



**March for Life Homily – Cardinal Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto
May 12, 2016, Notre Dame Basilica, Ottawa**

The Path of Holiness, the Path of Wisdom

We gather in Ottawa each year to proclaim the sanctity of life from the first moment of conception until natural death. Human life in this world is not ours to control or to master; it is a gift of God. We are entrusted with it, and called to nurture that gift on our brief journey through this earthly world on our way home to the house of the heavenly Father.

The focal point of our gathering has traditionally been the threat to life in its earliest stages, through abortion, and that must always be our concern. But especially in these days we have witnessed the growing threat to life at the other end of the earthly journey, through the misguided decision of the Supreme Court, and the preparation of legislation to implement that decision throughout our land. The scourge of euthanasia and assisted suicide is upon us, and we need only look to the countries of western Europe that have gone before us down this dark path to see what is in store.

So this year, keeping always before us the evil of abortion, we must concentrate in a particular manner upon the evil of euthanasia.

To an even greater degree than with abortion, we are facing a misguided societal consensus, based upon the sands of misunderstanding and driven by a distorted vision of the dignity of the human person.

In this, as in other areas such as the meaning of marriage, we are being swept along by currents that seem irresistible, but which are driving all of us onto the rocks. What to do?

I think that we can gain some help from the insights of a most faithful Canadian Catholic layman, Marshall McLuhan. A favourite image of his was taken from the story of Edgar Allan Poe, “The Descent into the Maelstrom”, in which the author describes a small boat caught in the great whirlpool that opens up in the Atlantic from time to time off the coast of Norway, and sweeps to destruction at the bottom of the sea anyone unfortunate to be caught in it. One sailor on the boat, instead of panicking and clinging to the mast, had the presence of mind to observe the dynamics of the whirlpool, and noticing that smaller objects seemed to be moving upward, grabbed on to a barrel and was swept up to safety. The point is that we need to use the God given treasure of insight, so that we may act wisely in the face of seemingly irresistible forces.

So, in reflecting on the threats to life that are sweeping over our country, and recently most especially euthanasia, we need to think clearly, and to act effectively. God expects no less of us.



***The readings of today's Mass guide us: in the psalm and the Gospel we are reminded that the foundation of all that we do as disciples of Christ in a world gone mad must be sanctity: we are called to abide in God, as God is in us, especially through our Baptism and Confirmation, and most intensely through our participation in the Eucharist. It is right and proper that our advocacy before parliament begins in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. But the first reading gives us another complementary insight: we see Paul brought before the hostile Sanhedrin, and he has the presence of mind to observe the divisions within it, and to make effective use of them. He not only prays; he uses his ability to think, and so should we.

Holiness and wisdom are not opposed; they are more like concave and convex. As in the Bible there are some inspired books devoted to prophecy, which assume faith in almighty God and which explicitly call the faithful to that surrender to God's will which is the path to holiness, so also there are equally inspired books devoted to wisdom, to the use of the mind to discover the will of God in the world around us, in nature and also in our relations with the people we daily encounter.

Above all we need to be holy, and to trust in the providence of almighty God. Psalm 15, the psalm of today's Mass, speaks of that trust: "Preserve me Lord, I take refuge in you." Whatever the shifting currents of public opinion, or the apparent triumph of evil, we are not discouraged, for we take refuge in the Lord who preserves us. Thus disciples before us dealt with the evils of their day, and in our own time our brothers and sisters in Christ who are facing murderous persecution all over the world inspire us with their trust in the Lord. The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church. How can we in our country be less trusting than these witnesses to Christ. As they are willing to die for Christ, so must we be willing to live for Christ, giving witness by the integrity of our faith.

We need to grow in holiness, so that we may live in our hearts and not just proclaim with our lips the words of today's Gospel, as Jesus prays to His heavenly Father: "I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them."

The more our country embraces the culture of death, the more deeply must we grow in holiness, and trust in divine providence. Here are some practical implications:

- 1) We must focus on the Holy Eucharist, and come before our Eucharistic Lord seeking strength and wisdom, and interceding for our country. As the great Catholic writer, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote to his son, who was facing confusion and discouragement, "I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament. There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves on earth." As it is most fitting that this March for Life begins with the celebration of the Eucharist, so too all our efforts must be rooted in the Eucharist, in the celebration of the Mass, and in the vigil of prayer before our Eucharistic Lord.



- 2) All of us need to be attentive to how easily it is for us to displace God from the centre of our lives through the dominance of our egos, even in service of a godly cause. In the Gospel we are reminded that God comes to abide in us, and too often God may find the space in our hearts occupied by our sins and by our worldly preoccupations. “Let strife among us be unknown; let all contention cease. Be Christ’s the glory that we seek; be ours his holy peace.” So we need regularly to humbly get to confession.
- 3) And we need to pray daily for those who promote abortion and euthanasia. Pray for them. And pray for all of the good people, deceived by false language and the lure of a phantom compassion, who are led astray and who unthinkingly approve of evil, seeing evil as good.

Holiness is always the foundation. But we also must be attentive to holy wisdom, to the use of reason which is also a gift of God. In this we can look to Paul in the first reading today, and in the other passages in the Acts of the Apostles in which he uses his reason to reach out to the pagans so as to bring Christ to them, and in his letters, in which he uses the gift of language to persuade, to challenge, and to inspire.***

Jesus entrusts us with the mission of making Him present in our world, which rejects his Good News as much as it rejected Him, and he sends the Holy Spirit upon us to give us the wisdom and strength we need to fulfil our mission. Like the servants entrusted with the talents in the Gospel parable, we are expected to use well and fruitfully the natural abilities we have received. It is no praise of God to spurn them. So the exercise of our minds to understand the challenges we face, and to find ways to address them effectively, is also a vital aspect of our Christian mission, as is the discipline of our wills.

Holiness comes first, but wisdom must follow. That has some practical implications of that for us as we defend the right to life from conception to natural death.

First, we can learn something from the political astuteness of Saint Paul in today’s first reading. He could read the situation in which he found himself, and he understood those who opposed and supported him, both in the Jewish community and in the Roman government. There is a lot to be said for such political competence.

Second, we need to communicate more effectively, using not only the gift of language, but also any other way of helping people to see the truth, and to embrace it in their actions. We tend to issue statements, full of truth, which few pay attention to, while the champions of the culture of death tell bewitching stories that touch the heart and convince the mind that bad is good. Rhetoric itself, which is simply the art of effective communication, is neither good nor bad. We need to learn from Our Lord, who when he did indeed make speeches, as in the Sermon on the Mount, used powerful concrete images, while much of the time he communicated his teachings most effectively through stories that touched the heart, illuminated the mind, and moved the will. We can learn from the classical tradition of communication articulated by the great Aristotle:



first build a bridge of trust, then touch the heart, and only then communicate the message. The building of the bridge of trust brings us back to the need for a repentant heart: if our lives contradict our message, then we will convince no-one. As Pope Paul VI memorably said, in matters of religion people listen to witnesses rather than teachers, and only to teachers who are witnesses. The scandals of the Church provide an excuse for people not to listen to us when we proclaim the Gospel. As Saint Gregory the Great wisely observed, the Gospel loses credibility when conscience tethers the tongue.

Finally, we need to use the gift of reason to understand the roots of the false ideas that afflict the people of our age, false ideas that are unconsciously assumed by almost everyone to be self-evidently true. Here are three of them:

- a) Absolute personal autonomy, the idea that each of us is an island. This false idea is simply taken as obvious throughout the misguided Carter Decision of the Supreme Court, and in Bill C14. “It’s my life; I can do with it whatever I want.” Another version is: “It’s my body; I can do with it whatever I want.” But as the great English poet John Donne wisely observed, no man is an island, entire unto himself. We live in a web of relationships of love, and as Christians we see in that a reflection of the very life of the Blessed Trinity. We are not absolutely independent, and in fact as we depend on others and on God we find the meaning of our life. As one practical response to this false idea, we need as individual disciples and as communities to reach out with love to sustain those who are lonely, who are suffering or who (as Pope Francis often reminds us) are on the edges of society. Through true palliative care we are assisted not only by technical remedies such as pain killers, but more importantly by the love of those on whom we do indeed depend as our bodies disintegrate and the vibrant powers of our youth, that can foster the illusion of our independence, wither away. We are always dependent on others, but at the beginning of life and at the end of life, that dependence is simply more obvious. It is not to be rejected but to be embraced, and that can happen in a life affirming community of love. Love does not at all mean not having to say you’re sorry; it means offering and receiving the loving support of those upon whom we depend, and who depend on us.
- b) The false idea that reality is mainly found between my ears. No, there is an objective world of reality, not created or shaped by our subjective desires. Wisdom involves discovering it, and seeing how we are called to adapt to it. We are fruitfully bound by realities that constrain our egos, even if they are universal principles that cannot be photographed or weighed. Marriage as a covenant of love between a man and a woman, faithful in love and open to the gift of life, is not just something that we can adjust to our taste; that reality focuses our desires, and makes them truly joyful and fruitful. “Thou shalt not kill” is not an abstraction. People do seem to unconsciously understand that



moral norms govern our egos, since they are so eager to twist language to hide the hard fact that they are going against those norms. So language, which is designed to reveal reality is used to conceal reality, and killing is called “medical assistance in dying.” When people feel compelled to use deceptive language to hide from the reality they dare not acknowledge, we know that something is wrong.

- c) The false idea that our dignity comes from externals, and depends on our capacity to function according to some self-established norm. Although avoidance of pain is used as an excuse for euthanasia (while we should be concentrating on alleviating pain), a fundamental motive force in this destructive movement is the idea that if we can no longer function to our satisfaction, life is not worth living: it is said to have no dignity. Dependence on others, which is in fact an occasion for the experience of love, is seen to be a loss of dignity. We are falsely considered to have dignity only when we are in control. There are deadly implications beyond the immediate issue of euthanasia in this false concept of dignity, for there are many people in society who could be considered to not be functioning according to some arbitrary standard of excellence, and who therefore would be considered unworthy. That dark path has been travelled before. No: our dignity does not depend on our ability to function, which will inevitably decrease over the years. Our dignity resides in our identity as a precious human person, a child of God, loved and loving. What I am in the sight of God, that I am indeed, no more, no less.

So we need to get to the roots of the culture of death, and find ways to communicate the awesome reality of the human condition, so that people who are deceived through these false assumptions that lie at the foundation of our contemporary society may be freed of their illusions, and come to realize the wondrous dignity of the human person at each stage of earthly life from conception to natural death.

May the Lord bless and guide us during this March for Life, and in the years that lie ahead, as we seek to proclaim the Gospel of Life with integrity and compassion.

*** denotes section of homily delivered in French***