

GOD'S SMILE

CATHOLIC SENTINEL
OCTOBER 1, 2009
ARCHBISHOP JOHN G. VLADNY

Back in 2007 Pope Benedict was delivering a homily on the feast of the Baptism of our Lord. On that occasion he stated, "Every child... brings us God's smile and invites us to recognize that life is his gift, a gift to be welcomed with love and preserved with care always and at every moment." Ever since 1972 we American bishops have been working hard to educate our Catholic people on the "life issues" through our Respect Life Program. The theme for this year's program, "Every Child Brings Us God's Smile," is taken from those words of the Holy Father. I pray that this year's program also brings a smile to your face.



The birth of a child is a truly memorable event in family life. My own first vivid memory goes back to the birth of my younger sister. I still remember the day mom and dad brought her home from the hospital. As curious as I was about her then, I certainly never realized how much of an impact she would make on my life. I also remember the excitement surrounding the birth of my first great-niece, the daughter of my nephew, Matt, and his wife, Kelly. As I became a great uncle for the first time, I thought of my own dear mother's death more than a year earlier which deprived her of the blessing of meeting her first great-grandchild.

Our annual Respect Life Program typically reflects the diversity of pro-life issues which we Catholics come to understand in the light of our faith. Once again I take this opportunity to remind all of you that this is not merely a religious matter. Matters of life and death pertain to justice and human rights. Our campaign is not the only one at work in today's world. Unfortunately today's world is tragically assaulted by a cultural campaign against human dignity. In so many ways we are told that what we have is more important than who we are. We have become willing to dispose of people, beginning with human embryos, so we can use their stem cells to search for cures for diseases. Then when our health begins to diminish, assisted suicide becomes a so-called "medical treatment" to terminate life.

Yes, every child does bring us God's smile. Unfortunately, too many of us tend to ignore the evidence which confronts us so dramatically with the genuine humanity of every child in the womb. Instead of welcoming this gift of new life, as has been the tradition in the human family for centuries, we now live in a world where the widespread practice of contraception and the legalization of abortion have fostered a widespread disdain for unborn children.

In our own country nearly one million little girls and boys are killed by abortion every single year. Scientists are creating and destroying little human beings for embryonic stem-cell research. Many people acknowledge the dignity and value of human life after birth, but they deny the same when it comes to human life before birth. Ironically, even though there are scientists who disdain our pro-life efforts, it is science itself which is making so obvious the humanity and personhood of children in the womb.

Between 24 to 30 hours after conception, a baby's unique DNA is in place, the entire genetic blueprint and instructions for development from a single-cell person to an adult. Furthermore, within 21 days the three primary sections of the brain can be identified. Then the embryo's heart begins to beat. That little

heart will beat nearly 54 million times before the child is born. Within six weeks an embryo's brainwaves have been recorded. Within eight weeks the digestive system is working and kidneys are producing urine. At this point the little fetus, a Latin word which means "offspring," is sensitive to touch. Within nine weeks this unborn child begins to suck its thumb. Then by another week this new little child of God may even smile for the first time.

With all this information so readily available, it is absolutely amazing that so many remain indifferent to the killing of our little sisters and brothers. It goes on in maternity clinics, laboratories and abortion facilities, throughout all nine months of pregnancy. As Christians our reason is strengthened by our faith in the gospel of life. We need to preach that gospel more effectively and we need to work harder for change in the attitudes and laws of our neighbors and help them to discover, celebrate and cherish the miracle that is every single human being, from conception to natural death.

Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia is presently the chairman of our American bishops' Pro-Life Committee. In this year's program he asks the question, "Where do we go from here?" He reminds us that it is good to remember first of all why we are here, why we are involved in this struggle.

Empowered by our Catholic faith, we have come to treasure the dignity of each human person, a tenet which is not based only on religious teaching. We are particularly concerned about those who are most vulnerable among us, including the unborn, the marginalized and the weak. This intrinsic God-given human dignity is the basis for all inalienable human rights.

A culture of life is impossible when we legalize the direct taking of a human life when it is most innocent and defenseless. Too many people today are committed to a conditional and selective vision of human rights. They draw lines between the important and unimportant members of society. This has happened before when we struggled with issues involving slavery, racism and anti-Semitism. The Supreme Court's 1973 Roe v. Wade decision is what has made abortion the battleground over our tradition of human rights and has polarized our society. Roe has become the inspiration and precedent for other efforts to use law as a weapon against other innocent human lives. That is why we Catholics always give priority to defending innocent unborn children from direct attack.

Where do we go from here? First of all, we have to stop fighting among ourselves. Not everyone will approach this important issue in the very same way. But we must stand together in making sure that extreme legislation which would treat ready access to abortion as an important public goal is something unconscionable and disrespectful both for unborn children and pregnant women. Furthermore, we must continue to insist that only morally sound stem cell research deserves public support. We should likewise continue to support initiatives which will allow states to provide prenatal care for unborn children and their mothers, regardless of the woman's immigrant status. The "Pregnant Women Support Act" also merits our support since it will provide a wide range of assistance whereby women can bring their children to live birth and receive a helping hand as they parent the child or make an adoption plan.

Whatever pastoral efforts the church is able to muster to complement the task of government deserve our encouragement and support. Pro-life pregnancy centers, maternity homes, parish-based support networks for pregnant women and children, plus prayer and assistance efforts outside of abortion facilities merit our support and participation. This is the way we will be able to

months of pregnancy. As Christians our reason is strengthened by our faith in the gospel of life. We need to preach that gospel more effectively and we need to work harder for change in the attitudes and laws of our neighbors and help them to discover, celebrate and cherish the miracle that is every single human being, from conception to natural death.

Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia is presently the chairman of our American bishops' Pro-Life Committee. In this year's program he asks the question, "Where do we go from here?" He reminds us that it is good to remember first of all why we are here, why we are involved in this struggle.

Empowered by our Catholic faith, we have come to treasure the dignity of each human person, a tenet which is not based only on religious teaching. We are particularly concerned about those who are most vulnerable among us, including the unborn, the marginalized and the weak. This intrinsic God-given human dignity is the basis for all inalienable human rights.

A culture of life is impossible when we legalize the direct taking of a human life when it is most innocent and defenseless. Too many people today are committed to a conditional and selective vision of human rights. They draw lines between the important and unimportant members of society. This has happened before when we struggled with issues involving slavery, racism and anti-Semitism. The Supreme Court's 1973 Roe v. Wade decision is what has made abortion the battleground over our tradition of human rights and has polarized our society. Roe has become the inspiration and precedent for other efforts to use law as a weapon against other innocent human lives. That is why we Catholics always give priority to defending innocent unborn children from direct attack.

Where do we go from here? First of all, we have to stop fighting among ourselves. Not everyone will approach this important issue in the very same way. But we must stand together in making sure that extreme legislation which would treat ready access to abortion as an important public goal is something unconscionable and disrespectful both for unborn children and pregnant women. Furthermore, we must continue to insist that only morally sound stem cell research deserves public support. We should likewise continue to support initiatives which will allow states to provide prenatal care for unborn children and their mothers, regardless of the woman's immigrant status. The "Pregnant Women Support Act" also merits our support since it will provide a wide range of assistance whereby women can bring their children to live birth and receive a helping hand as they parent the child or make an adoption plan.

Whatever pastoral efforts the church is able to muster to complement the task of government deserve our encouragement and support. Pro-life pregnancy centers, maternity homes, parish-based support networks for pregnant women and children, plus prayer and assistance efforts outside of abortion facilities merit our support and participation. This is the way we will be able to change the culture, one person at a time.

Yes, every child brings us God's smile. Through children our belief that life is God's gift, a gift to be welcomed with love and preserved with care, is strengthened and eventually shared more widely. Throughout this month of October, we commit ourselves to working together to change attitudes and laws which are harmful to human life. Just like little children, this effort on our part will likewise bring us God's smile.