



Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities

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Homily of Daniel Cardinal DiNardo, Archbishop of Galveston-Houston
Chairman, USCCB Committee on Pro-Life Activities
National Prayer Vigil for Life Opening Mass
January 21, 2010, 6:30 p.m.

Let us first this evening keep before our eyes and in our prayers the people of Haiti, the living and the deceased. This tragedy demands our fervent intercession to the Lord and our commitment to the assistance of this deeply wounded part of the body of Christ.

Sisters and brothers, we are gathered by Christ in this magnificent Marian Basilica to keep vigil as on every January 21st. Here, we pray and focus our expectations on tomorrow's March, an event that has brought us together for many years.

The young girl, St. Agnes, whose memorial we celebrate, is our inspiration at this Vigil Mass. At the age of 12 or 13, she was called by her bridegroom, Jesus Christ, to be a witness of faith, and of chastity. Some 70 or 80 years after her martyrdom in Rome, St. Ambrose of Milan wrote with astonishment about her life. He was in a state of wonder about her seemingly care-free attitude towards violent death, and he quotes her supposed words to her executioner, "Get it done!" Beyond the horror at the cruelty imposed on one so young, what is striking about Agnes; it's a Greek name, Agnes, means "the pure one." Later the Latin messed up and said her name means "lamb." But I'm here to tell you it means "the pure one." And what is so striking in the legends about her words and deeds at the time of her account is one reality which St. Ambrose picked up: joy! She is bathed in joy, not just in blood. The day of her martyrdom in the early church's wonderful liturgical logic, is her birthday! That logic continues in the beautiful opening prayer we just proclaimed this evening, 1,800, 1,700 years after her death.

This night as we honor her memory, even as we celebrate the Sacrifice of the Bridegroom and partake of the Feast of the Lamb Slain, I know myself also to be surrounded in a joyous environment. That's all of you, and most especially so many young people. What an acclamation of praise and what spirited joy.

I'm grateful tonight for the presence of our President of our Conference, Cardinal George, Cardinal Rigali, who is my predecessor as the chair of the Pro-Life Committee, the other cardinals, archbishops, bishops here present, especially Archbishop Wuerl, the ordinary of this place and for his hospitality. I do want to name one other Cardinal who is here tonight. His name is Cardinal Baum, who was one time the Archbishop here. He was an especially effective instrument in the Lord's hands as the head of the Congregation for Catholic Education for years in the city of Rome when I worked there in one of the other offices. Cardinal Baum, how wonderful it is to see that some of the work that you did in years past about religious education and formation has such a practical, practical outcome in the presence of so many young people here, for whom the word "pro-life" is not simply a concept. How good it is that you are all here. I am thankful for the presence of so many priests, both diocesan and religious, permanent and transitional deacons, women and men religious, seminarians and just scores of novices and postulants. God bless you all.

What joy to see also numbers of families here, so many veterans of the March for Life, so many elders and so many “youngers.” “Youngers,” as you vigil tonight (and there are elders assigned to them), please have mercy on them and allow them a few hours of sleep. Most especially as I already mentioned I am grateful for the young people's presence, a sure mark of infectious joy, the sign of life. I add a word of gratitude for those who organized these events. For the Shrine's staff, for the staff of the Pro-Life Office of the Bishops' Conference who worked so well to help me and the bishops, that we will speak wisely and well about the magnificent personal gift of human life both with and for the Church and in the public square. Our thanks also extended tonight to those watching on EWTN.

Sisters and brothers, St. Agnes was so small that the chains intended to bind her hands and wrists slid off. Unfortunately in our culture, we have grown into the chains that bind us, and hold us fast in a grip of deadly attitudes about human life, about the human person, especially in the moments of his or her beautiful but fragile beginnings, and in those vulnerable times of old age or illness. There are some in our culture and even in our country, even culturally elites who think that human civil institutions or some given human subject bestow the right to life. No, not any of us bestow the right to life. We can only recognize the right to life, uphold it, defend it, and cherish its beauty.

In his recent encyclical “Caritas in Veritate,” Pope Benedict XVI wrote “Openness to life is at the centre of human development” for individuals, for peoples and nations. “When a society moves towards the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for” our genuine human good (#28).

This is such a time for our country, a time to be renewed in motivation and energy in our openness to life. Walking tonight in procession to the altar, I figured there was enough motivation and energy for a thousand years, so I'm not worried about this particular congregation at all. There may be other congregations we have to worry about, but not this one.

It is a time for openness to life, especially in our health care reform, currently being debated in Congress. Health care reform must protect the life, dignity, consciences and health of all, and should not advance a pro-abortion agenda in our country. As you may be aware, the House, U.S. House of Representatives passed a reform bill that reaffirms the essential longstanding and widely supported policy against using federal funds for health plans covering elective abortions. The Senate, afterwards, rejected that policy and passed a bill that requires federal funds to help subsidize and promote health plans that cover elective abortions. The Senate bill is also less successful in making health care affordable for all who are poor or vulnerable, especially immigrants. Neither bill has sufficient conscience protections at this point, so we need to be responding.

Our response must be clear and articulate to Congress on the essential criteria for genuine health care reform. Abortion is not health care. Health care is about saving, preserving, not destroying lives. As the president of our own Conference has recently said, “Everyone should be cared for. No one should be deliberately killed.”

Thirty-seven years ago, the Supreme Court wrongly decreed that abortion was the law of the land. Now it seems that there is at least one part of Congress that wants to force us to pay for it. This would be the most radical expansion of abortion since Roe v. Wade, an attempt to use the power of government to mainstream abortion into our culture and our daily lives. We oppose this on a more fundamental, positive ground, as we labor to achieve genuine human solidarity.

Sisters and brothers, our efforts towards this, our efforts towards overturning Roe v. Wade, so many of our efforts to bring a culture of life, may seem to be beset by challenges much greater than our own resources. We may become distracted and fretful. We may end up disagreeing and being disagreeable, even with one another. We may lose our joy. We may end up losing our “caritas,” our love.

Proclaimed tonight for all to hear is the opening section of the body of St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. That letter opens with a standard greeting and a remembrance of particular persons. By the way that's important in your New Testament letters, they all mention particular persons. St. Paul then thanks God for the gifts given to that sometimes rambunctious community. In the list of gifts He strikingly withholds any mention of love or joy. Realities that he mentions in almost every other thanksgiving in his letters. Sisters and brothers, what's up? What's happening, in 1 Corinthians?

Let's look at a moment of what he says of the body of the opening of the letter. What does he say? That not many of you were powerful or noble born, not many of you by human standards have human wisdom. Is this passage consolation or a corrective? Maybe some of them thought they were pretty good, maybe they thought they were well-born, maybe they thought they had it all together. Maybe some members of the Corinthian community thought they were so something special that they maybe didn't need to boast in the Lord. Perhaps the text is genuine consolation on the other hand, for the difficult daily lives that the Corinthian community had to lead. Whatever the case, the final message is still clear.

Do you notice the end of tonight's First Reading? It is only due to God that they and we are in Christ Jesus. It's a new way, a living separated from sin, the control of sin and thus, in integrity before God, righteousness, sanctification, redemption, yet even here, St. Paul doesn't mention agape, love, or joy. Like a good pitcher, St. Paul is keeping his reserves in strength, sisters and brothers. You have to wait twelve more chapters. Then suddenly out of nowhere, St. Paul hurls a 95-mile-per-hour fastball right into the strike zone of Corinthian home plate. What does he say? What does he say?

“If I speak with the tongues of angels and of men, but do not have love, what am I? A noisy gong, a clanging symbol. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not put on airs. Love rejoices. It rejoices in the truth.” There it is, sisters and brothers, chapter 13, not our love, God's love. That's what produces a St. Agnes. That's what produces witnesses. That's what makes the pro-life cause come alive. Ultimately it is God's love. To be suffused with that love changes everything. A love poured out through Christ Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, a love that issues forth in Christian joy. The joy remains even in supreme difficulties, even in the most vociferous disagreements. The love remains even when our resources seem paltry.

Remember another time when the resources were paltry for the Twelve, recorded in all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They have nothing to eat. Jesus says “You give them something to eat.” What do the apostles do, like we all? They whine. “We don't have much.” “It's just hard, Jesus.” What does Jesus say to them at that point? “Just give me what you have.” That's what he's looking for. That's where you get a sense of joy and love. That's why St. Paul had to wait twelve chapters in 1 Corinthians. They weren't intelligent enough in 1 Corinthians to get it. He had to correct them for twelve chapters and then they could get it. Sometimes the Lord Jesus has to do that with us.

There is a Christmas hymn I heard this year saying "Christ's appearance is love and joy, and these shall unbind chains of evil from mankind . . . never since the world began, such a light, such dark did span." Christ's agape, His love has already spanned the darkness. He invites us to give our meager resources, He transforms them and then the chains begin to fall off our metaphorical wrists even as they physically fell off Agnes in her joy for the Bridegroom. Only Christ is our boast, only in Him is love saturated in joy, the reality that distinguishes and marks us all as His own. In Him, all dark valleys, all hostilities, all belittling comments about our pro-life commitments are as nothing. Nothing do we want but Christ Jesus and His love. This is the pro-life commitment's foundation and boast.

The treasure trove of parables in chapter 13 of St. Matthew's Gospel is breathtaking. Tonight we hear the last two parables. They're short and they are engaging, whether we speak of an anonymous person walking in a field or a sharp-eyed merchant knowing the beauty of a true gem, so it is with the Kingdom of God. God's kingdom is supernally valuable and precious. Once the kingdom is discovered, the person surprised by joy effortlessly sells everything else for the knowledge and life of that reality. The kingdom of God so prominent in St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke is found to be at the end of those three Gospels, not "a what," but "a who." When you reach the end of the Gospel, it is the person of Jesus Christ.

Isn't that the attraction and the brilliance of our Catholic faith received in loving joy? That the basis, the source, the ground, the rock bottom, call it what you want, it's personal with a capital "p," and therefore, we respond as persons to the capital "p," personal, who has called us in to life and the charity that is all joy.

The gift of the person of Jesus Christ received in faith and celebrated with joy in our everyday life and our commitment to life needs nourishment. This evening at this Eucharist, we receive our strength from God's table banquet of sacrificial love prepared for us. Sisters and brothers, 150 years before St. Agnes joyfully offered her life, there was an earlier martyr on his way to martyrdom. He said that he was God's wheat. He prayed to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts so that he could become pure bread. The man's name: Ignatius of Antioch. His line, the first cry of Eucharistic ecstasy in the history of the church, and his cry remains to this day. We partake of the Body and Blood of a crucified risen Lord, so that we, nurtured in that way, ground, that we indeed will be the pro-life bread for others. We are so filled with Eucharistic charity and joy, when we partake of this table tonight, that we will become fitting instruments for the Kingdom.

Sisters and brothers, tomorrow there will be time in the public square for principled statements, for action items, for sober analysis, for meetings with those who are in power. This is all very important. But for us tonight, as grains of wheat, let us simply boast in the Lord Jesus in this liturgical public square so filled. He comes as the lamb slain to give Himself to the faithful who rejoice in him, surrounded by a crowd of witnesses, like St. Agnes, Peter and Paul, Ignatius and Basil, Macrina and Claire of Assisi, Aquinas and Augustine, Francis Xavier Cabrini and Elizabeth Anne Seton, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta and the great Pope John Paul II, let us look with confidence to Jesus, our Bridegroom, let us gaze only on Jesus. Let us receive him so that in charity and joy we will be instruments for life.

Let us not be like the Corinthians of Chapter 1 that we just heard. Briefly lay them aside, especially you young people. Run to chapter 13. You young people are our hope and our ground. I beg you to accept like St. Agnes, and most especially like the great Virgin Mary, the One who reminded us this past Sunday to do whatever Jesus tells us. I beg you, I ask you to accept the great inspired fast pitch of St. Paul, accept it into your home plate, and tomorrow, please, hit a home run out of the park, relying only on Jesus, your Bridegroom. God bless you.