

## RESPECT LIFE SUNDAY (OCTOBER -- 2017)

Our annual observance of "Respect Life Month" begins today, and so, I would like to say a few words about this and about how all of us can observe Respect Life Month both in our homes and in our daily lives.

By way of introduction, let me return to our second reading. That reading is taken from Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians. There Saint Paul reminds us of how Jesus Christ, though He was in the form of God, did not come in glory and majesty. Rather, He came in humility, as a servant, as a slave, and then He gave His life on behalf of us all.

Because of this, God the Father has exalted Him. In fact, God the Father has raised up Jesus to such heights of glory that at the very mention of His name, **"every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord ..."**

Saint Paul's point here is this: He says we should live in the same way as did Jesus. Why? Because when we humble ourselves and when we serve the needs of others and when we place their needs ahead of our own, then, just like Jesus, we too will be raised up and exalted in heaven.

That said, let's consider how all this applies to how we treat those who are weaker than us, to those who are sick and to those who are handicapped and those who are dying and to those who still reside in their mother's wombs and are yet to be born.

These people are seldom in a position to care for themselves. In some cases they are totally dependent upon others for their care and even their very lives.

For example, some people are paralyzed and cannot move their arms or legs. They must be fed by others and bathed by others. Other people who are very old must be assisted with things they were once quite capable of doing themselves. Some people suffer from diminished mental capacities and need help. Then of course there are the babies yet to be born, those still in their mother's wombs where they are safe and protected as they grow and prepare to enter into the world. These babies are totally dependent upon their mothers for everything.

Jesus taught that we must love our neighbor, and it's those who are helpless who are in a very special way our neighbors. Our care for these people and our sacrifices for them is a measure of our love.

Our world today has rejected these teachings of Jesus. It has rejected the idea that we should have a love and concern for the most vulnerable. Instead it has created what Saint John Paul called a "culture of death." By that he meant a society which see killing as the best solution to human suffering.

That child's birth defects are too severe. Her quality of life will be at best poor. It would be better to just let her die. That elderly man has terminal cancer. Why does he have to linger and wait for death? Let him choose the day and hour, and we will help him take his life. That way he can have death with dignity. At least that's what the people at Compassion and Choices say (formerly known as the Hemlock Society). Her pregnancy was unplanned. She has a right to decide what she will do. It's her body and her choice.

But here is the problem with this kind of thinking. It's not Christian. It's not Christ-like. It's not loving. Quite the opposite. It's selfish, and it's self-centered, and it's wrong. It's not like what Jesus did when "He emptied Himself and took the form of a slave ..." and when "He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Let me point out something here. Human life begins at conception and this is affirmed both by faith and by science.

In Psalm 139 it says of God, **"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them (Ps 139:13-16)."**

In this beautiful prayer, we learn that we were already in the mind of God before He even created us, and we learn that as we grew secretly in our mother's wombs, God oversaw all that transpired. Because we are fearfully wonderfully made, the psalmist gives praise to God.

That is what our faith teaches us about the beginning of life, but science also affirms this. Biologists say that each type or kind of cell is distinguished from every other kind by two things: composition and behavior. When the sperm and egg cells come together to form a new cell, scientists have determined that this new cell has a different composition and a different behavior from its parent cells. It is a new life quite distinct from its parent cells. Even more remarkable is this. That process of transformation takes less than a second.

So, new human life begins at conception, a fact we know from both science and faith.

So why should we care? Why should we have a concern for all human life? Why should we oppose the culture of death? Let me give you four reasons.

First. Our lives are not our own. Neither do we have rights over other people's lives. Our faith teaches that we were created in God's image and likeness, and what is created belongs to the one who created it.

If you make a sandwich, it doesn't belong to me. You were going to have that for lunch, and I can't come along and take it for myself. If you earn money, it doesn't belong to the guy down the street, it belongs to you, and you are the one who gets to decide how to spend it.

In a similar way, God has created us. We belong to Him. As Saint Paul says, **“Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord (Rm 14:8).”** That is why we cannot take the life of another or our own life for that matter. We belong to God.

Second. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are not our own because we have been bought at a great price (1Cor 6:19-20). It’s a fact that we pay more for what is more valuable, for what is worth more to us. Jesus paid for our lives with something more precious than anything else in this world and that is His blood. That makes human life more valuable than anything else on Earth. Therefore, we should be willing to spend our whole fortunes to preserve and defend it.

Third. God has made it clear that we cannot take innocent human life. The fifth commandment is quite direct and quite simple: “Thou Shalt not kill.”

Fourth. There are two ways to look at life. Either human life is valuable because it has an intrinsic worth to it which cannot be taken away, lost, sold or renounced. Or else, human life is valuable because it is useful to others in some way.

If we take the second position, that human life is valuable because it’s useful, then someone has to decide when and how your life is useful. Furthermore, when that person decides you are no longer useful, then out you go with the empty boxes, old shoes, broken bottles, burnt-out bulbs, rusty nails and all the rest of the trash. But we are not trash ...

This second position basically reduces to “might make right.” As long as you are strong and healthy, you are safe. However, when you can’t defend yourself any more, when someone else is responsible for your care and can make decisions about your life, then watch out.

Let me end with this observation. We Catholics are in a unique position. We are a large Church and as such, we can be more influential than smaller denominations – when we are united. Because we are bigger, we can stand up to powerful influences in society which would disrespect and even kill those who are unborn or who are sick or handicapped or dying. In fact, we Catholics have a special obligation to remind others of our responsibilities to those who cannot defend themselves and who depend upon our love and kindness.

So, let us work to build a culture of life where in all areas of human endeavor, in our customs, arts, practices, habits and so on, we have a respect and love for human life.

If you are a teacher, expose your students to stories and lessons which show a respect for life, especially for the unborn and the elderly. If you in business, make allowances for young families. If you are a parent or grandparent, be pro-active and make sure you teach your children respect for human life especially when it’s at its most vulnerable stages. If you are in public office, work for pro-life legislation and all of us should vote for candidates who will defend life.

Finally, let us pray that all human life, from conception to natural death be welcome and respected and loved. Amen.