



Defending Life: A lifetime commitment

January 20, 2001

This is the main address delivered at the Colorado Right to Life March and Rally on the west steps of Colorado's State Capitol Building on Saturday, Jan. 20, 2001.

Back in the 1930s, a young German thinker looked around at the persecution and political violence in his country and wrote the following words of admiration for the United States:

He said, "American democracy is not founded on the [so-called] emancipated man . . . but upon the kingdom of God and limitation of all earthly powers by the sovereignty of God."

Why was that important to him? It was important because he could see in America a freedom based on the sanctity of every human life . . . a freedom rooted in the dignity which all people share as children of the same God.

He could see in America a nation founded by people who - despite all their sins - at least understood that political power is subordinate to a higher authority. America's founders understood that it's God who judges the strong; God who protects the weak; God who guarantees the rights of all persons, including the right to life.

And this young German thinker - in his own experience, in his own country - could compare America's blessings with the disaster that happens when leaders ignore God and begin to decide for themselves who qualifies as a human person . . . and who does not.

Of course, America in 2001 is a long way from Germany in the 1930s. But on a day when we remember the killing of some 40 million unborn children over the past 28 years through abortion, we can rightly ask: Are we really as far removed from the past as we think?

I suspect not, and here's why: Political systems are organic; they're ecologies. Bad laws and bad court decisions poison the roots of the way we live. They degrade the way we think - and that in turn results in more bad laws, more bad court decisions, more bad political behavior . . . and gradually we lose the ability to see what's right, and to do what's good. And that's where we find ourselves today.

When the Supreme Court issued its *Roe vs Wade* decision in 1973, it committed two distinct crimes against humanity. First, it legalized abortion on demand. It opened the floodgates to killing 40 million unborn children, and scarred the lives of millions of women and men in the process. *Roe* put the definition of human personhood *up for grabs*. It removed the unborn from human status - and in doing so, it set a precedent that now comes back to haunt us in the debates over infanticide and physician-assisted suicide.

Second - and in a way, just as brutally - *Roe* undermined our reasoning and our moral vocabulary. As a result, we're losing our ability to think rigorously about moral issues. The way abortion supporters hide behind the label "pro choice" simply proves this point. "Pro choice," as an expression, is completely divorced from the real, flesh-and-blood event of an abortion. It's sanitized. It's evasive. And it's dishonest.

When God gives Israel the *shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4 - "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one" - He tells His people to "bind [my commands] as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates" (Dt 6:8-9).

God inscribes His presence on the heart of Israel - and His commands on the memory of Israel. One of those commands is to "choose life." And He follows that command with a warning and a promise:

"See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in His ways and by keeping His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day that you shall perish" (Dt 30:15-18).

Germany was one of the most cultured nations in Europe before the Third Reich. It became the greatest death machine in history. Nothing prevents us from growing into the same kind of creature, and in fact the seeds of that future are already among us in three sins we encounter and share as Americans every day.

The first sin is pride. Francis Bacon once said that "knowledge is power" - and we Americans believe in our power because of the success of our knowledge in our science and technology, and the accumulation of all our wealth. For however long it lasts, we're still the only superpower on the planet, and we like that. We assume we deserve our power and our advantages.

The second sin is fear. When you have a lot of stuff, you have a lot of stuff to lose. As a culture, we're preoccupied with getting more - and protecting what we already own. The fear of *losing* what we have spills over into a fear of *sharing* what we have. The abortion and contraception we force on the developing world is just an expression of that fear. We don't export birth-control programs and abortion programs for the benefit of the Third World. We do it for our own security.

And that leads to the third sin: anger. We live in a culture that exalts the self . . . and what that means is that *all selves are finally in competition*. Community works in exactly the opposite way. Community is based on *shared* principles which are larger than the individual self, and a shared commitment to the future. If the basic idea of American society is "create your own meaning," then no common purpose is possible. Competition becomes conflict, and conflict creates violence and more anger. And we see that all around us now, every day.

If we want to defend human life, we need to begin by realizing that abortion, euthanasia, exploitation of the poor and all the other acts of violence against human dignity which good people work so hard to prevent, begin right here - in this trinity of pride, fear and anger.

The question is: What can we do about it? How can we build a culture of life? I think we can build it in two ways: one personal and interior; the other public and political.

First, we need to embark on the daily struggle with ourselves to wake up from the culture of death *which our own selfishness has helped to create*.

We need to pray for *humble* hearts, because humility is the beginning of sanity. We need to pray for *grateful* hearts, because gratitude creates joy. We need to pray for *faithful* hearts, because fidelity is the seed of courage. And we need to pray for *repentant and forgiving* hearts, because these make justice and mercy possible . . . and justice and mercy are the food for brotherhood and real community - and that's the world God intended for us.

Second, we need to reconnect our personal moral convictions with the way we conduct our lives as citizens. Public citizenship and personal moral beliefs cannot be separated.

If we want prolife officials who act with both intelligence and moral character, the only way we'll get those qualities is by carrying our religious faith and moral principles into the public debate - not just at election time, but week in and week out in dialogue with the people who represent us.

Anyone who reads the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution or "The Federalist Papers," understands that the Founders saw America as an experiment in ideas and *moral principles*. The political leader who claims to be "personally opposed" to abortion and then votes to protect a so-called right to choose abortion, colludes in the destruction of innocent human life. Moreover, he's being untrue to his own convictions, and therefore is unworthy of public service. The same applies to each and every one of us as voters.

We can't simultaneously commit ourselves to human rights, while voting for people and policies that attack the weakest among us. Nor can we practice a commitment to the sanctity of human life only as a private piety. People of religious faith must live their prolife witness *courageously, as a matter of public record and civic responsibility* - or we'll lose it even as a matter of private principle.

We need to remind ourselves that real democracy is usually impolite. And real pluralism is not a tea party: *Real pluralism always involves a degree of conflict. It demands that people of faith will work tirelessly to advance their deeply held beliefs by every legal, ethical, non-violent method available to them.* For those of us who are Christians, this is what it means to be leaven in society. If we're leaven, we need to offer our culture the whole truth about the sanctity of the human person, even when the message is unpopular.

We get the elected officials we deserve. Their virtue - or their lack of it - is a judgment not only on them, but on us. Every political choice we make, also affects the persons we are. Private conviction is not a separate universe from public life. If we're prolife, that's the soil from which all our public actions should flower, including our political choices. When we claim to believe one thing, but act in a contrary political manner, we choose a kind of schizophrenia. We contradict ourselves. And the result is the sort of confusion we find in so many of our centers of public life today.

I began with the words of a young German thinker, and I want to return to him as I close.

The same young man wrote, "There is no clearer indication of the idolization of death than . . . when big words are spoken of a new man, a new world and of a new society which is to be ushered in, and yet all that is new is the destruction of life . . ."

He also wrote, "Destruction of the embryo in the mother's womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon [a] nascent life. To raise the question whether we are here concerned already with a human being or not, is merely to confuse the issue. The simple fact is that God certainly intended to create a human being, and that this nascent human being has been deliberately deprived of his life. And that is nothing but murder."

The young German thinker who wrote these words was the great Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred by the Nazis in April 1945. Bonhoeffer gave his life as a witness to his faith in God - and to the sanctity of the human person.

Surely we can live our lives - publicly and vigorously - in a way that shares in his witness. And if we do, then the future we help create will be worthy of our children, of our nation's best ideals and of our identity as a free people.