



## Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194

202-541-3070 • FAX 202-541-3054 • EMAIL [PROLIFE@USCCB.ORG](mailto:PROLIFE@USCCB.ORG) • WEB [WWW.USCCB.ORG/PROLIFE](http://WWW.USCCB.ORG/PROLIFE)

**Homily of Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo**  
Chairman, USCCB Committee on Pro-Life Activities  
National Prayer Vigil for Life ~ Opening Mass  
Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception  
Sunday, January 23, 2011

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light!” (Isaiah 11)

Last month on December 24<sup>th</sup> at midnight, we heard these words of Isaiah proclaimed at Midnight Mass. Amidst obscurity, listlessness, slavery and nothingness, a promise is made of an eruption of joy. At the time of Isaiah the prophet, the reference about darkness is one that unmistakably highlights the hosts of Gentiles and foreigners who have come upon the Northern Kingdom and rendered it a shadow land, a non observant region of a lacerated Israel. The birth of the child will undo that nihilism. No wonder we read it on Christmas Night.

When St. Matthew utilizes the same passage to highlight the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, he has further concerns. A geographical detail quoted in modified form from Isaiah becomes a theological epiphany. The degraded land of Zebulun and Naphtali, (now the whole territory is called Galilee), has experienced a reversal. Pagan rebellious Galilee has experienced a true Messianic jolt. Not in Jerusalem or Judea, not even in the desert, no, the first flowering of the true genuine Christ, the Messiah, now fully grown happens in the outposts! The Baptism of Jesus Christ has been accomplished; his days in the desert in fasting and encountering temptations have readied him in his heart. He changes residence from Nazareth to Capernaum not as a real estate transaction but as a transaction of the deepest resonances of his Father’s will already directing his mission. The beautiful and fragile messiah of Bethlehem, the anxiety and obedience of Joseph about his espoused wife, Mary, the journey of the Magi and their gifts, Magi stalked by Herod, the horror of the Holy Innocents and the flight to Egypt, all these holy happenings have anticipated this new action: the people that walked in darkness have seen the light of Jesus the Christ. And the place of this happening is a marginal outpost of Israel! Jesus’ bold proclamation distills, in fact, his whole demeanor, his humble obedience and his love of his Father’s will. God is taking charge: the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Change your mind, turn towards God through my preaching and healing word! Believe the good news. The mysteries of the public life of Jesus are not (simply) past occurrences for they are enfolded by and into the direction of his life already signed by the Father, the pascha, death and resurrection. In this wondrous movement of Jesus the Nazarene, prophet and Teacher, Son of Abraham, Son of David, but most of all THE Son of God, St. Matthew has invited every reader to turn again and follow the light, enter the light as a response to the invitation, and change for God in Christ. Change for the better! Change for Life!

In our own cultural shadows today, shadows cast by the terrible reality of legal abortion on demand, how important the light of Christ is that calls for renewed conversion.

Just as startling as the outpost setting of the appearance of the Light in Galilee is the action of Jesus calling the first disciples and apostles. In those days rabbis and doctors of the law attracted hearers and those followers attached themselves to the star on their own volition. As recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel today, Jesus, the Christ, was different. He actively sought out the apostles and disciples. His invitation and call were primary as they will always be. Saint Matthew even goes so far as to presume that Jesus gave his first followers no immediate preparation before calling them where they were. The creative and life giving Word of God from the Word made Flesh Himself met them, called them, and changed them forever. They left all and followed him. (I sometimes wonder in humor what marketing agents, development directors or personnel boards would make of this amazing action of Christ.)

Sisters and Brothers, we have been changed by Christ. His light has poured out new life to all of us. His light and life have made us aware of the dignity of each human person and invited us to witness. I thank all of you for your presence here, my brother bishops, the priests from everywhere in this country, the deacons, permanent and transitional, the many women and men religious, the many adults who come as guides and chaperones, the staff of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the great staff of the Bishops' pro-Life Office with whom I collaborate as Chair of the Pro-Life Committee and whose work is so much a labor of love, the various pro-life groups throughout the country, the resources of EWTN Television network . I thank all of these groups and all of you here.

But now, like the wedding feast at Cana, I save the best wine of thanks till last. I want to thank all the young people here, the seminarians, postulants and novices, the children, youth in high schools, the university students and young adults. You have been, have become and remain the genuine leaders and pioneers of this March for Life and this Vigil Liturgy. To the astonishment of nature, of the chattering classes and of disinterested and jaded media, you have continuously come forward here and throughout the places where you live to be unflagging witnesses to the inestimable worth of each human person. The sad anniversary recalled each year on January 22 has become an invitation to you, one that calls for prayer and vigil, marching and testifying, and a joyous love for human life that is unable to be defeated. We your elders become exhausted just watching you! May you never cease to give your beautiful witness to the gift of human life.

Almost 16 years ago a marvelous word from Rome came to the attention of the world, an encyclical "The Gospel of Life." Pope John Paul II proclaimed the good news of the dignity of personal human life with boldness and candor in that encyclical. He minced no words when he wrote of a disturbing state of affairs that keeps expanding: new attacks on the dignity of the human being by way of scientific and technological progress. He wrote of broad sectors of public opinion justifying certain crimes against life in the name of individuals and the rights of individual freedom claiming not only exemption from punishment but even authorization by the state done in freedom and with assistance of

health care systems. He particularly mentioned the great multitude of weak and defenseless human beings, the unborn children, whose fundamental right to life has been trampled. His diagnosis endures as relevant as ever today. But we are blessed with the recent announcement in Rome that he will be beatified by Pope Benedict XVI on May 1<sup>st</sup>. His teaching and witness is now continued by his assistance with his prayers! That is a pro-life plus! It is a sign of light in our darkness.

Pope John Paul also called on us to be a luminous conscience for many whose conscience on the dignity of the human person is distorted and lives in shadows. I trust that in your witness tomorrow and meetings with government officials you are able to make clear the threats against the rights of conscience that are present today. The seemingly daily attempts to deny nurses and pharmacists their conscience rights are disquieting. A further violation takes place when taxpayers are forced to fund abortions. The blindness against the rights of the unborn seems to move to an inability to respect the rights of those of us who respect and fight for the rights of the unborn. Your voice, personal and collective, is important. Even in the arena of health care the presence of new funding for initiatives not under a measure like the Hyde Amendment opens a door for uses of those funds for abortion, especially funds that deal with reproductive services or care for women's health. The bishops of our country have been clear and united on these issues and their teaching is not just one voice among many.

In recent days new pro-life bills have been introduced in Congress. One, the Abortion Non-Discrimination Act, reaffirms a basic principle, that no health care entity should be forced by government to perform or participate in abortions. Another bill that would permanently codify the policy of the Hyde Amendment across the board is also important and should receive wide support. The federal government should not use taxpayers' money to promote and support elective abortions either at home or abroad. These matters deal with public policy and they are issues in the public square in which you can participate. Advocacy on behalf of human life is an important dimension of our pro-life cause.

There are other actions in which you can be a light for the human person, especially for the weak and defenseless. The admirable work on behalf of those with unplanned pregnancies by various pro-life groups and associations is a magnificent witness. There is also tremendous assistance being provided to many women and men in confusion and distress after an abortion through Project Rachel, a program that aims at healing broken hearts and bringing God's mercy and healing and truth to those same women and men. Come back to God who is love and mercy and check out the bus stop ads in D.C happening right now!

I speak especially to the hearts of the young here to be a pro-life witness in your families, among your friends, in your schools and in your parishes. We are always in need of that conversion, that turning around that the Kingdom of Heaven invites. There is always room for us to deepen our respect for the human person. Not only do we need to see each person in the light of the Gospel but we also need the jolt from Christ Jesus to see every human person as light!

During Ordinary Time this year, we are reading the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians as our second reading each Sunday. Saint Paul writes to a beloved but cantankerous early Christian community; his letter is a theological x-ray that diagnoses, exposes and advises that community from the inside out. He has barely greeted and given his beautiful and lengthy salutation to them when he launches into his probing from outside to the inside. What manifold gifts they have and what an appearance of vitality and public witness to God. Yet, as we hear in today's Second Reading, reports have circulated about some "skeletal" difficulties in this portion of the Body of Christ. St. Paul has done a probe and the x-ray reveals multiple broken bones, hidden breaks, amidst the glossy surface. The breaks are in unity and in facile assumptions about attachments, attachments even to important persons. But in Christ Jesus such attachments become cliques and breaks. Christ is not divided; He is one. All who are called and sanctified are one in Him to the praise of the Father. The many gifts lavished by the Spirit are for the good of the Body, not markers of a superiority complex. Later in the same letter, St. Paul will brilliantly display the truth of what in recent years I have heard frequently as a song among Youth Gatherings: "We are One Body, One Body in Christ, and we do not stand alone." Nor do we act out of rivalry or conceit! If there is a place where our unity must shine it must be in this realm of laboring joyfully for the culture of life.

The unity of the one Body in Christ is astonishing. I want to narrate a brief story of a poignant recent experience of mine. As do many other bishops I go frequently to prisons to celebrate the Rites of Initiation and the Sacrament of Confirmation. (My own archdiocese in Texas has the dubious distinction of having the most prisons of any diocese in the State.) This past Fall I went on a Saturday to celebrate at a prison where there were a number of Receptions into the Church and Confirmations; but there was also to be one full initiation of a catechumen—Baptism, Confirmation and First Eucharist. Let us call his name "Matthew!" A group of superb permanent deacons in my archdiocese are much involved in prison ministry and in this case had for a few years been working on RCIA and Faith Formation. Wonderfully, Matthew's chief catechist, and a good one, was also a prisoner. To come to faith and persevere in faith is a special gift of grace for prisoners. Prisons are tough. The standard of self-sufficiency and "being hard edged" are the dominant ways of behaving in prison; these behaviors are there for reasons of self-survival. That is why faith formation there is so miraculous. On this day, I celebrated in the non-denominational chapel and many prisoners, catholic and non catholic, were present. Matthew was strong and in a way almost stoic throughout. His answers to the Creedal questions were bold, even aggressive. His baptism was beautiful and the hand of his catechist sponsor upon him for Confirmation gave Matthew strength, but not necessarily a smile. Matthew was the first to receive Holy Communion and his "Amen" was clear and his face more serene. I continued distributing Communion and about a minute later I glanced to the left side. There was Matthew kneeling in the arms of his catechist and sobbing deeply. He had reached a point of intimacy, granted to him by the Lord through the first reception of Christ's Body and Blood that overwhelmed him and brought him to his knees in adoration and in communion with the one member of the Church he knew would understand. But just as marvelous was a further scene. As each prisoner came from communion, that man surrounded this new Catholic brother, and

eventually they all formed a most beautiful web and circle of support and encouragement. It could never have been programmed, a spontaneous work of the liturgy that truly brought them into a reality: We are one Body, one Body in Christ, and we do not stand alone. I have presided over many Rites of Initiation, all of them beautiful and all of them significant. Never has one been so poignant, so touching. What was also striking was the Reading that day from St. Paul: I preach and am a prisoner for the Gospel, but there is no chaining of the Word of God. Indeed! And there is no chaining of the effects of unity in those who are graced to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, pledge of eternal glory.

I pray for all here but especially the young to be of one mind and heart. In a few moments we will approach the altar table of the Lord and enact, or rather Christ will enact, the great paschal sacrifice of our redemption. In the Eucharistic Offering and Banquet we are made One! Let us beg the prayers of the chief human mystagogue of the Church, the Virgin Mary, that she teach and lead us to unity in Her Son. A mystagogue is a virtuoso in getting us to understand the depth of the communion we have with the Father in Christ through the celebration of the mysteries of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the chief divine mystagogue. The Virgin Mary is the chief creaturely mystagogue. Her prayers for the Church are tireless and serene; we need her for a deep understanding of the mystery...Remember "Ave Verum Corpus natum de Maria Virgine" "Hail true Body (of the Lord) born of the Virgin Mary." His true body and blood given to us is Word Made Flesh of the Virgin Mary; she leads us to Him and she helps us understand human life and the human person, because her Son was and is active in her in a way beyond our understanding.

Approach the Eucharist tonight with reverence and joy and grow together as one in communion with Benedict our Pope and Donald our Bishop and all God's holy People, including St. Matthew and Matthew our new Catholic in a prison in Texas. Let us all be a people of Life, because the light of Jesus' brilliance has mercifully not blinded us but illuminated us! Shine Zebulon and Naphtali! Shine Jerusalem and Rome! Shine New York, Washington, D.C. and Houston! Shine Los Angeles and Atlanta and Miami. Shine young people: your light has come!

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