

*Homily – Mass for Life on 13 May 2020*

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In this gospel passage, Jesus uses an image that we can easily understand. A branch has no life by itself. It is only by its attachment to the vine, to the root and main stem that a branch has any life at all. This is a meaningful image for all of us who find Jesus Christ to be the source of our life. Very simply stated: we find our life in Him, and in Him alone. We have no life apart from Him. There is no plan B. The only way that we give life to others, is by including them in the same union with Jesus that we ourselves enjoy. Jesus is the vine; we are the branches. He is the master; we are His disciples. He is the way, and we walk in His way.

In 1983, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago gave a major address at Georgetown University in Washington DC; the title of his talk was “The Seamless Garment of Life”. Cardinal Bernadin used as his image the incident from the passion of Christ found in John’s gospel, chapter 19. Pieces of Jesus’ clothing were being torn along their seams and shared among four soldiers, but his undergarment was seamless. Being made in this fashion, it had to be given up as one piece, so the soldiers cast lots to see which of them would take it home as a trophy of the day’s sordid labour. Using this image, the Cardinal spoke of a consistent ethic of life as a “seamless garment”. In other words, we cannot separate and divide the many issues that surround the sacredness of human life. Abortion, capital punishment, militarism, euthanasia, social injustice, economic injustice: all these many and varied issues demand a consistent vision of life principles that we understand to be sacred. We cannot seek to save some lives and not others. All life is related, and has a common root in the fundamental belief that life itself is sacred. Life comes from God, and when human life reaches its end in this world, which by nature it must, God calls that life back to himself. While for the sake of argument we may focus on a single issue at a time, we realize equally that there are many related issues that call on us to apply the same principles and values.

The way we use words is very important. Our definitions of terms are very important. How we speak of a matter reveals how we understand it. The words we use, and the way we speak about life, is significant. Let me use my mother as an example of this. I remember as a youngster – I was perhaps seven or eight years old -- asking my mother the “birds and the bees question”. “Mommy, where did I come from?” There was no sign of a flinch or a hesitation on her part. And I’ll never forget her answer: she said that I came from God, that God entrusted me to her and my father, and that one day God would hold them accountable for how they took care of me and my brothers and sister. This made a deep impression on me: it spoke not only of the sanctity of my life – that I came from God – but also about who I really was. I was not a possession of my parents, but a sacred trust. Those were the words that she used.

The way we speak about life in the womb is equally significant. I cringe to hear some refer to life in the womb as a “piece of tissue”, with seemingly no more consequence than a wart or a cyst. To remove it, they imply, has no greater moral consequence than applying Compound W. The freedom to do with my own body as I please is itself a freedom worthy of debate. But what of the body and life of another, the child in the womb? Left to itself, the child developing in the womb has all the potential necessary to become another independent person. Other pieces of tissue in our body do not.

Our language, then – our words – reveal that one struggle (but not the only one) in the pro-life debate is one of understanding. Do we, as a society, understand what life in the womb is? Do we see it for what it truly is? I have noticed with great interest the affect that seeing an ultra-sound of a child in the womb has on the parents, especially if they’re considering whether or not to abort their child. They see with their own eyes the child moving and growing, much as he or she will after birth.

Several years ago, in a human sexuality course that I took as part of a Master’s program in West Hartford, CT, we were to read materials printed by Planned Parenthood. In the glossary section of one pamphlet, which purported to define terms, the word

“abortion” was described as “the termination of a pregnancy before it can become a baby”. The termination of a pregnancy before it can become a baby. Hmmm. I would love to have known at what point in the pregnancy that is, but the pamphlet failed to address that critical point. Should we deduce, then, that before the child is “born” it’s not a baby, and then at the point of leaving the womb, it becomes a human child? But it’s the same life, the minute before and the minute after, is it not? Science has already established that the child in utero has feelings and movement, is affected by what it’s fed by its mother, the sounds and the moods in the mother’s environment. I marvel, and you might also, at recent advances in medical technology. We are told that for certain conditions, the child can receive corrective surgery, while in the womb. It’s amazing what we will do when we want a child; it’s horrifying what we will do when we do not want that child. Our laws give a child status outside the womb, so you can be tried and convicted for infanticide. But Canadian law affords no status for the child in the womb. Such a child can be dismissed without consideration. Many of you may recall the Molly Matters case from December of 2014. Molly was a child in the womb (she had already been given a name by her parents), whose mother was killed. Prosecutors charged and convicted the killer with taking one life, while Molly’s father insists that Molly also was killed. It’s as if Molly doesn’t matter. Her father begs to differ. A private member’s bill that sought to consider in law a child’s death in the womb was defeated in the House. Shame on Canada.

Let me conclude with a few lines from *Amoris Laetitia*, the apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis following the synod on the family. In section 170, the Holy Father states “*children are a gift. Each one is unique and irreplaceable. We love our children because they are children, not because they are beautiful, or look or think as we do, or embody our dreams. We love them because they are children. A child is a child. The love of parents is the means by which God our Father shows his own love. He awaits the birth of each child, accepts that child unconditionally, and welcomes him or her freely.*”

