

THE RIGHT TO LIFE OF THE UNBORN CHILD

Inaugural Meeting of the Pro-Life Group

of St. Mirin's Cathedral Parish, Paisley

7th May 2006

Bishop Philip Tartaglia offers

Readings (based on the original Italian text) from

Pope Benedict XVI's recent book:

“Benedict's Europe in the Crisis of Cultures” (2005)

I Why we should not give up defending unborn life

To a large slice of contemporary public opinion which reflects the received wisdom of conformist thinking, it may well seem excessive, untimely and even irritating that the question of respect for newly conceived and as yet unborn life continues to be presented by some as a significant and even decisive question. After the lacerating debates which have taken place in most western nations over the last 40 years and which have accompanied the legalisation of abortion, should we not just accept that the issue has been resolved and avoid re-opening old ideological battles? Why not just accept that this battle has been lost and simply dedicate our energies to initiatives that are greeted with greater social consensus?

Superficially, we could be convinced that the legalisation of abortion has changed little in our private lives and in the lives of our societies. At the end of the day, everything seems to go on as before. Everyone can proceed according to their conscience: people who do not want to avail themselves of abortion are not forced to do so; anyone who does resort to abortion with the approval of law maybe would have done so anyway (or so it is said). In any case, everything happens in the silence of a sanitised medical facility, which at least guarantees conditions of a certain safety for the procedure: it is as if the foetus who will never see the light of day never existed any way. Who will know any different? Why continue to make this drama public? Is it not better to leave it buried in the silence of the consciences of those who are directly involved?

In the Book of Genesis, there is a text which sheds much light on our dilemma. It concerns the blessing that the Lord God gives to Noah and to his children after the flood. In this blessing, laws are decreed that alone can guarantee the continuation of life for the human race in a now sinful world. The creation, which had come completely perfect from the hands of God, had been caught up in the disorder and the destruction consequent upon the sin of our first parents. Violence and killings without limit had spread throughout the world, making impossible any kind of peaceful society ordered according to justice. Now, after the cleansing of the flood, God put aside his anger and embraced the world again in his mercy, providing it, in view of its future redemption, with the norms essential for survival : “I will demand an account of every man’s life from his fellow men. ‘He who sheds man’s blood, shall have his blood shed by man, for in the image of God man was made’.” (Gen 9, 5-6)

With these words, God claims the life of human beings as his particular possession: it remains under his direct and immediate protection. It is sacred. The spilled blood of human beings cries out to him because man is made in his image and likeness. Authority within society is established by Him precisely with the purpose of guaranteeing the respect of this fundamental right, which was endangered by the evil heart of man.

The recognition of the sacredness of human life and of its inviolability without exceptions is therefore not a small question, which can be considered relative, in respect of the pluralism of opinions in modern society. The text from Genesis directs our thought towards a twofold conclusion:

1. There are no “small or insignificant murders”: respect for every human life is an essential condition for the possibility of a life in common worthy of the name;
2. When we lose respect for human life as sacred, we inevitably end up losing our very own identity.

II The Right of Power and the Power of Right

In today’s pluralistic societies, where different religious, cultural and ideological approaches exist side by side, it becomes increasingly more difficult to guarantee the existence of commonly agreed ethical values that can create an adequate foundation for democracy itself. On the other hand it is a fairly widespread conviction that it is not possible to do without a minimum of moral values which are commonly recognised and sanctioned. But when it is a matter of attempting to determine these values through social consensus, their consistency inevitably crumbles away. One single value seems certain and beyond discussion to the very point that it becomes the filter for the selection of others. This super-value is none other than the right of individual liberty to express itself without any impositions, at least as long as it does not impinge upon the rights of others.

And so, even the right to abortion is invoked as a constitutive part of the right to freedom for women, for men and for society. Women have the right to continue the exercise of their profession, to safeguard their reputation, to maintain a certain regime of life. Men have the right to decide the tone and style of their lives, to pursue their career, to enjoy the benefits of their work. Societies for their part believe they have the right to control the numerical level of the population so as to guarantee citizens a broad-based wellbeing through a balanced stewardship of resources, of employment and so on. All these rights are real and well-founded. Moreover no one denies that the concrete situations of life in which the decision to abort is taken are very often dramatic. But the fact is that the claim to the exercise of these real rights (through abortion) is made to the detriment of the life of an innocent human being, whose rights have not even been considered. People thus become blind to the right to life of the other person, to the rights of the smaller and weaker party, to the rights of the one who has no voice, namely the unborn human creature. This means that the rights of some are given precedence over the fundamental right to life of the other. With the legalisation of abortion, the conclusion is inescapable that power is the real basis of rights.

In this way, by stealth more than anything, but nonetheless effectively and really, the very foundations of an authentic democracy based on the order of justice are undermined. The constitutions of western democracies, the fruit of a complex process of cultural development over centuries, are based on the idea of an order of justice, on the awareness of the fundamental equality of everyone in a common humanity. They also express the consciousness that it is profoundly iniquitous for the real but secondary interests of some to take precedence over the fundamental rights of others.

The *Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man*, signed by nearly all the States of the world in 1948 after the horrors of the second world war, expresses fully, even in its title, the awareness that human rights (of which the most fundamental one is the very right to life) belong to man by nature. This Universal Declaration presupposes that the State recognises these rights, but does not confer them; and that they belong to all human beings as human beings, and not for other secondary characteristics which others may determine later according to their own judgment. So a State which arrogates to itself the prerogative to define who is or who is not the subject of rights, and recognises as a consequence the power of some to violate the fundamental right to life of others, thereby contradicts the democratic ideal, even as it continues to appeal to it, and undermines the very foundations on which it is built. In accepting that the rights of the weakest can be violated, it accepts also that the right of power prevails over the power of rights.

III The Gaze of Love is decisive

But beyond the juridical question, at a more fundamental level, there lies the moral question. This moral question passes through the heart of each one of us, in that hidden interiority where freedom decides for good or evil. I was saying just before that, in the decision to abort, there is necessarily a moment in which a person allows himself to become blind before the right to life of the little one who has been just conceived. The moral drama, the decision for good or evil, begins from that look, from that gaze, or from the choice to look or rather not to look on the face of the other. Why is it that today, the killing of children is almost unanimously condemned, while people remain un-moved by abortion? Maybe only because in abortion we do not see the face of the one who will be condemned never to be born. Many psychologists have shown that in women who are determined to abort, the spontaneous dreams and fantasies of a mummy-in-waiting are suppressed: a mummy who will give a name to her child, who imagines her child's face and appearance, who enjoys dreams and reveries of her child's future.....And it is precisely these repressed fantasies and dreams which often return as pangs of unresolved guilt to torment a woman's conscience.

The countenance of the other appeals powerfully to my freedom, so that I may accept the other and take care of him/her, so that I may affirm the other's worth in itself and not just in the measure in which it happens to coincide with my interest. Moral truth, as truth of the unique and totally singular worth of the person made in the image of God is a truth which has a full claim on my freedom and rightly makes demands of my liberty. To decide to look at the other person full in the face is to decide to be converted, to allow myself to be engaged by the other, to come out of myself and make space for the other. Compelling evidence for the other's moral worth depends in large part on my free and secret decision to look on the other, and so to be moved to change.

In the preface to the well-known book by the French biologist Jacques Testart, *'L'oeuf transparent'*, the philosopher, Michel Serres (apparently not a believer), facing the question of the respect owed to the human embryo, put this question to himself: "Who is man?" He demonstrated that there no single satisfactory answer to this question in philosophy and culture. At the same time, he notes that, even if we do not have a precise theoretical definition of man, nonetheless in our common experience of life in the concrete situation, we know fine well who man is. We know fine well when we find ourselves before a person who is suffering, who is the victim of power, who is defenceless and condemned to death: Behold the man! Yes, this non-believer uses the phrase uttered by Pilate, who had all power over Jesus who was brought before him stripped of his garments, scourged, crowned with thorns, and condemned to death: Who is man? Man is indeed the most weak and defenceless, the one who has neither power nor voice defend himself, the one whom we can pass by in life pretending not to see; the one to whom we can close our heart and say that he never existed.

Almost spontaneously, there comes to mind another incident in the gospel where a similar need for definition surfaces: “Who is my neighbour?” We know that to recognise who our neighbour is, it is necessary to allow ourselves to be a neighbour, that is to stop, get down off our horse, approach the one who is in need, and take care of him. “In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me” (Mt 25, 40).

I want to draw your attention now to a passage from a great Italian-German thinker, Romano Guardini, who wrote: “Man is not untouchable for the fact that he lives...the life of man is inviolable because he is a person.” To be a person is not a given of psychological nature, but is existential. In a fundamental way it does not depend on age, nor on psychological condition, nor on the gifts of nature with which the subject is endowed...being a person may remain under the threshold of consciousness, as when asleep, but it is still present and it must be taken into account. Being a person may not yet be developed, as in children, but from the beginning it demands respect. It is possible that being a person may not emerge in activity, as when the physical – psychical presuppositions are lacking, as happens in people who are mentally ill. And lastly being a person can be hidden, as in the embryo; but it is there from the beginning and has its rights. It is this being-a-person which gives to men and women their human dignity. It distinguishes them from things and makes them subjects. A thing is treated as a thing when it is possessed, when it is used, and at the end it is destroyed, or, in the case of human beings, killed. *The law against killing human beings expresses in its most acute form the command not to treat human beings as if they were things.*

And it is clear that the look/gaze which I freely decide to direct towards the other becomes the measure of my own dignity. Just as I can decide to reduce the other to a thing, to be used and then destroyed, so I need to accept the consequences of my way of regarding the other, consequences which rebound on me. “The measure you give out is the measure you will receive.” The gaze with which I look on the other decides the level of my humanity. I can treat him simply as a thing, forgetful of his and my dignity, of his and my being image and likeness of God. The other is the guardian of my dignity. That is why morality which begins from our regard for the other is the guardian of the truth and of the dignity of man: man requires this (morality) to be himself and not to lose his identity in the world of things.

There is another, decisive step to take to complete our reflection, a step which takes us back to the passage from Genesis from which we started. How is it possible for man to achieve this gaze/look which is capable of capturing and respecting the dignity of the other person and at the same time of guaranteeing his own? The drama of our time consists precisely in the inability to gaze/look at each other in this way. This inability means that another person’s look/gaze becomes a threat from which we defend ourselves. The fact is that morality is always embedded in a broader religious context, which constitutes the horizon towards which it moves forward. Outside this context it becomes rigid and formalised, it weakens and dies. The ethical recognition of the sacredness of life, and the commitment to respect it, need faith in creation as their horizon: just as a child can confidently open himself to love if he knows he is loved, and can develop and grow if he knows he is accompanied by the gaze of love

of his parents, in the same way we too are able to look on others in respect for their dignity as persons if we have the experience of God's look of love on us, which tells us how precious is our person. "And God said: Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselvesAnd so it was. God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good."

Christianity is that memory of the look of love of the Lord on man, which protects his full truth and which safeguards the ultimate guarantee of his dignity. The mystery of Christmas reminds us that in Christ who is born, every human being is definitively blessed and welcomed by the mercy of God. Christians know this, and they stand always under this look of love; they receive with this look of love a message which is essential for the life and future of man. For that very reason, with humility and pride Christians can continue to declare and defend the sacredness of unborn human life as a joyful announcement of their faith, without which the very survival of humanity is threatened. In this duty to proclaim the dignity of man and give voice to the obligation to respect human life, Christians will probably be derided and hated, but the world cannot live without them.

I would like to conclude with a wonderful passage from the ancient *Letter to Diognetus*, (written 150-200AD) which describes the essential and non-negotiable mission of Christians in the world:

"Christians in fact are not different from other people by reason of place or language or custom...Whether they live in Greek or barbarian cities, as is dictated by each one's fate, and conforming to the customs of the land as regards dress or food or lifestyle, they give example of their own extraordinary way life, which, by all accounts, contains something of the unbelievable. They inhabit their own nations, but like a foreign people; they perform all their duties as citizens yet put up with everything as if they were strangers. Every foreign land is their homeland and every homeland is strange territory. They marry like everyone else and they have children, but they do not expose their newly born. They share their tables with each other, but not their beds. They live in the flesh but not according to the flesh. They live on earth but they are citizens of heaven. They obey established laws, but with the quality of their lives, they go beyond laws. They love everyone but by everyone they are persecuted. To put it briefly, Christians are in the world like the soul in the body. The soul loves the body and its parts, but the body hates the soul: Christians too love those who hate them. The soul is enclosed in the body, but it sustains the body: Christians too are held in the world as in a prison, but they sustain the world. **So high is the place that God has assigned them; it is not permitted for them to abandon it.**"
