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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
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The Second Sunday of the Year (A)¹
Homily on the 35th Anniversary
of the Supreme Court Decision *Roe v. Wade*

We know the story. The Archangel Gabriel had announced to the Virgin Mary God's invitation to become the mother of the Messiah. As further evidence that nothing is impossible for God, Mary's elderly cousin Elizabeth, thought to be barren, was also expecting a child, John the Baptist.

Both Elizabeth's pregnancy and Mary's - despite their unusual circumstances - are cause for rejoicing. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the unborn child Jesus announces his presence to John, his unborn cousin. John leaps for joy, proclaiming to his mother, in effect: "Behold, the Lamb of God!" Elizabeth, too, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and recognizes Mary as the blessed tabernacle of our Lord and Savior. Through the evangelical witness and sacrificial love of Mary, Jesus, and John, the work of our salvation has begun.

The Old and New Testaments are filled with such passages extolling children as gift and blessing. It is disheartening, then, to see how far our culture has diverged from this view.

¹ From the pamphlet of the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The Infant in My Womb Leaped for Joy."

To be sure, most parents love their children generously and even unconditionally. But today the inherent, priceless value of every child - as a unique individual created and loved by God - is no longer universally accepted. Before birth at least, a child's worth seems to depend on his parents' attitude toward him. A Planned Parenthood ad illustrates this point well: "Babies are loud, smelly, and expensive, unless you want one."

Unborn children are routinely dehumanized by the abortion industry. The author of a widely used textbook on abortion techniques describes pregnancy as a "parasitic illness." A well-known columnist writes: "A goldfish resembles a human being more than an embryo does." One author has described the unborn human being as "protoplasmic rubbish," a "gobbet of meat."

A Princeton professor has followed this thinking on to its logical conclusion, to demean the newborn child: "Human babies are not born self aware, or capable of grasping that they exist over time. They are not persons." Therefore "the life of a newborn is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee."

Such attitudes have crept into people's behavior. Many of us seem to spend much of our adult lives trying to *avoid* the inconvenience of having children, and we don't like surprises in the children we do have.

Consider:

Despite their many risks and harmful side effects, hormonal contraceptives exceed \$24 *billion* in annual sales worldwide.

The abortion industry claims that half the children conceived in the United States are "unwanted," and half the "unwanted" children are aborted - over 1.3 million annually. The most common reason given for abortion is that raising a child could interfere with one's education or career.

We are often told how costly it is to raise a child. The scarcity of large families among wealthy and middle-income couples suggests that many who could afford more children value other things more than bringing a new life into the world.

Conversely, some couples who have difficulty conceiving will pay tens of thousands of dollars to have a fertility clinic create a son or daughter for them. How many parents realize that for every IVF-created child who survives to birth, many others die in the process? And if that custom-made embryo is found in the lab to have a "defect," the clinic will readily recommend scrapping the "faulty" child and ordering up another.

Tragically, many scientists and politicians now think of living human embryos created in fertility clinics - but no longer desire by their biological parents - as raw material which can be destroyed for stem cell research. Is it any wonder that some scientists now want to create human embryos in the lab, by fertilization or cloning, solely to kill them for their

stem cells? Or that, such misguided efforts continue despite the existence of morally acceptable alternatives, such as stem cells from umbilical cords and other "adult" sources that are already helping patients with 72 conditions and diseases?

In all these ways we are being urged to stop seeing human life as God sees it. From the moment of our conception, God does not see us superficially as a microscopic, unformed cell. In every child, born or unborn, God sees the individual he created to love, and be loved by, for all eternity.

At the other end of life, as well, the bonds of love between generations are being stretched thin. Some doctors and ethicists claim that patients with dementia or in a so-called "persistent vegetative state" are no longer really persons, and that families should deny them even the most basic forms of nourishment and care. And yet, however weak and vulnerable such patients may appear, they have the awesome power to inspire heroic, sacrificial love from their family members and caregivers - a power that can lead to the sanctification of those who care for them.

It matters not to God whether we are now, or ever, conscious of our existence or capable of "higher thought." The value of a human life does not depend on exercising one's intellect; it comes from God's fatherly love for each human, created in his image. His love is present long before our brain

waves can be measured at six weeks' gestation, and long after our brains no longer function so well. His love is present long before our heart begins to beat at 22 days after conception, and long after our heart begins to fail. His love is present at every step and misstep of our lives.

And to some of us who are humble and lowly, God grants the privilege to be his instrument in bringing forth holiness from others. God loves, and wants us to love, the grandfather lying unconscious in a hospital bed, the child with severe physical and mental impairments, the frightened teenaged mother, and the unplanned embryo nesting in her womb. Each of these vulnerable persons is given to us so we may learn to love as God loves - generously, sacrificially, unconditionally.

May we never tire of proclaiming the dignity and worth of every human life. May we never tire of serving the vulnerable and their caregivers with generous hearts. And may we never cease to pray for the day when all people, and all societies, will defend the life of every human from conception to natural death.