we are asking of all of you, to do your Christian duty. If you want peace, work for justice -for unborn children and for mothers. Work for justice. Justice is being in right relationship, giving another person his or her due, giving God His due as author and sovereign of life, giving your brothers and sisters, including the poor, including the women, including unborn children their due. You think about our world today, and it is on fire. War in Ukraine, Gaza, endless war in Syria, violence against Christians in Nigeria, and I could go on. We could think about our own streets here in the nation's capital, Chicago, all around. Gun violence, senseless violence. Should we be surprised if war is waged on the most innocent members of our society? Should we be surprised at all?

But the reason we are here is that we know in our heart of hearts that we are made for more. We are made for something better. We are made for life. Sometimes I will counsel couples who are engaged for marriage, and sometimes I will tell them: don't settle. Don't settle for a mediocre marriage, don't settle for something less than what God is calling you to. And God is calling all of you to excellence, to strive for life, to leave a better world than the one we have, to create a world, by God's grace and with His power, that supports and sustains the gift of human life.

My brother bishops, my fellow priests, to our dying breaths - we promise you we will be with you to walk with you and to march with you. But after the march is over, we will serve side by side with you. You are not alone, and we cannot leave the unborn alone. We must love them, and we must love their mothers. May Mary Immaculate, the Patroness of the United States who carried the Author of Life in her womb, intercede for you and show you the face of her Son who was born a child, the one whom they call *Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-forever, Prince of Peace*.