

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

'Before birth, the Lord called me'

Editor's Note: The following text is the homily delivered Jan. 17 in Saint Martin University's Marcus Pavilion at the Mass for Life, marking the 39th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision.

In the eyes of God, my life and your life are no accident. God desired for us to be conceived, God desires that we live, and God desires that we spend eternity in his presence. These simple yet profound truths set the anthropological framework of the Bible — in other words, they help us see what every human person is about and where we are headed.

The prophet Isaiah was keenly aware of his personal origin in God and, indeed, his personal vocation in God, from the womb:

"Before birth the Lord called me, from my mother's womb he gave me my name" (Is 49:1). "For now the Lord has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb ..." (Is 49:5). Isaiah's conviction was that his life and every life, desired and brought into being by God, had a purpose in God's plan. And in God's plan, each life is irreplaceable.

As Jesus taught his disciples about the reign of God, one of his favorite images was the *child*. Chil-

dren, Jesus taught, not only deserve our priority attention (along with the poor, the widow, the blind and the lame) but also have profound capacity to teach us how to live in God's reign.

His disciples had been arguing about who among them was the greatest, and Jesus took the occasion to teach them to make themselves the least, to make themselves servants of all. And placing his arms around a child, he said to them — and to us — "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me" (Mk 9:37).

A deliberate precision

More than a symbolic gesture, Jesus' embrace and his words were a vital lesson to you and me, and to the world: These little ones are irreplaceably precious in God's eyes; these little ones have priority; these little ones teach us how to grow in our relationship with God.

A physician friend is fond of reminding people of two extraordinary things

about the human body: First, that the body is designed by God to survive — in other words, that its systems are designed to place all its resources at the disposal of healing when we are sick or dying; and second, that the body is composed of 300 billion cells, 100 billion neurons and 100 trillion connections between the cells.

No accidents, these bodies of ours, these lives of ours, but created by a loving God with a deliberate precision that is hard for us to grasp. The care and intricacy with which each body is created — or as the psalm tells it, "knitted together in our mothers' wombs" — are signs of God's loving hand at work, deliberately, in the creation of each of us.

These basic spiritual truths — these basic human truths — bring the disaster of abortion into sharp relief. To snuff out any life desired, created, loved and given a purpose by God is an unspeakable tragedy. To further suggest that a woman or a man has a right to end a life desired, created, loved and given a purpose by God is adding heartbreaking insult to mortal injury.

To propose that coverage for abortion be mandated for all private insurance plans is not only utterly indefensible — it is a grave infringement on the rights of conscience of insurers, private employers, churches and individuals. And to attempt to redefine marriage is to propose the further erosion of the bedrock foundation of every human society. Marriage in faith and societal traditions is acknowledged as the foundation of civilization. It has long been recognized that the stability of society depends on the stability of family life in which a man and a woman conceive and nurture new life.

Each life precious

My sisters and brothers, we have our work cut out for us. This is work we must do with conviction, with enthusiasm, with unflinching perseverance, with hope and with love. Our words must be clear and strong, but they must never be hateful. Our actions must be consistent, but they must never be harmful. Our efforts must be united, collaborative and prudent, and we must be aware of anything that could cause divisiveness among us. Our prayers must

be fervent and hope-filled, for as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, God "is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us" (Eph 3:20).

Our trust in God must be firm. Today we are together as a living witness that each life is precious, sacred, unrepeatable, irreplaceable and of infinite value to us and to the world itself. We will never stop saying that; we will never stop reminding those we elect to office that they have a responsibility to protect human life.

We will resist any and all efforts to attack our rights of conscience and our religious liberty by forcing us to provide insurance coverage for abortion. If, God forbid, such legislation should pass, the state of Washington would be putting the Catholic Church and many others in an untenable situation.

Last week we Catholic bishops of the state of Washington issued what we consider to be a critical statement about marriage and the common good (see page 8). We urge you and all citizens of this state to send a resoundingly clear, simple message to Olympia: The definition of marriage must remain as it is, the union of one man and one woman.

Love for poor, vulnerable

Finally, and not incidentally, as our legislators ponder the very perplexing matter of a huge budget shortfall, we must remind them not to forget the poor. The government, above all, has the responsibility to protect human life. As Catholics, we can be proud of the tremendous work of our Catholic charities and Catholic health care operations, which are second only to the state in their outreach to the poor and elderly.

But we must also remember that as citizens we share a responsibility to see that the government takes care of our brothers and sisters who suffer poverty, homelessness, mental illness and the effects of old age, often on their own. Every life is precious to God and to us, and we have a responsibility to challenge the state — and work with the state — to extend vital services to those who suffer.

You and I celebrate life today, and we will join many others to march for life. Our strong conviction that abortion is killing innocent life comes from our belief in the sovereignty of God, the inviolability and sacredness of human life, the destiny of every human

DO YOU HAVE AN INTENTION FOR ARCHBISHOP SARTAIN'S PRAYER LIST?

You may send it to him at Archbishop Sartain's Prayer List, Archdiocese of Seattle, 710 Ninth Ave., Seattle, WA 98104.

person, our love for the poor and vulnerable and our concern for the common good.

And those strong convictions urge us not simply to state our beliefs but to put them into practice, to work tirelessly, respectfully and non-violently for an end to abortion. They urge "individual Catholics and the many institutions and organizations of the Church

to unite in an unprecedented effort to restore respect and legal protection for every human life — to be what [Blessed John Paul II] asked us to be: a people of life and a people for life" (Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities, USCCB, 2001).

What is frequently referred to as a matter of "choice" is in reality a matter of life and death. It is a matter of right and wrong. It is a matter of accepting our origin and destiny — and that of every child conceived in every womb — from the very hands of God. It is a matter of recognizing that I am not a god who makes up rules for my world by "choice," but that I am a creature of God whose fulfillment is found in his gift of life.

You and I have the responsibility and the vocation — from the womb — to be praise of God, to live as loving creatures of God, to love and protect every human person from the moment of his or her conception to natural death, and to do everything in our power to ensure that such is the law in our country. Please God, with your help, may it be so. Amen.

What is frequently referred to as a matter of "choice" is in reality a matter of life and death

We will never stop reminding those we elect to office that they have a responsibility to protect human life.



ARCHBISHOP
J. PETER
SARTAIN



Isaiah, depicted in this 18th-century Russian icon, held the conviction that every life has a purpose in God's plan.