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A Matter of the Heart

*A Statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
on the
Thirtieth Anniversary of Roe v. Wade*

November 12, 2002

Spanish Version

Each year on January 22nd – the anniversary of the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* – people pause to recognize the date in some way. Some speak out, some march, some reach out, some educate, some just reflect. Many pray.

Each year, for thirty years, pro-life Americans have shown that their commitment will not waver, their efforts will not cease. Our firm conviction as Catholics that "life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception" (Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 51) has been a part of the Church's constant witness since the Apostolic age and has inspired millions to defend human life at every stage. Against the backdrop of a society in which many institutions of influence endorse legal abortion, the pro-life movement has grown year by year, in numbers and in vitality.

As we reflect on the thirtieth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, we express gratitude to those who have worked tirelessly for human life and against this ruling from the very beginning and continue to do so. They have lobbied, counseled and prayed. Many have suffered for their pro-life convictions. At the same time, what is perhaps most striking on this anniversary is how many young people have taken up the cause for life, and how impassioned is their support.¹ This generation was born into a society already altered by *Roe v. Wade* and brings a special enthusiasm to the movement. This is the generation that knows it was born at a time and in a place where there was no legal assurance of continued survival at the earliest stages of life, in the womb.

In the United States abortion is legal throughout pregnancy. Yet abortion is a violation of human rights incomparable in magnitude and an atrocity for the whole human family. While *Roe v. Wade* appeared to create a right with some limitations, *Doe v. Bolton*, which was decided the same day, erased those limitations by creating a "health" exception so broad that it effectively allows abortion for any reason at any time.² The lack of any limits to legal abortion was never more clear than in the case of *Stenberg v. Carhart* in 2000, when the Supreme Court ruled that even the horrific partial-birth abortion procedure could not be restricted. Most Americans are surprised and shocked to learn about the lack of any meaningful legal limitations for abortion. Most know things have gone too far.³ Together with those from many other faith communities, we work to bring about a society that recognizes abortion for what it truly is.

Many young people today comprehend the legacy of *Roe*. They look at thirty years of legal

abortion and weep over the 40 million lives destroyed. They are aware that one in every four pregnancies ends in abortion,⁴ and they grieve for the world they will soon inherit. They mourn the fact that each year approximately 1.3 million abortions take place, and that thousands of them are done in the sixth month of pregnancy or later, when the child would likely survive if born.⁵

Many who came of age at the time of *Roe* were hopeful about what it was said to promise: an end to poverty and abuse. Who would not hope for these things? But legal abortion promised what it could not give. It promised women a freedom to participate more fully in society, but it took their children and broke their hearts. Countless women have suffered physically, emotionally, and spiritually because of abortion; many have even lost their lives. Many men, too, mourn the loss of their children, while others carry the heavy burden of having persuaded their daughter, wife, or girlfriend to have an abortion.

Thirty years after *Roe v. Wade*, some may think that the pro-life movement's efforts have amounted to nothing because *Roe v. Wade* still stands.

But that misses the heart of the matter:

- Today fewer abortions are being done each year, and fewer doctors are willing to be involved in abortion.⁶
- More Americans identify themselves as pro-life, while the numbers of those saying they are "pro-choice" have declined significantly.⁷
- Ultrasound and other medical advances have made possible a greater appreciation of the humanity of the unborn child.
- In these three decades thousands of pro-life groups, individual parishes, Catholic social service agencies and pregnancy resource centers have provided practical assistance and support to thousands of women facing difficult pregnancies.
- Most state legislatures have enacted measures to restrict or regulate the practice of abortion and reduce its incidence.

Above all, the pro-life movement is brimming with the vibrancy of youth.

Why so much youthful energy in the cause of life? Because the hearts of the young are open to life and are filled with love of life. The minds of the young are open to the truth about abortion. They dream of a world without *Roe v. Wade*, and they live as if the dream were true. Their hearts are full of compassion for unborn children and for young women who are confused and suffering, and they look for ways to serve them. Many in the last generation fought for legal abortion; but more today know that women deserve better, and so fight for true freedom for women. Young people know that the future is in their hands, and their hearts yearn to bring a message of hope and healing to a culture in great need of hearing it.

Among those who defend abortion, there are many who do so despite the pain abortion has brought into their lives, or even sometimes because of it. Many contemplating abortion believe they have no other choice. We listen to them, we understand their sense of isolation and despair. We must strive to know their hearts.

We renew our offer of assistance to anyone considering abortion: If you are overwhelmed by the decisions you face, if you cannot afford medical care, if you are homeless or feel helpless, whatever your needs, we will help you. The Church and her ministries, inspired by the word and example of Jesus Christ, will help you with compassion and without condemnation.

Roe v. Wade has left a trail of broken hearts. Through Project Rachel and other ministries, we will continue to help the broken-hearted. Those who resort to abortion out of a sense of desperation often find the cruel reality of abortion too difficult to bear. But it is too difficult only in a world without God and therefore without hope. We must reach these hearts and give them hope. These are the converted hearts that will at last bring an end to abortion.

Roe v. Wade cannot stand as the law of this great nation, a nation founded on the self-evident truth that all people are created with an inalienable right to life. We are committed, no matter how long it may take, no matter the sacrifices required, to bringing about a reversal of this tragic Supreme Court decision. We will speak out on behalf of the sanctity of each and every human life wherever it is threatened, from conception to natural death, and we urge all people of good will to do likewise. For, as Pope John Paul II reminds us, "it is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop" (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 101). *Roe v. Wade* must be reversed.

¹ Those under thirty support greater protection for life in larger numbers than almost any other age group. In recent Gallup polls, major restrictions on abortion were supported by 55% of adults under 30 years old – a higher figure than for any age group except those aged 65 and over. See L. Saad, "Public Opinion About Abortion – An In-Depth Review," at www.gallup.com.

² *Roe* said that states must allow post-viability abortions when they are needed to preserve the mother's health. *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973) at 163-4. *Doe* then defined "health" to include "all factors – physical, emotional, psychological, familial, and the woman's age – relevant to the well being of the patient." *Doe v. Bolton*, 410 U.S. 179 (1973) at 192.

³ In a July 2000 CBS/New York Times poll, 40% of Americans supported stricter limits on abortion and another 22% said it should not be permitted at all. See L. Saad, note 1 *supra*.

⁴ Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Facts in Brief: Induced Abortion*, www.agi-usa.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html.

⁵ *Id.*, *The Limitations of U.S. Statistics on Abortion*, www.guttmacher.org/pubs/ib14.html; University of Wisconsin Medical School, "Chances for Survival," www.pediatrics.wisc.edu/childrenshosp/parents_of_preemies/survival.html.

⁶ See note 4 *supra*.

⁷ Gallup says that "prior to 1996, Americans were more likely to call themselves pro-choice than they are today"; in Gallup's August 2001 poll, "pro-life" respondents matched those calling themselves "pro-choice" (46% vs. 46%). See L. Saad, note 1 *supra*.

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