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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
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The Twenty-eighth Sunday of the Year (C)

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has chosen the month of October of each year for us to focus and reflect upon the necessity of the respect for life. Too often do we focus only on the horrendous tragedy of abortion - grave as it is - while we ignore the plight of the poor, the malnourished, the imprisoned, the orphaned, the widowed and the sick.

The respect for life to which Christ calls us includes all of humanity, from conception to death, male and female, rich and poor, black and white, innocent and guilty, holy and sinful, young and old. There is not a single human being who is not deserving of respect, compassion and love, because God created every person and in love died for every person.

What then is the root of the lack of a respect for life in society today? Why has it so dimmed and is now in danger of being snuffed out? At the heart of it is a false understanding of mankind, and of individuality in particular. We look to ourselves first, and to God second.

So focused are we on ourselves that we seldom take a genuine notice of those around us. Each of us is too content to consider only my own wants, needs and desires at the expense of the legitimate wants, needs and desires of others. In our daily

lives we are like those nine who render no gratitude to Christ Jesus for restoring them to health (see Luke 17:17). We have become like ungrateful swine that fill their bellies on the slop of false teaching. We are like Naaman who refuses to wash in the river Jordan - despite the command of the Lord - because he knows its waters to be filthy (see II Kings 5:12).

In our selfish pride we have believed the lie that we know better than the Lord our God, who created us and redeemed us. We have believed the lie that we are better or of greater dignity than others. We have believed the lie that some life can be discarded for our convenience, be it young or old. We have believed the lie that the "quality" of a person's life somehow equates with their dignity. We have believed the lie that there is nothing to be gained in patient and faithful suffering. In all of this, we have ignored the example of the Savior who came to us when we deserved him not.

Simply consider the love of God for us. When we greatly offended him and rightly deserved eternal punishment and condemnation because of our sin, he did not cast us off or abandon us to the power of death forever. Rather, in the fullness of time he became one of us, though without sin, and suffered death on the Cross for us, to redeem us and restore us to his friendship. When we abandoned God, he abandoned heaven and came in search of us. What greater love is there than this?

Even today he goes in search of us, telling us, like Naaman, to wash ourselves in his waters, in the waters made holy by his death and resurrection, in the fountain of living water springing forth from his pierced side from which the sacraments derive their mighty and wondrous power.

Whenever we are tempted to consider ourselves as more important than another, as better than another, we must recall what Christ has done for us. He acted not as we do. When we are wronged by another we seek revenge. When he was wronged by us, he gave up his life for us. He did not consider himself better than us - though by his very nature he is! - but humbled himself, taking the form of a slave. He calls us not to the path of pride, but to the path of humility, by which he leads us to see in each person the reflection of his own image, be they rich or poor, smart or foolish, swift or slow, cool or dorky.

If this is true, why are we so slow to speak up when we encounter a lack of respect for life and an attack on human dignity? Why do we not defend the downtrodden and lift up those whom the world casts down with all the strength we have?

Saint John Chrysostom reminds us that "nothing can bind the tongue but cowardice and unbelief."¹ When we remain silent in the face of these evils, it is either because we are too afraid of what someone else might think of us for standing up for the

¹ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on II Timothy*, 4.

truth, or because we do not believe that all people are created in the image and likeness of God.

Sadly, the decision to stand up for the right to life, to encourage and foster a greater and more profound respect for life, is today met with much opposition. Those who defend life and promote the fundamental dignity of the human person - of every person - are too often vilified, even by those who claim to follow Christ. They are looked down upon and discouraged from their holy and just endeavors. To those who truly seek to promote the dignity of human life are the words of Saint Paul addressed: "If we have died with him we shall also live with him; if we persevere we shall also reign with him" (II Timothy 2:11-12).

"What is the meaning of 'If we [persevere]'? If we patiently bear tribulations and persecutions... [This] narrow path is unattractive by nature but becomes easy when we choose to follow it, because of our hope for the future."² To promote true human dignity today is to walk the narrow path. It is difficult to stand up for the truth, to condemn injustice, to right what is wrong; but this we must do, for in so doing we render thanks to the One who created us and gives us life and recognize that we have been healed by his command.

² Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, 87.3.

Let us then beg the Lord Jesus Christ to make our hearts ever more like unto his own, that we might be truly grateful to him for having saved us from sin and death and restoring us to his friendship. In this way, may we strive to treat others not as our lessers, but as our brothers and sisters in Christ, who have also been redeemed by his death and resurrection. By remembering his mercy toward us, let us have mercy toward others. In this way, may the respect for life and the true dignity of every person take root in the hearts of all men and women of good will.