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Respect for Life

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Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 3, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Jer 1:4-5, 17-19; Ps 71; 1 Cor 12:31-13:13; Lk 4:21-30

RESPECT FOR LIFE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Each week the Church gathers the faithful to celebrate the mystery of life; both in public worship and in family prayer we acknowledge that our human experience of existence is enriched immeasurably by Christ's gift of a fuller life, in communion with the living God. However, we should never take for granted the initial gift of human life. God's words to Jeremiah are true for each human being: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you..." (1:2-5). The biological processes that govern human existence from conception to birth are always at the service of God's plan to set this life apart from the mundane for a sacred and eternal destiny. Jeremiah was dedicated to God's service as a member of the Israelite nation, as a priest and later as a prophet. Who would have foreseen at his birth the important role he would play in Israel's history? Who can guess the contribution that a child born in 1998 will have on the next century? Yet so often people fail to consider even the right of that unborn child to savor the gift of life itself. Of course, abortion and infanticide were known in various cultures of ages past and from early times the Church interpreted the fifth commandment to prohibit such attacks on innocent life. "Do not kill a child by abortion nor kill the infant at birth" (Teachings of the Twelve Apostles 2:2).

But never have the attack on the life of the unborn reached the proportions we have experienced in the last three decades. The Church tries valiantly to appeal to conscience on every level, from the individual facing a difficult personal decision to the medical profession and the international order. People of faith can make a contribution, each from our own place in society, some by providing homes for children, others by expressing their convictions in the context of their work, all by moving from prayer into acts of compassion toward those in need.

With simplicity and directness Mother Teresa of Calcutta addressed the issue in the context of the United Nations Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, September 1994). "I am sure that deep down in your heart you know that the unborn child is a human being loved by God, like you and me. How can anyone knowing that deliberately destroy that life? It frightens me to think of all the people who kill their conscience so that they can perform an abortion..." She drew attention to the misuse of resources and human energy because of a myopic vision of the world and the meaning of life. "We are too often afraid of the sacrifices we might have to make. But where there is love, there is always sacrifice. And when we love until it hurts, there is joy and peace."

Knowing St. Paul's hymn to charity, Mother Teresa taught that the greatest response to the divine gift of life and love is to seek the poor. Our convictions must find expression in practical efforts to provide alternatives to abortion. "If there is a child you don't want, or can't feed or educate, give that child to me!" What would you or I give up from our relative abundance so that others may enjoy the necessities of life? That is the challenge of the Gospel.

In this Sunday's readings the Church reminds us that fidelity to God's teaching will bring ridicule and persecution. The ideals of the prophets and of the Gospel sound wonderful, but the altruistic love demanded by Jesus can be reflected only at a cost. The people of Nazareth expected to receive the benefits of Jesus' ministry simply because this was his hometown. However, these blessings called for faith in the person and mission of Jesus. Aspects of his message were hard to take and provoked them to anger. Those following Christ find that the Gospel may bring ridicule and persecution. This was the experience of the prophets of old. Jeremiah was informed that the task would be onerous and the immediate response of many listeners would be negative. People do not appreciate learning about their physical or spiritual ailments, even though that knowledge may be the first step toward a cure. No teacher who is demanding should expect popular acclaim, but Jeremiah received the assurance that God would remain with him to deliver him (1:19). That promise of God's presence is the foundation for our confidence today as we proclaim the unpopular truth that every human life is sacred, especially when most vulnerable. The "little ones" have ever needed the care of the Church; those excluded from the protection of law and attacked in the name of someone's "choice" cry out silently for help. May we convince others that these unborn children bear the divine image and a sacred destiny!