

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY [B]

Genesis 2:18-24; Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16

Annually our bishops set aside a day for us all to recall God's most precious gift of human life. Church leaders in America have designated October 4 as **Respect Life Sunday**. And so today we pause and ponder how well we, as a nation and individually, are living up to the obligation to protect the rights of those who, due to age, dependency, poverty and other circumstances, are at risk of their very lives.

Our founding national document unabashedly proclaims,

“that *all men are created equal*, that they [all men] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these [for all men] are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Declaration of Independence).

Of course, our history is marked by fierce struggles to mean what we say.

Not long after our independence was won, Pope Gregory XVI condemned the slave trade in America, chastising all those in our then still young nation who sought to,

“reduce to slavery Indians, Blacks or other such people...as if they were not humans but rather mere animals” (*In Supremo*, 1839).

Sadly some Catholics, in particular some bishops and priests in America – and most especially Catholic bishops and priests in the South – tried to argue that the Church's teaching did not apply to *American* slavery practices because somehow it was...well...you know...*different*.

Caught in the toxic winds of what *then* was politically correct, some bishops and priests twisted the crystal clear doctrinal teaching of the Church into something that rightly today makes us sick.

This is exactly the point behind St. Paul's exhortation to the Christians in Rome when the apostle boldly says:

“do not conform yourselves to this age but *be transformed by the renewal of your mind*, that you may discern what is the will of God.”

Understandably the confusion of some bishops and priests caused confusion among the laity. And that confusion grew, leading to a terrible disaster one generation later. In 1857, a self-proclaimed “devout Catholic” named Roger Taney, who writing as the fifth Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, wrote the opinion in the infamous case known as “Dred Scott” which upheld the vile institution of slavery in our country.

My friends, history makes clear that when bishops and priests fail to teach clearly or purposefully disregard doctrinal teachings of the Church the gates of hell gain an upper hand. Let us speak honestly and candidly:

- slavery was and is *evil*;
- the ghastly Civil War and death of over 500,000 Americans was *evil*;
- the more than 100 years of abhorrent racial discrimination that persisted in our country *after* “Dred Scott” was *evil*.

In contrast, when the Office of Peter is heard, respected and obeyed – no matter how weighty the teaching feels, no matter how difficult the teaching appears - the gates of hell cannot prevail, so says the Lord Jesus.

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Nearly 100 years after the “Dred Scott” case a Catholic bishop from New Orleans humbly and courageously accepted the teaching of the Church. Even in the face of ugly personal attacks and threats of violence, this bishop refused to conform himself to the wickedly segregated world of the deep South in which he lived.

In 1956 Bishop Francis Rummel *demande*d desegregation in his archdiocesan Catholic schools. And when large groups of Catholic laity and some priests – mind you, some very influential laity and priests – sought to stop him, after ample warnings, he excommunicated them.

Imagine for just a moment if all the Catholic bishops and priests in America of the mid-1800’s had been as clear and courageous as Archbishop Rummel in following the Church’s clear teaching. Even if the “Dred Scott” case had the same outcome, more than likely it would have been without the help of Roger Taney.

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I wish I could report the abolition of the sinister spirit marking an earlier era in our nation’s history, but sadly I cannot. For sure, the grace of God has placed the sinful and repugnant institution of slavery behind us. However, some of my brother priests and some laity – including nary a few prominent and self-proclaimed “devout Catholics” - accept the abomination of abortion.

- How can this be when the Church since her beginning has made clear that abortion is always and everywhere a grave evil?
- How can this be when all recent popes have reiterated in no uncertain terms that abortion always and everywhere is not in accordance with God’s ways?

In his papal encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II does not mince words about the issue at hand:

“by the authority of Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors...I declare...that direct abortion...always constitutes a moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.”

How can we not wonder what might just happen in our nation if all the Catholic bishops and priests imitated Archbishop Rummel and spoke clearly and courageous about the evils of abortion?

Listen, again, to the absolutely unambiguous language of Pope John Paul II that is expressed later in his same teaching:

“Abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is...a grave and clear obligation to oppose them.”

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Ten months before he became Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger wrote directly to the bishops of our nation. In his letter, Cardinal Ratzinger reiterated the clear and consistent teaching of the Church. He wrote:

“There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion...”

We all will do well to take to heart lessons learned from the past so not to open further the gates of hell.

Let us passionately pray for ourselves, for one another and for our leaders in the Church and public life.

Resist temptations to be conformed to this age.

Let us begin here at home. May our parish more and more allow the grace of Christ and His Church to *transform us by the renewal of our minds, always discerning the will of God.*