

**Homily – Opening Mass
National Prayer Vigil for Life
January 23, 2025**

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Archbishop of Kansas City in Kansas**

It is a joy to be with you tonight. When Bishop Thomas reached out to me, and he was so looking forward to this night and to celebrating this Mass with you, but, sadly, he had a tragic death in his family. He only has one sibling, a brother, who died I think in 2016 and his wife, the bishop's sister-in-law, dropped dead suddenly. So he is with his family in Philadelphia, where he needs to be. But I know his prayers are with us tonight and I ask us just to spend a moment in silence praying for eternal life for his sister-in-law, Karen Thomas, and praying for the Thomas family.

So as was mentioned, I am Archbishop Joseph Naumann, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas. I was a former Chair of the Pro-Life Committee, and I have served for seven years. When Bishop Thomas contacted me to fill in tonight, I was a little bit taken aback and a little intimidated, but he told me he had some rough notes that he would send to me, and I was reminded when I was in St. Louis, where I'm from originally, we were having a Eucharistic Congress and Archbishop Cardinal had invited a friend of his, a Cardinal from Belgium to celebrate the closing Mass, give a talk to priests, but the opening night of the Congress. It was Father Groeschel who was supposed to give the talk, and there was bad weather on the east coast, he couldn't get to St. Louis, so Cardinal asked his friend if he would fill in and he said yes reluctantly and then he proceeded at that talk to give this amazing, amazing talk about his own personal experiences. The first time he ever carried the Eucharist was when he was 12 years old and the Nazis were overrunning his village and the sacristan at the church asked him to carry the Blessed Sacrament to one of the religious center's convents because they thought that the church was going to be blown up. He talked about Pope John Paul II calling him one day when he was working in the Vatican. He said, "I'm sending you to Siberia." He said, "Holy Father, what have I done?" but he had sent a Bishop to Siberia and this Bishop said to the pope, "I'm going to build a cathedral there. Will you come and dedicate it, and I think he said, "I'll try," and he succeeded in building this cathedral. This Bishop had founded over a million Catholics in Siberia and he did this by establishing Eucharistic chapels in cities and towns and the people gravitated to them. He gave this marvelous talk, and throughout the weekend, people were coming up to him and saying, thank you so much for the talk. It was marvelous. He said, "yes, the one I did not prepare."

Tonight, I want to read to you Bishop Thomas' notes and then I will add on the rough part. His are eloquent. He says this: what came to be through him was life and this life was the light of the human race. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Life and light. Gathered from dioceses near and far for this annual Pro-Life Vigil Mass here in our Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. This is what we have come to celebrate in this Mass entitled, "For giving thanks to God for the gift of human life." Life. It is here, at this moment, on the eve before the March, whose theme this year is precisely "Life - this is why we march," that we take the time to give voice to our praise and thanksgiving for the gift of Christ who is our life and light, to praise and thank him for the gift of human life in all its forms and at every stage, for the gift of life and light he has given each of us, called to witness to his life and light, in particular for the preborn who may not have the opportunity to be born into this world and who may never see the light of day. When we first heard the Gospel this evening, it would be surprising if the thoughts of many here did not turn immediately to the recently celebrated Feast of the Nativity of the Lord. We know the Gospel just proclaimed is par excellence the Christmas Gospel. Now,

do not get the wrong idea, we are not celebrating Christmas all over again. But here and now, the prologue of St. John's Gospel, with its rich imagery, captures for us that mystery of the Word made flesh. Jesus who took on our human flesh became like us in all things but sin, and who became light in the darkness. "And the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Our first task this evening, then, is to glorify God, who chose to take on our human nature, to become one with us, and who chose to pierce the darkness with his eternal light. So thanks be to God for Christ Jesus, the Lord of life and light. It is through, with, and in him we have gathered. We adore and praise him, our life and light. John's Gospel also compels us to offer praise and thanks for the life and light of Christ in every human person, preborn and born, in the image and likeness of God. Because Jesus took on our very flesh with all its frailty, we encounter Jesus preeminently in the fragile flesh of the defenseless baby in the womb. We encounter Jesus and the fragile flesh of those born with physical and mental disabilities. We encounter the flesh of Jesus in the fragile flesh of the persecuted, the victim, the immigrant, poor, and the needy. We encounter the flesh of Jesus in the vulnerable, the elderly, the imprisoned, the addicted, the depressed, the anxious, the fearful, the dying. Here and now, we recommit ourselves to seeing Jesus in the flesh when we see any and all of our brothers and sisters clothed in the fragile flesh of their humanity, the humanity of Jesus.

In this way, we can celebrate the life he gives, shedding his light on the lives of those whom we serve, allowing his light to shine through our fragile flesh. The Gospel of John proclaimed this evening inspires us to praise and thank him for the gift of life he has shared with each of us and the light he has shed upon us. The Lord has shed his light and life with each of us in our vocations: lay faithful men and women and countless young people, the single, married, widowed, seminarians, consecrated religious, deacons, priests, and bishops. He fills us anew during this evening so that we might bring his life and light to our nation, to our states, to our diocese, to the Church and to the world. Jesus reassures us of his presence and desires us to be his life-giving presence in every situation in which we find ourselves, and to reflect his light no matter the darkness around us.

Much later in John's Gospel, Jesus announces to the gathered crowd, "the flesh I will give is my flesh for the life of the world," the very theme of our National Eucharistic Revival. Here in the holy Eucharist this evening, let us pray that we might receive with renewed fervor and love the very life of Jesus, his very body and blood. Let us pray with renewed trust and joy that he might remove any darkness and infuse us with divine light. In St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians we just heard, he delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins. As servants of the Church, as disciples of the Lord of life and light, this is our reason for hope, our rallying cry, our consolation, our source of unwavering confidence, our joy and peace. This evening, as we reflect upon the words of John's Gospel, we ask for the grace to allow those words to fill us anew, but all the more, filled with the very life and light of Christ in our reception of the Holy Eucharist, we are nourished and equipped to announce and proclaim in all our words, our work and our witness. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not, cannot, and will not overcome it.

These are Bishop Thomas' beautiful words to us tonight focusing on those themes and that beginning of John's Gospel of Jesus being the light and life. You know, when I accepted this, there was one thing I was looking forward to, and that was from this perch to be able to see this congregation. This church is adorned with beautiful mosaic art. But it is the mosaic on the floor of the Basilica that is most impressive tonight, this gathering of people from so many different places and coming together to stand for life and to be a light in our culture. I am particularly grateful for our consecrated religious with us. I know that so many people mentioned to me that they were thrilled by the many consecrated religious at the Eucharistic Congress. Mother Teresa - we have the Missionaries of Charity here - she inspired me in many ways by her heroic witness of the love for the poor, and also her commitment to life and her love for

the unborn. And dear Sisters of Life, I remember the late Cardinal O'Connor announcing when he had this vision to form this community to live the Gospel of Life. I want to reflect on this just for a few moments with you. In 1999, Pope John Paul II came to St. Louis for a pastoral visit, and as was his custom, almost everywhere in the world, he always wanted to meet with young people, and we had a gathering there in the hockey stadium. And in the theme of his talk that night to the young people, he challenged them to be light as only young people can be light. You know, the Lord has this particular love for the young to be as instruments of grace in the world. You think about some of the prophets, Jeremiah, who talks about how the Lord formed him in the womb and who protested that he was too young. But God told him say not that you are too young; I will put the words in your mouth. Think of John the apostle, the beloved of the Lord who was just a teenager when he received the call to follow our Lord. I think of Joan of Arc, this amazing young woman, who heard the voice of the saints and of God calling her to this impossible mission, but she was open to it, not so much to preserve France, but to revive the faith of the French people. We just celebrated this past few days ago the feast of Saint Agnes, this 12-year old virgin martyr of the early Church who inspired some of the great saints. There's a beautiful reading from Saint Ambrose in the office of readings talking about how her executioner trembled as she willingly submitted her life to martyrdom. We think of great apostles of the Eucharist as well.

My good young people, say not that you are too young to be a light in our culture and society. You have a unique power to be that light. Bishop Thomas shared that he wanted me to make reference to the fact that this year's March for Life is in the midst of the Jubilee Year, a holy year. Pope Francis chose for the theme of that holy year Pilgrims of Hope. Now, a holy year, a Jubilee Year, is the time when the Church prays in a special way that we encounter the Lord in a new way. That was the symbolism of the Pope going through the holy door. It is not just a physical gesture, but a physical prayer in which we try to open our hearts in new ways to leave the darkness of the secular culture outside and enter into a deeper relationship with our Lord. And so, we pray for that tonight.

In John's Gospel, the 10th chapter, Jesus referred to himself as the gate or the door. Jesus said, "I am the gate for the sheep." And our Lord continued, "I am the gate; who enters through me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." Then he declares, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." This is the same chapter where Jesus identified himself as the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. Jesus reminds us that good shepherds know their sheep by name and he's saying to all of us, he knows us by name. He desires to have this personal friendship with each of us. And so I pray that this holy year may be a time of grace for all of us, where we open our hearts to the Lord who is knocking on the door of our hearts, waiting for us to let him enter in a greater way.

Pope Francis chose this holy year theme Pilgrims of Hope, I think, because he noted that our particular time needs a renewal of hope. And in so doing, the Pope identified what so many in social sciences have termed as epidemics of anxiety, loneliness, depression and despair, especially amongst young people. As Christians, we understand ourselves to be pilgrims. This world is not our final destination. We are on a journey through the world to the heavenly kingdom for which Jesus is the gate and door. Ultimately for the Christian, our hope is not based on political leaders, cultural celebrities, or athletes. Our hope is anchored in the only one who will not and cannot disappoint. Friendship and communion with Jesus have given his disciples hope for 2,000 years, during times of adversity, illness, deaths of loved ones, persecutions, imprisonments, and even martyrdom. When we march tomorrow, we march as Pilgrims of Hope. The theme chosen for the March for Life: "Life: why we march," was chosen to encourage us to reflect upon what has motivated us to be here for this March for Life, what has motivated many here tonight to give their lives to be advocates for life.

Elections are important. They have consequences. And we pray for our new president and vice president. I was encouraged to hear that the new president gave pardons to pro-life prisoners who have

been spending time in jail because of their advocacy for life. We pray for them, that they will have wisdom to be good leaders for our nation. But as Pope St. John Paul II understood so clearly, culture is more significant than politics. Elections reflect the values of a culture. After the elation of a few years ago caused by the Supreme Court's overturning *Roe vs. Wade* and returning to state legislatures and the Congress the authority to determine public policy regarding abortion, the pro-life community was celebrative. We have experienced since that time, though, many disappointments with the outcome of state referendums, beginning with my state of Kansas. Part of the reason that, in Kansas, we lost, and I think this is true in other states, is that there was a great outpouring of new young voters who voted against the amendment called "value them both." Value both the mother and the child. Because our state supreme court, like the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, claimed to have discovered a right for abortion in the Kansas constitution that was written in the 1850s.

It was good fiction writing by our justices. But this time, it was particularly the young people, and I can understand that in many ways because they have grown up in a culture where they have never known anything but legalized abortion, a culture of death. They have grown up in a culture where they have seen so much infidelity in love. They have grown up in a culture where my generation has failed to protect them from a pornography industry that targets children and young people to addict them to pornography, to this phony and this false kind of love.

And so my good young people here, you are called to be witnesses to your peers. You are called to help them to come to know what brought you here tonight. These defeats have been sober reminders that we need to re-intensify our efforts to build a culture of life. You know, Jesus never promised his disciples it would be easy. In fact, he told them that if we are going to follow him, we have to follow him all of the way to Calvary, that we have to be prepared to take up the cross to transform our culture. We must touch hearts by efforts like *Walking with Moms in Need*, where we try to surround women in difficult pregnancies with a community of love and support, and by efforts like Project Rachel, which began about the same time I began my work in pro-life. I think we were the third diocese to have Project Rachel, this important healing and forgiving ministry for those that have been involved with abortion. Ministries like, "And Then There Were None," started by Abby Johnson, this former Planned Parenthood director, and who now has this ministry to bring people out of the abortion industry, to bring them out and to give them a renewed life, to free them from this culture of death, this culture of darkness. We must touch minds with the truth. That can be arrived at by reason of the life and the dignity of every human person. But we must also touch hearts.

In the Letter of Saint Peter, the first Pope, he reminded us that we must always be prepared to share with others the reason for our hope. The reason for our hope is the Word made flesh. The reason for our hope is the God who pursues us despite our sinfulness, our brokenness. Our reason for our hope is anchored in the Creator of the cosmos, choosing to become an embryo in the womb of Mary, to be born in the poor circumstances of Bethlehem, to be an infant refugee fleeing a tyrannical king, to be a boy growing up in a small town of Nazareth, to be a laborer, a carpenter who knew what it was to work hard, to exercise his public ministry in this obscure region of the world, according to the worldly leaders of the time, the back waters of the Roman Empire, and ultimately to give us life on Calvary so that we can be transformed by Divine Mercy, and with his Easter victory of life, give us a destiny to live with him and the saints forever.

Bishop Thomas' episcopal motto is in English "My Lord and my God." The words of the apostle Thomas, doubting Thomas, have touched the wounds of the love of Jesus. This is how we transform culture, by allowing ourselves to become wounds of love for our world, to help your peers, my dear young people, to know that they're made in the divine image, to see in them a reflection of God, to know that there is such worth by the very way that you treat them, that God died for them as well. And to help them

to discover all of the false narratives of our culture and society today. With the love of God revealed in the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, how can we not have hope? That is why these consecrated religious are so powerful. You are witnesses of hope. You are witnesses of love and the heart of the Church, you are heralds of the Gospel of light. And so we ask this Jesus, this Word made flesh who humbled himself to be an embryo in Mary and humbles himself to be present to us in the Eucharist, to give us food for the journey. Let us take up the banner to be Pilgrims of Hope, intent on building a culture of life and a civilization of love.

Amen.