

Easter 4: Thursday
Students' Pro-Life Mass

St. Patrick's, Victoria

11 May 2017

Dear brother priests, young people and friends in Christ:

Introduction

Thank you for coming to Victoria to be witnesses to the culture of life here in our beautiful – if rainy – Province, especially those for whom this is a first-time experience. It is a great blessing for you – and certainly for me and everyone else who shares your convictions – to see your courage in action: that your Confirmation has made a difference in your life, that this gift of the Holy Spirit given to you in the Sacrament is bearing such fruit! Bravo to all of you! You truly give us a great reason for hope that the prolife cause is going forward with intelligence, imagination and enthusiasm.

Now first to a word about the Gospel, for it sets just the right note for the kind of attitude proliferators should have. What this attitude should be comes to us from Jesus himself. And so it is to him that we must look. From his actions, as described in today's Gospel, we who are followers, disciples and servants who are not greater than their Master, we can learn just how to make a lasting contribution to the sacred cause of fostering the dignity of human life in British Columbia.

Gospel: Washing of Feet

The Jesus we meet in today's Gospel, or rather the Jesus who

comes to meet us, is the One who has just knelt down and washed the feet of his closest followers. Then, as now, this is an unpleasant, even humiliating, task. In ancient Palestine, washing a guest's feet was the responsibility of the lowest of all the servants. Yet the One who is our "Lord and Teacher" (Jn 13:14) went down on his hands and knees to wash his disciples' dirty feet.

Why? Why did he do this? To show us that he was "gentle and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29)? This, for sure. It is yet one more dramatic indication of the depth of God's own humility by which he stooped down from heaven in order to draw close to us, his creatures. This gesture is, we might say, a true "visual" of the great mystery of the Incarnation, of the Son of God who, in his mercy, took our sins upon himself.

But he also did this for another reason. And he tells us why in plain terms: "For I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (Jn 13:15). If we want to follow Jesus, he shows how we are to imitate him in our own life: by serving, truly serving, our brothers and sisters who are poor, sick, suffering, vulnerable and marginalized. We are to take care of others, especially those most in need of our attention.

And today, who is more in need of our attention that the unborn child in the womb or the dying person who is suffering? As you know,

many think they are solving the situation of an unexpected or unwanted pregnancy or of a suffering dying person by eliminating what they imagine to be the cause of their “problem.” But think seriously. Is causing death, is killing really a solution?

I want to propose to you another way. That of Jesus at the Last Supper in the Upper Room. Here he shows us what service really is when he washes his disciples’ feet. Washing another’s feet signifies welcoming, accepting, loving another. It is no longer a humiliation, but the high road of Christian service.

We are called, you are called, to be servants, servants of life! We cannot just stand on the sidelines as observers of our world. We are called to become involved. The Lord got involved with us and he wants us to do likewise. Pro-life activists get involved by word and deed in the great life issues of our day. They are willing to embrace human life from conception to its natural end, “touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.”¹

Respect for human life, especially to those in greatest difficulty, that is, to the unborn, and those near death, profoundly engages your mission both as young Catholics and as citizens of our democratic country. That’s why we are participating in today’s March for Life. It is a sign of the desire to take part publicly and respectfully in open

¹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.

discussion which focuses on human life issues.

Tips for Young Catholics who Are Pro-life

Now I wish to offer you just a few tips on how, as servants of life like Jesus, you can foster a real culture of life.

1. Watch the Language Used

First of all, I urge you to be informed about the intrinsic worth of human life: why we value it as a gift of God our Creator and why we should protect all that is “wonderfully made.” It is now indisputable that a distinct human life comes into being comes into existence at conception. Science is on our side, and so we need never fear its findings.

This also means being very aware of the manipulation in vocabulary that surrounds life issues. For example, abortion is often referred to as the “termination” of a “fetus,” language which dehumanizes the unborn child. Or think of the now popular term “quality of life.” It has been hijacked to mean primarily economic “well-being,” associated with independence, beauty and enjoyment. Government sponsored and paid for suicide and euthanasia are now euphemized as “medical assistance in dying.” Deliberate killing of another person is called “end of life care.”

So, be astute and informed about what people are talking about.

2. Remember: It's Not Just Your Opinion

A second trap to avoid falling into as a servant of life is that of feeling you are “imposing your religious beliefs” on others. And, they say, who are you to do this? But let me remind you that when we enter into dialogue in the political and social spheres, we do so with arguments from reason and from the common wisdom that has guided humanity for thousands of years. “You shall not kill” is a commandment which puts into words what the conscience of people has held for millennia. It is on the hard-drive of humanity. We are not imposing our religious beliefs but giving voice to values that are the common patrimony of all men and women, wherever they live and whoever they are. God has given to all people these values, and we have an obligation to try to see that they are honoured in society at large. They tell us the right thing to do.

Think, for example, about the oath that physicians still take after more than 2,000 years “to do no harm.” Until a very few years ago all health-care workers understood that this meant they could not take the lives of their patients. And the law backed them up. Now some have concluded that no “harm” is done when a patient is euthanized or given the means to take his or her own life.

So, be convinced that your positions are not based on your religious beliefs, though certainly our faith reinforces what human

reason already tells us.

3. Accompany Those Confronting Difficulties

Third, let it never be said of us – as we are often falsely accused – that proliferators only preach respect for life but leave those in tough situations alone. If there is one thing a servant does, and must do, is that of “accompanying” those in distress. Our words are not of condemnation but of mercy. And our actions must show the compassion of Jesus. This is not “giving in” to an anti-life mentality but a manifestation of what it means to wash the feet of a suffering person.

For example, if a child comes into this world in unwanted circumstances, the parents and other members of the family – and the extended family of the parish and other individuals – must do everything possible to accept that child as a gift from God and assume the responsibility of accepting him or her with openness and affection.

Likewise, those who are tempted to end their own life need us not to lecture them but to accompany them. They need our presence, our hands to hold and our words to comfort. We must be there by the sick-bed to assure them that they are not alone, that their life, even as it ebbs away, still has meaning and beauty. And we must work to see to it that palliative care is more accessible and affordable for every British Columbian.

4. Be Courageous, Imaginative and Edgy

My last “tip” is to remind you that you have the Holy Spirit working with you. You are not alone! And so don’t be afraid to be imaginative and creative in the different ways you can foster a prolife attitude among your friends or in your school community. Be courageous in swimming against the tide.

We are counting on you to be the servants of life who will work zealously so that the womb will be always be a sanctuary of life and the death-bed a place where authentic compassion is offered.

Our Prayer Today

In this Mass let us pray that, strengthened by the Bread of Life, you will always remain firmly committed to upholding the reverence for life in our province and nation. And may the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Life, make you courageous servants of life!

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver