



American culture and the sanctity of human life

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Address to USCCB Pro-Life Secretariat Meeting

As I was gathering my thoughts for today, I came across a talk one of my brother bishops gave some years ago. And it seemed to fit so well with our work this morning, that I wanted to share just a few of his words with you as we begin.

The bishop wrote that "if it is once accepted that people have the right to kill 'unproductive' fellow human beings – and even if it only initially affects the poor defenseless mentally ill – then as a matter of principle murder is permitted for all unproductive people; in other words, for the incurably sick, people who have become invalids through work or war, and for all of us when we become old, frail and therefore unproductive . . . *None* of our lives will be safe . . . [And] who will be able to trust his physician anymore?"

Ten or 20 years ago, that kind of anxiety might have sounded alarmist. But we now live in a world where 8 percent of the infants who die each year in the friendly, civilized, *democratic* Netherlands are killed by their own doctors. This is the same Netherlands where doctors have cooperated in the suicides of people with early-stage HIV, anorexia and depression; the same Netherlands where an unsettling number of doctors admit to killing patients without even bothering to get their permission.

Most of you in this room already know the challenges to the sanctity of human life that exist in nearly every developed country. Many of you have been warning about the drift toward infanticide and euthanasia since the United States legalized abortion 30 years ago. But what's always struck me as strange – and what we might reflect on for just a moment — is the *size of the gulf* between how right the warnings of the pro-life movement have been, and how stubborn so many people have seemed in ignoring those warnings. It's as if proliferators were the Cassandras of American politics – doomed to be correct and doomed to be ignored at the same time.

Now I think proliferators can and do have a significant influence on American political life. But it seems pretty reasonable to ask why so many otherwise good people in our country simply *don't see* any connection between the advent of *Roe v. Wade* and today's arguments over human cloning, or eugenics, or breeding embryos purely for science.

So I want to suggest four problems embedded in American culture today that make it almost impossible for some people to understand what proliferators are talking about. And maybe we can explore these further in our questions and answers after my remarks.

Here's the first problem: *our inability to reason*. Most of the arguments in favor of embryonic stem cell research come down to two main points: (a) Stem cells are really, really small, therefore they can't be human; and (b) the end justifies the means.

Reasoning requires time. It requires a vocabulary of ideas. It involves the testing and comparison of competing arguments. But America in our lifetimes is a culture built on marketing, and marketing works in exactly the opposite way. Marketing appeals to desire and emotion, and it depends on the suppression of critical thought, which gets in the way of buying the product or the message. That's why marketing is tied so tightly to image – images operate quickly and very effectively at the sub-rational level. That explains why car manufacturers usually stand a good-looking blonde in front of their latest sports car instead of a stack of performance statistics. And that's also why we've seen so many alien-looking closeups of stem cells in magazine and newspaper spreads. The implicit message of the image is: This can't be human; it doesn't even look like us. The fact that these cells are unique and contain all the genetic information a person will ever need, and that left alone they will inevitably progress to a fetus, to an infant and finally to an human adult, is often just bypassed.

The other argument for embryonic stem cell research – the end justifies the means – is basically an exercise in cost-benefit analysis. And it goes like this: We need to sacrifice the few for the sake of the many, because the many outweigh the few. But again, the power of that argument is not rational but *emotional*, and it usually translates, in the media, into stories that pit this or that suffering Parkinson's Disease patient against an inarticulate petri dish. Of course, we should never dismiss the suffering of individual patients or their hunger for a cure. But my point is that the structure of such a comparison is inherently flawed; it's designed to appeal to something other than our reason. We gravitate to the Parkinson's Disease patient naturally and emotionally . . . and meanwhile, a very dangerous argument from utility sneaks past us masquerading as compassion.

Here's the second problem: *our inability to remember*. The historian Christopher Lasch once observed that Americans have a kind of addiction to the new, the fresh and the practical. We're a people of the "now" — the present moment. We enjoy nostalgia, because it's a kind of entertainment, but we don't really like *history* because the past, as it really happened, burdens us with memories and unfinished business, and it imposes obligations on the present. We like to think that we invent ourselves, and that anything is possible. It's part of the American ethos. But the cost of that illusion is that Americans tend to have a very poor grasp of history, and thus we often learn too little from the lessons of the past.

To mention just one example: Quite a few Americans have some general knowledge of Hitler's campaign against the Jews. But I suspect very few understand that the ethical framework for the Holocaust was already in place in the German medical establishment before the Nazis ever came to power. Before turning its attention to the Jews, the Third Reich had already systematically killed tens of thousands of people — the official word was "disinfected" — people who were insane, mentally handicapped or terminally ill . . . and it did so using some of the same utilitarian excuses we now hear in the Netherlands.

Here's problem three: *our inability to imagine and hope*. Americans have never been ideologues. We're pragmatists and tool makers. We respect results. Therefore it's no surprise that we have the strongest economic machine in the world, and that we excel at science and technology, and that these disciplines enjoy such esteem in our culture. But as the writer Edward Tenner once observed, technology always carries with it a "revenge of unintended consequences" — and one of the unintended consequences of our science is that we've now become its objects and its victims. One of the costs of our science has been a decline in our vocabulary of the soul, a rise in a purely materialist, determinist view of the world, and a decline in our sense that humanity is somehow unique in creation. Hope and imagination flow out of a belief in a higher purpose to our lives. If all we are is very intelligent carbon, then hope and imagination are just quirks of the species. And so is any talk about the sanctity of the human person.

Problem four: *our inability to live real freedom*. Freedom is not an endless supply of choices and options. Choice for its own sake is just another form of idolatry. Freedom is the ability to see — and the courage to do — what is right. But if, as a people, we begin to doubt that any absolute principles of right and wrong exist, then how can we even begin to discuss things like freedom, truth and the sanctity of the human person in a common vocabulary? How can we agree on which rights take precedence, and who has responsibility for what?

What we get in place of freedom is a kind of anarchy of conflicting pressure groups and personal agendas held together by just one thing: the economy we all share . . . and that's not the basis of a community or even a useful conversation. In fact our economy, more than anything else in modern American life, teaches us to see *almost everything* as a commodity to be bought or sold. This is what Jeremy Rifkin warns about when he describes American culture as increasingly a "paid-for experience" based on the commodification of passion, ideals, relationships and even time. If we want freedom, we *buy* it by purchasing this car or that computer; if we want romance, we *buy* it by purchasing this cruise or that hotel package.

The trouble is, the more our advertising misuses the language of our dreams and ideals to sell consumer goods . . . the more confused our dreams and ideals themselves become. We delude ourselves to the point where we no longer recognize what real love, honest work, freedom, family, patriotism — and even life itself — look like.

This is why Neil Postman once described television commercials as "a form of religious literature" and any serious commentary on them as a kind of "hermeneutics, the branch of theology concerned with interpreting and explaining the Scriptures." Postman wrote that "the majority of important television commercials take the form of religious parables organized around a coherent theology. Like all religious parables they put forward a concept of sin, intimations of the way to redemption, and a vision of heaven. They also suggest what are the roots of evil, and what are the obligations of the holy." And of course, the *first* obligation of the holy is always to buy the product.

Now these four problems we've just outlined act as a kind of background noise in American culture that can screen out much of the work the good people in this room do. And I know that can be discouraging. The Prophet Jeremiah certainly struggled with discouragement when God sent him to preach repentance to his people. He was treated with contempt and disbelief, and I know that some of you are as well. *But he was faithful* — and because he was faithful, the truth was served and God remained alive in hearts of the Jewish people. Mother Teresa once said that we're not called to be successful, we're called to be faithful, and in due time, God will ensure the victory.

We need to remember that. But we also need to take joy and confidence in the fact that, in the long run, *right makes might*, not the other way around. A friend once shared with me the unofficial motto of the Texas Rangers. It's in Texan, not English, but it goes like this: *Little man whup a big man every time if the little man's in the right and keeps a-comin*. I probably like that because I'm short — but I also believe it's true.

All of us have a freedom given to us by God, so in the near term, no one can stop an individual or even a nation that consciously chooses to die. But in the long run, life *always* wins; right *always* wins; God is *always* glorified — and nothing is more beautiful or more powerful than the simple, single person who witnesses the sanctity of life even in the face of his or her own destruction. Nobody remembers the party hacks or police thugs at Tiananmen Square. But we *all* remember the single young man who blocked the line of tanks.

The biggest lie of the modern age is that individuals can't make a difference. But it's *exactly* individuals who *do* make a difference, men and women who refuse to cooperate with evil and insist on doing good. *Human beings make history, not the other way around*, and we do it day in and day out, one by one, in our choices of whom and what we love, what we build, what we live for, and what we fight for.

I began my remarks today by quoting a brother bishop. His name was Clemens August von Galen. He was quite an extraordinary man because he was one of the very few German religious leaders who publicly, forcefully and courageously condemned the Nazi regime at the height of its power for murdering the mentally and physically handicapped. Bishop von Galen delivered his homily almost exactly 60 years ago this week — August 3, 1941 — and his message is just as urgent today as it was then.

The difference between 1941 and 2001 is that America, perhaps unlike Germany at that time, still has a deep reservoir of goodness in its public life. The struggle for the soul of our country can still be won, and the people in this room are all von Galens. You all know history, and you're all working to create something better and more humane — a future worthy of the human person as a child of God. And in John Paul's *The Gospel of Life* and the American bishops' *Living the Gospel of Life* we have tools that can guide us in the task.

Little man whup a big man every time, if the little man's in the right and keeps a-comin. Be faithful to God, as He is faithful to us. And know that in saving one child, you save the world.

God bless you, and welcome to Denver!