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Light and Shadows

Our Nation 25 Years After Roe v. Wade

A Statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops

November 12, 1997

http://www.usccb.org/prolife/tdocs/lighshad.htm

The twentieth century will not end without one more anniversary to remind us that this era of extraordinary progress is also darkened by the shadows of unimaginable tragedy. January 22, 1998 marks the 25th anniversary of our Supreme Court's rulings in Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton. Because of those decisions, more than 35 million children have been killed, and reasons used to justify abortion are now extended to excuse infanticide. Today babies are being killed in the very process of delivery by a procedure called partial-birth abortion. Many mothers have lost their lives in abortion clinics, and countless others survive with physical, emotional or spiritual scars. Fathers and grandparents also suffer grief for a child they never met.

What was once seen as act of desperation--the killing of one's own child--is now fiercely defended as a good and promoted as a right. Even worse, a deadly blindness has come over our land, preventing many persons of good will from recognizing the right of innocent human lives to respect, acceptance and help. Claims of privacy and an ethic of unlimited individualism have been used to undermine government's responsibility to protect life. Legalized violence has spread through our society like a cancer. The powerless of all ages are threatened.

We look upon this panorama with shame, and also with immense sympathy for all its victims. At the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI said the "spirituality of the Good Samaritan" would guide the Church's encounter with the world of today. So often an "outsider" in a world blinded to the transcendent value of human life, the Church—like the outsider Samaritan—wishes to come to the aid of the victims of this eclipse of the spirit. It is in this spirit that we make our appeal on this tragic anniversary.

To all our fellow citizens we say: Abortion is an assault on human dignity, an act of violence against both mother and child and the whole human family. Legal protection for unborn human life must be restored in our nation. As the Second Vatican Council also reminded us "Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful self-destruction...all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator" (*Gaudium et spes*, 27).

We recall what is best in our common national heritage. Human beings, simply because they are human must be recognized as persons with fundamental human rights. Our nation fought a terrible civil war because the practice of slavery was finally recognized to be inconsistent with our national ethos enunciated in the Declaration of Independence: All are endowed by their Creator with the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Slavery is repugnant because it treats human beings as property to be disposed of at the will of another.

It was morally absurd then to say: "I am personally opposed to owning slaves and would never own any myself, but I can't force my moral views on others. It is not the government's task to legislate morality. It is a personal choice." It is just as morally repugnant to say the same about abortion today. Our nation stands in judgment now, as it did more than a century ago: are we to be a nation that honors its commitments to the right to life, or not? And if not, then just what does our nation stand for?

No one has spoken more eloquently about the sacred value of human life than has our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II. It is he who reminds us that all who are "sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize in the natural law written in the heart (cf. Rom.2:14-15) the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and can affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree. Upon the recognition of this right, every human community and the political community itself are founded" (Evangelium Vitae, 2).

We see in our culture an ongoing conflict between good and evil, a conflict between life and death. As we strive to assure peace and justice, too often it is forgotten that the common good can only be served when the right to life, the right on which all other inalienable rights of the individual rest and from which they develop, is acknowledged and defended (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, 101).

In spite of the relentless propaganda in favor of abortion, most Americans have not become fully insensitive to the killing of children so weak that they cannot cry for help. Indeed, the 1973 abortion decisions set in motion the broadest grassroots movement this nation has ever seen. Our debt to those who serve the pro-life cause is immeasurable. They are the witnesses and bearers of our nation's most noble aspirations. In a special way, through the national debate on partial-birth abortion, they have focused the attention of Americans on the plight of the child.

Perhaps the most uplifting sign of hope is the witness of those teenagers and young adults who have come of age with legal abortion, but who are not seduced by its empty promises. They participate in the annual March for Life, fill our National Prayer Vigil for Life, organize supporters in their schools and campuses, run baby showers, and write to us asking what they can do to end abortion.

We especially honor the work of more than 3,000 pregnancy centers, as well as those hospitals, agencies and medical centers in radical solidarity with women in need of counseling, pre- and post-natal care, housing, material support and adoption services. And for those women who have had abortions and seek help to deal with its aftermath, Project Rachel and other post abortion healing programs are available throughout the country. We pledge continuing support of these programs. Our condemnation of abortion is accompanied by an unswerving commitment to provide alternative solutions and compassionate care in respect for the dignity of all wounded by its violence. Such is the "spirituality of the Good Samaritan."

To our fellow Catholics, we ask you to do even more for life. Reach out to women who are pregnant and in need of help, to families struggling with financial or emotional difficulties. Stand by those who wish to choose life with the witness of solidarity, hope, and service. Catholic families should be living symbols of our conviction that life is always, always a gift from God. Teach your children to respect human life from conception to natural death. Pray

as a family for an end to this evil that destroys the weakest of the weak, the poorest of the poor.

May God strengthen us in our effort to bring about a culture of life and solidarity for the true good of the whole of human society (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, 101).

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