

## Homily for Pro- Life Pilgrimage to Walsingham

During the summer I spent some time on a pastoral visit to Nigeria. I was visiting the Diocese of Orlu in the Eastern part, in Igbo-land, because we have three priests from that part ministering in the Diocese of Plymouth. The local Bishop invited me to come and ordain their new cohort of priests for this year. So, I had the great privilege of ordaining 14 new priests. Whilst there I was often struck by the vibrancy of the Church in Africa. At every mass the people sing an anthem to the Gospel:

“Praise to the Gospel for it brought us education,  
praise to the gospel for it showed us that girls could be educated,  
praise to the Gospel for it taught us to accept twins,  
praise to the Gospel for it taught us to recognise the dignity of every human being, and so on....”

That line about twins struck me, but of course, before Christianity in that part of Africa, twins were put to death. It was the arrival of the Gospel that brought life.

Those who preached the Gospel had a profound impact because they stayed with the people, they learnt their languages and their culture, they taught and witnessed to the humanising nature of the Gospel. The Gospel makes us better human beings. The Gospel, our Faith, helps us to stick up for the weak and the vulnerable. Of course, the weakest in our society is the unborn child.

We know that when the Abortion Act was introduced just over 50 years ago, it was meant to be a cautious, limited measure. Instead, it has led to the abortion of well over six million children in England and Wales. It was meant to have strict safeguards, so that the law could not be abused. Instead we have seen abortions for all sorts of reasons and heard cases of doctors pre-signing stacks of abortion forms without ever seeing the women they were supposedly treating. The numbers of repeat abortions and abortions on the grounds of disability has skyrocketed, with late-term abortions for babies with disabilities increasing by 270 per cent since 1995. We have also seen headlines indicating that some doctors want abortion to be more readily available beyond 24 weeks and well into late pregnancy. Most recently is a new law on abortion which is about to be imposed on Northern Ireland. This new piece of legislation was introduced by one minister as an amendment to another law being passed. It certainly lacks constitutional rigour and, if implemented - without any consultation with local people it has to be said - it will be the most liberal application of abortion in our countries.

In the face of such a relentless pursuit of death dealing, we can sometimes feel overwhelmed. This is where the parable of today's Gospel and the example of the mustard seed should give us courage. Our faith may seem small but the Lord does not abandon us. He can bring an abundant fruitfulness out of the smallest beginnings. In St Paul's letter to Timothy, proclaimed today, we hear:

“I am reminding you to fan into a flame the gift that God gave you.....God’s gift was not a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power, and love.....So you are never to be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord.....bear the hardships for the sake of the Good News, relying on the power of God. (2 Timothy)

So, please do not give up your efforts on behalf of the most vulnerable in our society. It has often been remarked that the attitude to abortion in our countries, is like that of people to slavery in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1850, lots of good and thoughtful people defended the institution of slavery. Now, only insane people would. In 2019, lots of decent and thoughtful people defend the pro-choice position. One can only hope that through our efforts, working with other faiths and people of good will, we will hasten the day when only insane people would.

We must stand firm and continue to be a witness to the truth of the human person, recognising that a civilised society does not pit mother against child and does not discriminate against its weakest members.

At the same time as government gets more and more de-sensitised to the actual reality of abortion, a YouGov poll in recent years, found that more than half of women want the 24-week abortion limit reduced. Polling does not tell the whole story, but it does show the areas in which the culture of death has less of a chokehold on the general public and the cracks in which pressure should be applied. Most people are uneasy about the carelessness of Britain’s abortion culture. They realize that the actual practice of abortion is a long way from the reassuring words with which pro-choice campaigners try to persuade us.

The Gospel of Life is an imperative for Christ’s disciples. Christ, through His Church, is urging us to be defenders of life in the midst of the culture of death. Several years ago St John Paul II commented on the seeming contradiction at the heart of modern societies.

“How can we reconcile these repeated declarations of human rights with the continual increase and widespread justification of attacks on human life? How can we reconcile these declarations with the refusal to accept those who are weak and needy, or elderly, or those who have just been conceived?”

The Church’s pro-life message is a great service to all society. The culture of death flows out of the extreme individualism of our age. The Church’s antidote is community and solidarity. Pope Francis stresses the need for a culture of encounter. In his extraordinary Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes: “Among the vulnerable for whom the Church wishes to care with particular love and concern are unborn children, the most defenseless and innocent among us.” Pope Francis goes on to say: “Frequently, attempts are made to ridicule the Church’s efforts to defend the unborn. Attempts are made to present the Church’s teaching as

ideological, obscurantist and conservative. Yet this defense of unborn life is closely linked to the defense of each and every other human right.”

Life is sacred. Life is a mystery. Life must be protected, nurtured, respected. The Gospel of Life is the centre-piece of the Church’s social teaching. When the value of life is compromised or diminished, all life is at risk. When we give the State the power to determine which human beings are worthy of living and which should be eliminated, we are beginning down a ‘slippery slope’ which makes possible every kind of injustice and violation of human dignity.

Several years ago a woman asked to see me because, she said, she wanted to organise a memorial service for her dead child. Ten years before she had an abortion, but what she had done always haunted her. In prayer, she said, she realised she needed to name her child, and to ask the child's forgiveness. The service was in order to remember the short life of her lost child, to ask forgiveness and to remember that her child now had the fullness of life with God. Her child was with Jesus and Mary. Knowing this gave her great comfort.

This is what we remember today. Each of these children is before God. Praying for their parents and praying for us. In this holy place, we recall the holy house of Nazareth, where Mary showed she was open to the Gospel of Life, as she gave a home for The Word of God to become flesh and to be born into our world.

We believe that those lost children of the culture of death have found a place, a home, with her. Today, we can say that these innocent ones have an intercessory role for their parents, praying before the throne of God, praying that their parents might draw close to them, remember their loved and lost, and so draw close to Jesus and Mary, too.

We are all here because we want to save the thousands of innocent children who are being put to death by the very people whose mission should be to heal and protect life. The truth is that we can save those babies only by saving the mothers. When they experience God’s loving mercy, then they will become capable of showing mercy to their children. We have to be about saving mothers, too, that they in turn can save their children.

I want to thank all of you for all that you do to animate in our country a concern for life in all its vulnerability.

May we all continue to prophetically proclaim life. May Mary, the Holy woman of Nazareth, intercede for us and all her children, that all may find a home of refuge, of life, and of peace.

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