

Prayer Service for Life
Cathedral of Saint Paul
January 22, 2008
Archbishop John C. Nienstedt

My brothers and sisters in Christ, especially my young friends, how good and important it is to be here this morning, in support of life and the culture that allows it to flourish. You are the bright promise of a new day in this country, a day when the promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are truly secured for all, born and unborn.

As you all know very well, we live in a time and in a world when threats against the well-being of the human person are nearly always present – from a consumerist culture that informs us that our personal worth is dependent on what we own, to the rampant greed that has left our country and our world in such economic difficulty, to wars and famines and oppressive political regimes that terrorize so many. Truly, we live in a world that now more than ever desperately needs the healing power of Jesus Christ's redeeming love.

But in a world full of abuses and injustices, it is my belief that none stand so in need of our attention and prayerful opposition as the grave evil of abortion, that is, the taking of innocent human life in the womb.

As believers, we know that human life begins at the moment of conception. And with this miraculous beginning comes the inviolable rights with which all human persons, made in the image and likeness of God Himself, have been endowed. The first of these rights, upon which all others depend, is the right to life. But contrary to the sound bites and slogans of those who would diminish the gravity of abortion, the belief in the humanness of the embryo is not limited to people of faith. This insight is not dependent on revealed dogma or doctrine. The issue of when human life begins is, in fact, an issue of hard science. What else could the human embryo be *but* a small human being? When a man and a woman join to become one flesh, what else could be the result *but* a human person?

The issue of abortion is not simply one among many. It is the single greatest threat to the dignity of human life that we currently face as a nation and as a world. And how could this not be? If the innocent child in the womb is not safe, then who is? If we as a culture and as a society are willing to put to death a defenseless baby, who will we not sacrifice on the altar of comfort and ease? The elderly, the weak, the poor – these are all expendable if the most innocent among us are vulnerable to willful destruction.

But we must also sadly acknowledge that far too often, a mother chooses the tragedy of abortion because she does not see any viable alternative. Perhaps she is experiencing the terrifying pressure of parents or the child's father. Perhaps she feels that even if she should give birth to this child, there would be no real, practical support for her during her time of extreme need. Perhaps she is unable to see that she is even capable of

being a mother, after having been told for so long by family, classmates, and the world that she is unlovable and that nothing she does is good enough.

My dear young friends, how important it is that we develop as a people a “culture of life” that supports children and women from conception until natural death! It is not enough to work for the passing of legislation that puts an end to the barbarism of abortion. We must also change hearts so that all life is welcomed and accepted as a gift from our God, even when this choice makes very real, and at times very uncomfortable demands upon us. The critics of the pro-life movement are unfortunately somewhat justified when they criticize those of us who would abolish abortion but do not support women or couples struggling with an unplanned pregnancy. We must be willing to be a pro – life people “24 – 7” and not just when we are about the important business of marching or protesting or lobbying.

The creation of this culture of life is your task, dear young people. All of you have an indispensable part to play. None of you are unimportant in this struggle to overcome and finally eliminate the disgraceful and horrific human rights violation that is abortion.

To many, this struggle is unwinnable. Since the tragedy of *Roe v. Wade*, a judicial and ethical disaster, men and women in nearly every pertinent field have struggled to protect the legal rights of the unborn. Many would say that even after decades of struggle in the court room, on the street, and in the media, the final results are dubious at best. Abortion is still widespread and legally protected. But it is good to remember that the difficult struggle we engage in is not without precedent. For years, it was perfectly legal to own a human being as a slave. This in a country in which liberty is enshrined as a sacred right! Even when at long last the human rights of those in bondage were admitted, it still took a bloody and costly war to eliminate the great evil of slavery. Of course, no one should advocate such a dramatic solution to the horror of abortion. Violence is always to be condemned and avoided. But what we do need is a radical revolution in understanding, a revolution that requires your constant effort and constant attention. Just as no one would now condone slavery as a “necessary evil,” you are called to dream of a country in which the option of abortion is simply not seen as an option.

How are you to do this? How are you to work for that systemic change that is so desperately needed? First of all, you are called to be people of prayer. Scripture is very clear – there are certain demons that can only be cast out with prayer and fasting. It is no exaggeration to call abortion a demon, a diabolical reality that destroys everyone and everything it touches. Its elimination requires a perseverance in prayer and penance that is rooted in trust in God’s triumph over evil. You must pray for the conversion of hearts. But you must also pray fervently that young mothers and fathers would find the support and love they need to welcome their unexpected little ones into the world.

You must also be willing to speak boldly and honestly about the humanness of embryonic life. There are those who will tell you that the issue is complicated, that we ultimately don’t know when life begins, and that we should commit our limited resources and time to overcoming less controversial evils. In response to these often repeated

arguments we must be willing to say, oftentimes in the midst of great scorn and persecution, that this issue is only complicated because we have refused to love as a society and as individuals; we have refused to be bothered by the needs and rights of the voiceless. It is undeniably true that many women choose abortion after much troubling and troubled soul-searching. But a deliberate tragic choice does not negate its tragedy. Where are the men to support and love these women? Where are the parents to welcome and embrace a wayward child? Yes, it must be said – where is the local faith community to guide and comfort in the midst of these dark dramas of seemingly stark choice? It is frequently much easier to repeat the slogans of “personally opposed but unwilling to impose” or “it is a woman’s body therefore it is a woman’s choice” than to accept the part we have played, however small, in the defeat for goodness that is an abortion.

You see, my brothers and sisters, a culture of life is a culture of love, and love will always involve sacrifice. Love places demands upon us, not the least of which is the willingness to acknowledge the other as one made in the image and likeness of God, with just as might right to the good, true, and beautiful as we have. My young friends, I solemnly challenge you to be a generation of radical love, the seed from which a new people can be born.

Just yesterday, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, joined his voice to ours in congratulating President Obama on his inauguration as President of the United States, but then adding:

“Under your leadership, may the American people continue to find in their impressive religious and political heritage the spiritual values and ethical principles needed to cooperate in the building of a truly just and free society, marked by respect for the dignity, equality and rights of each of its members, especially the poor, the outcast and those who have no voice.” [Emphasis added.]

In conclusion, as we gather in this historic Cathedral on this tragic anniversary, I want to assure all of you of my own prayerful support for your many good works on behalf of life. People from many faith traditions and walks of life are represented here, and rightly so. The struggle for life is not the cause of one people or a single Church. It must be the common cause of our nation, indeed one that brings us together. There can be legitimate disagreement on many issues facing our nation, issues about which people of goodwill can disagree. But on this issue, there can be no compromise. Innocent life must always be protected, as a gift given by the Giver of all good things. Looking out into this assembly, hearing the stirring testimonies of the speakers and students here present, and praying with you all, gives me great hope that one day, a day perhaps sooner than many may imagine, our nation’s laws will change and the unborn life will be protected and recognized as our brothers and sisters – our silent, voiceless brothers and sisters who have been endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, the first of which is: the Right to Life!

Thank you and may God bless you all.