



HOMILY FOR PRO-LIFE PILGRIMAGE TO WALSINGHAM
Sunday 27th September 2020

I wish to begin by asking a question. What is the most important gift that the Church has to offer to the world today? What is the gift that has been given to the Church by Christ which he asked us to take out into the world and offer to all people?

The answer is, of course, the Gospel; the proclamation of the good news that, in Jesus Christ, life has triumphed over death; it is the Gospel of Life. The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the proclamation of the Gospel of Life. In John's Gospel, we hear the Lord Jesus Christ proclaim: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (*Jn 10:10*).

This proclamation of the Gospel of Life was already foreshadowed in the Decalogue given by God in the Mosaic covenant with the Jewish people. All of the Ten Commandments are oriented to the promotion and flourishing of human life, and to establishing peace and harmony in human society. The link between observing God's law and the flourishing of human life is reflected in this Sunday's first scripture reading from Ezekiel. The Prophet is revealing that sin is a violation of our human nature. Something is sinful because it denies love and respect for God and for the dignity, the rights and integrity of others.

The Creator's plan for humankind was, and is, that we should enjoy the fullness of life. Death results when we choose to turn away from that plan. The result of not accepting God's law of life leads to the devaluation of the human person and the disappearance of compassion and true charity; it is the path which leads to the death of all that makes life worth living.

This is why it is so important to keep respect for life in all its forms. Pope St John Paul II used the chilling phrase "a culture of death" which "seeks to impose itself on our desire to live, and live to the full" to describe the relativistic and utilitarian culture that has been overtaking our modern civilization; a culture which diminishes human sensitivity and often renders it powerless to acknowledge the inherent and equal dignity that human life possesses regardless of its stage or condition.

Such a culture only will be changed, and the great joy of human life which God gives us only will be enjoyed, when we are faithful to what God asks of us and, without fear, proclaim and live the Gospel of Life.

The period of this recent and present terrible pandemic has shown how conflicted we are as a society about the value of human life. Good messages have been promoted by governments about our duty as citizens to safeguard health and life, particularly to protect those who are vulnerable. Yet, at the same time, and with horrendous irony, the insidious threat to the life of the most vulnerable, the unborn child, has been increased further by enabling easier access to pills which allow abortion to take place in a women's home.

There is rightly an ever-increasing awareness of how women can be abused in relationships and exploited in society and yet, at the same time, fail to see that abortion is the ultimate exploitation of women.

There is a recognition that the sick and elderly need to be protected, and yet, at the same time, there remains in the background a vociferous group voice which calls for the legal right to euthanise people's lives when sickness and age threaten their quality of life.

In the years when the planet's natural environment was being ravaged and endangered but was not so well recognised or known about, few bothered or cared. Now that the effects of our abuse of nature and the ecosystem are being increasingly felt and seen, more and more people are calling for this to stop. Life that is visible and deemed valuable to our society, it seems, gains rights and protections; but when life is unseen and is unable to defend its own innate value, it is given no rights and regarded as expendable.

Let us pray that our society and our world will begin to see that the greatest threat to the future of human life on our planet is our blindness to the value and rights of the human life which begins hidden in the womb and which should be treasured and loved as that same life also approaches the tomb.

There is reason to hope though! It appears to me that the current generation of young people are more pro-life than the generation of their parents. The hearts of more and more young people are being stirred to listen to and appreciate Christ's Gospel of Life and Love. The young men and women of today are only too aware of the knife edge on which all life is balanced due to the abuse of our planet and its resources. This makes them more sensitive and conscious to the dangers which today threaten human life. It also opens their eyes to the lies which have been promoted by the culture of death that grows so unashamedly in countries which are gripped by consumerism and utilitarianism.

Our Christian faith teaches us that life is more powerful than the forces of death; as followers of Jesus Christ then, we are all called to be a “People of Life” (*Evangelium Vitae*) and proclaim the Gospel of Life. It is not enough, however, for us just to speak out and protest against abortion, euthanasia and other actions which threaten the dignity and value of human life, important as this may be. Our call only has force and credibility when it is accompanied by compassion and practical support for those who feel that such actions are the only answer to the pressures they feel or the problems they are experiencing.

All Christian action must begin with, and be accompanied by, prayer. This is why our spiritual pilgrimage today and the celebration of this Mass is so important. We offer this Mass with a common prayer and intention; that the hearts of all men and women will be converted and desire to uphold and cherish human life in all its stages, from the womb to the tomb.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, intercede for us and through her prayers may the Church ever proclaim the Gospel of Life.

Our Lady of Walsingham... pray for us!

**✠ Marcus Stock
Bishop of Leeds**