

McHENRY COUNTY CATHOLIC PRAYER BREAKFAST

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Overcoming the Challenges to Freedom to be Pro-Life Today

My dear friends and colleagues in the cause for life:

It is a privilege to be with you for this 3rd Annual McHenry County Prayer Breakfast. I commend you for taking the time on a Saturday morning to come and participate in this prayer breakfast.

I also wish to encourage you in your efforts. There are many challenges to putting our Catholic faith into practice in our modern world. The topic I have chosen to address today is one of those very real challenges, **“Overcoming the Challenges to Freedom to be Pro-Life Today.”** Some of these challenges are external, such as from the secular culture, the media and the law; others are internal, that is, there are challenges that we must face within ourselves that threaten our own commitment, resolve and inner-strength to be pro-life.

I know that such encouragement is greatly needed for the important work that you do in a secular culture that is increasingly hostile to our message of speaking out for the protection of unborn babies. I also realize that some of you may be discouraged by media reports in the past few weeks about some recent comments by Pope Francis that make it appear that the Holy Father's resolve in the struggle against abortion is weakening and, as a result, that the teaching of the Catholic Church will soon be relaxed. I do not blame the Pope for your discouragement; I blame the news reports that only report selected passages of the Pope's remarks that fit their editorial narrative and their political agenda.

The teaching of Pope Francis must be understood in its fullness, not just the media's sound bites. My purpose today will be to encourage you by focusing on some very important words of Pope Francis that the media have not generally reported, but which should indeed give you encouragement. The Pope speaks frequently in public and often at great length, such as his recent 12,000 word interview, so obviously I cannot repeat all of his words here. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to read his recent interview in full, which was published in several Jesuit publications.¹

From the media reports, you are probably aware that Pope Francis said, in that interview, that “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that.” But immediately after that, he added, “But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time.”²

Indeed, we must also talk about the doctrine of our faith, which is why we have Catholic schools, religious education, colleges and universities. We must also talk about caring for the sick and the elderly, which is why we have Catholic hospitals, health care institutions, nursing homes and retirement centers. We must also talk about the poor, which is why we have Catholic Charities, St. Vincent de Paul Societies and other social service agencies. We must also talk about helping people around the world in times of crisis and emergencies, which is why we have Catholic Relief Services. We must also talk about caring for the needs of immigrants, which is why we have Catholic Refugee and Migration Services. The list goes on and on.

You may not be aware, because of the lack of media reports, that just one day after his lengthy interview was made public, Pope Francis soundly condemned abortion in an address that he delivered to a group of Catholic doctors. The Holy Father said, "Every unborn child, though unjustly condemned to be aborted, has the face of the Lord, who even before his birth, and then as soon as he was born, experienced the rejection of the world."

Pope Francis condemned the "throwaway culture" abortion promotes, saying, "Our response to this mentality is a 'yes' to life, decisive and without hesitation. 'The first right of the human person is his life. He has other goods and some are precious, but this one is fundamental -- the condition for all the others.'"

The Holy Father described a contradiction whereby scientists pursue cures for diseases but snuff out human life in abortion. He said, "On the one hand we see progress in the field of medicine, thanks to the work of scientists who passionately and unreservedly dedicate themselves to the search for new cures. On the other hand, however, we also encounter the risk that doctors lose sight of their identity in the service of life."³

To some, the juxtaposition of these quotes may seem contradictory,⁴ but they are perfectly consistent with Catholic Church teaching, which not only stresses the truth about sin, but also the mercy of God's love. Pope Francis is reminding people of the latter, that we cannot simply talk about sin without also taking about the redemption that Christ offers us through His death on the cross.

Contrary to the media's wishes, the Pope did not change the Church's teaching about the sinfulness of abortion, contraception and homosexual acts, but he was emphasizing that such sins can be forgiven. Thus, it is true to say, even after the Pope's remarks, that, abortion is a sin, contraception is a sin, homosexual acts are sinful, but the Pope is also saying that these statements do not end the conversation. We must also speak of God's mercy to those who feel burdened by the guilt of these sins.

The Pope expressed this essential message in these words: "The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all. The confessor, for example, is always in danger of being either too much of a rigorist or too lax. Neither is merciful, because neither of them really takes responsibility for the person. The rigorist washes his hands so that he

leaves it to the commandment. The loose minister washes his hands by simply saying, 'This is not a sin' or something like that. In pastoral ministry we must accompany people, and we must heal their wounds."⁵

This is a key point which the secularists are missing: they think that stressing God's mercy means that sins are no longer sins. On the contrary, God's mercy is a great gift of grace precisely because sins *are* sins and they call for repentance and forgiveness.

Note from the interview, when he was asked to describe himself, Pope Francis said simply, "I am a sinner." After a brief pause, he amplifies this self-identity in the understanding of a Christian who has been saved by Christ, saying, "I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon." Then he gives a beautiful example referring to St. Matthew (whose feast day we celebrate today), saying that in Rome he often visited the Church of St. Louis of France, and he went there to contemplate the painting of "The Calling of St. Matthew," by Caravaggio. Referring to this painting, the Pope said, "That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That's me. I feel like him. Like Matthew. It is the gesture of Matthew that strikes me: he holds on to his money as if to say, 'No, not me! No, this money is mine.' Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze. And this is what

I said when they asked me if I would accept my election as pontiff. I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance.”⁶

So, far from saying that we shouldn't treat sins as sins, we are saying that our recognition and condemnation of sin does not stop there, but rejoices in the mercy of Christ the Redeemer.

That is why our condemnation of the sin of abortion does not stop there, but includes Project Rachel, which is the Church's loving outreach of reconciliation and healing for those who are struggling with the guilt, grief and pain that follows an abortion.⁷

That is why our condemnation of the sin of contraception does not stop there, but includes pastoral care and education for parents who wish to learn about natural family planning in accord with the teachings of the Church.⁸

That is why our condemnation of the sin of homosexual activity does not stop there, but includes offering group support and spiritual direction through programs such as the Courage Apostolate for those struggling with same-sex attraction who seek help living in accord with the virtue of chastity.⁹

That is why we do not passively resign ourselves to any kind of sin and give in to the devil's temptations without the struggle of a spiritual battle, but when we do sin, we can take comfort in the mercy and forgiveness of the Sacrament of Penance. In the words of Pope Francis, "This is also the great benefit of confession as a sacrament: evaluating case by case and discerning what is the best thing to do for a person who seeks God and grace. The confessional is not a torture chamber, but the place in which the Lord's mercy motivates us to do better."¹⁰

In terms of challenges coming from the law, we are familiar with the challenges of the insurance mandate from the federal Department of Health and Human Services requiring coverage for contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs. This HHS mandate is being challenged in dozens of lawsuits around the country, some of them filed on behalf of religious entities such as faith-based hospitals, colleges and universities. Others have been filed by private, for-profit companies whose owners have First Amendment religious freedom objections to providing such coverage. So far, in 35 cases that have been filed by private, for-profit companies, 30 of them have received preliminary injunctions barring the federal government temporarily from enforcing the HHS mandate while

the litigation is pending. This is a good sign, but the final outcome will most likely be decided eventually by the United States Supreme Court.

In this regard, it is important to note that some people are shrugging off the challenge of the HHS mandate, saying that they don't have a problem with contraception, so what's the big deal? The big deal, first of all, is that the HHS mandate is not just about contraception. As the owners of Hobby Lobby have said in their lawsuit challenging the HHS mandate, they do not have a religious objection to contraception, but they do have a religious objection to abortion, and the HHS mandate also includes coverage for abortion-inducing drugs. That is not widely known, because the secular media often simply refer to the HHS mandate as covering contraception, seeing abortion-inducing drugs as just another form of birth control, in their view.

Even if one considers the HHS mandate as only dealing with contraception, there is another problem. Let me describe it this way: how many of you have heard of the 1973 Supreme Court case of *Roe v. Wade*? In a forum such as these with so many pro-life people in attendance, most of you of course have heard of *Roe v. Wade*. Now let me ask: how many of you have heard of the 1965 Supreme Court case of *Griswold v. Connecticut*? Not

as many. *Griswold v. Connecticut* is not as well known or remembered because it is the case where the U.S. Supreme Court said that it was unconstitutional for states to outlaw contraception, and a lot of people shrugged that off because they had no objection to contraception. Even Justice Potter, who dissented from the majority opinion in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, called the Connecticut statute “an uncommonly silly law,” but argued that it was nevertheless constitutional.¹¹

Yet, the rationale that underlies *Griswold v. Connecticut* is where the Supreme Court first introduced the idea that a “right to privacy” was to be found in the “penumbras” and “emanations” of other constitutional protections, even though the Constitution does not explicitly mention “privacy.” This is significant because the Supreme Court cited the “right to privacy” articulated in *Griswold v. Connecticut* as the legal and binding precedent to grant the unfettered license for abortion in *Roe v. Wade*.¹² In the same way, if a precedent is set whereby the government can mandate the provision of contraception, then you can be sure that the next step will be to use this precedent and its rationale as the basis for the government to mandate the coverage of abortion.

In terms of the internal challenges that we must face within ourselves that threaten our own commitment, resolve and inner-strength to be pro-life, the biggest obstacle, as I see it, is sin. In the secular context, we might simply call this *apathy*, that the agenda of promoting and protecting life would be more successful if people were not so apathetic about these issues. But in the religious context, we must call this temptation by its more specific and theologically-precise terminology, namely, *acedia*.

St. Gregory the Great and St. John Cassian described seven deadly or capital sins that often deal more with attitudes of the heart than with our actual conduct or behaviors. These seven deadly sins are **pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth**. They are called *capital sins* because they lead to other sins, and *deadly* because their repetition clouds the conscience, corrupts the concrete judgment of good and evil, and deadens our sense of right and wrong.

Just as in the list of the seven deadly sins that I have just given, **sloth** is usually mentioned last, I wish to deal with it primarily, because I believe that sloth, properly understood, is at the root of many other sins. Sloth is often mistakenly understood simply to mean laziness. Actually sloth is more than being a “couch potato” who is too lazy to get up and do some

chores around the house. It is also more than the lethargy or inertia that a person may experience who would rather just stay home than go to church. The capital sin of sloth refers to a spiritual sluggishness also known as *acedia*, which refuses the joy that comes from God and is repelled by divine goodness. Since *acedia* captures the more profound meaning of the spiritual reality than the commonly-used word *sloth*, I will use the word *acedia* in my spiritual analysis of this capital sin.

According to the description of *acedia* in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The spiritual writers understood by this a form of depression due to lax ascetical practice, decreasing vigilance, carelessness of heart." (#2733).

In his article, "Pornography and Acedia" in the journal *FIRST THINGS*, Reinhard Hüter, Professor of Christian Theology at Duke Divinity School, says that *acedia* "is the very foregoing of friendship with God, that there never was and never will be friendship with God, that there never was and never will be a transcendent calling and dignity of the human person. Nothing matters much, because the one thing that really matters, God's love and friendship, does not exist and therefore cannot be attained." In

contemporary conversation, acedia is best exemplified in the response you receive when you're trying to explain something that you think is really important and the only reaction you get is a dismissive one-word reply, "Whatever."

The reason acedia is so deadly is that this capital sin creates a void at the center of our being that we try to fill with transitory rushes of pleasure—primarily sexual—hence, its connection to other deadly sins such as lust and vices such as pornography. But these pleasures can never fill the void created by the loss of our transcendent calling to the love and friendship of God. That is why such vices are so addictive, because they never leave us satisfied, and this vicious circle of unfulfilled compulsion ultimately leads to acedia's most dangerous offshoot: despair. As Professor Hütter puts it, "This vice's post-Christian secular offshoot, an unthematic despair posing as boredom, covers—like a fungus—the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional life of many, if not most, who inhabit the affluent segments of the Western secular world."¹³

As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI put it, "Man is a relational being. And if his first, fundamental relationship is disturbed—his relationship with God—then nothing else can be truly in order."¹⁴

Another obstacle in the way of promoting and protecting human life is that too many Catholics have justified their rejection of Catholic teaching on human sexuality, marriage and family life as a matter of following their “conscience,” but apparently without properly understanding what “conscience” means. The word “conscience” comes from two Latin words, “co-” (which means “together” or “with”) and “science” (which means to have knowledge about something). Conscience means to share knowledge with someone else about what is right or wrong. Conscience does not act in isolation on some sort of personal or individual intuition disconnected from someone or something else. For a Catholic, a properly formed conscience means to share God’s knowledge and the Church’s teaching about right or wrong. So those who invoke “conscience” to justify their rejection of divine law as taught by the Catholic Church are saying that they have chosen to follow the thinking, knowledge and values of someone or something other than the Pope or the Catholic Church.

For example, when Saint Thomas More invoked his conscience in refusing to sign Henry VIII’s Oath of Supremacy declaring the King to be the Head of the Church of England, Thomas was not just following a personal preference, but was declaring that he was thinking with the Pope

and would follow him, not the King. Others chose instead to think with the King, and follow him.

In order to overcome the external and internal challenges to the freedom to be pro-life today, I offer some practical tips in a book that I recently co-authored with my brother Joe called, *Holy Goals for Body and Soul: Eight Steps to Connect Sports with God and Faith*. Although I wrote this book from the perspective of sports such as hockey and marathon running, the challenges that athletes face are similar to the challenges that we face in everyday life, such as fear, frustration and failure. After describing these three challenges, I suggest five steps to overcome them, namely: fortitude, faith, family, friendship and fun. I don't have time to go through all eight steps now, so you'll just have to read the book! But suffice it to say that the virtue of fortitude, a strong faith, the love of a close-knit family, the personal support of caring friends, and an attitude that enjoys good clean fun are the best antidotes to whatever fears, frustrations and failures that we face in life.

In conclusion, let us turn to Our Lady of Guadalupe for her intercession. Unlike many images of the Blessed Mother which depict her with her child Jesus in her arms, the icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe shows

Mary as pregnant with her unborn child, expecting the birth of Our Savior, inspiring us in our work to save unborn babies from the execution of the abortionists. I pray that Our Lady of Guadalupe will intercede for our Holy Father, Pope Francis, for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to guide him in his teaching of the universal Church and to help us to understand the Church's teaching in its fullness.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130919_1.htm. This article is also published in the following journals of the Society of Jesus:

- [A Svív \(Hungary\)](#)
- [America \(United States of America\)](#)
- [Brotéria \(Portugal\)](#)
- [Choisir \(Switzerland\)](#)
- [Études \(France\)](#)
- [La Civiltà Cattolica \(Italy\)](#)
- [Mensaje \(Chile\)](#)
- [Razón y fe \(Spain\)](#)
- [Sic \(Venezuela\)](#)
- [Signum \(Sweden\)](#)
- [Stimmen der Zeit \(Germany\)](#)
- [Streven \(Belgium\)](#)

■Anoichtoi Orizontes (Greece)

■Obnovljeni Zivot (Croatia)

■Viera a Zivot (Slovakia)

² <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

³ See, <http://www.lifenews.com/2013/09/20/pope-francis-slams-abortion-in-new-comments-unborn-babies-unjustly-condemned/>.

⁴ See, for example, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/20/pope-blasts-abortion-after-0_n_3961888.html.

⁵ <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

⁶ <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

⁷ <http://www.noparh.org/>.

⁸ See, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/>.

⁹ See, <http://couragerc.net/>.

¹⁰ <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

¹¹ *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965).

¹² *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

¹³ Reinhard Hütter, "Pornography and Acedia," *FIRST THINGS*, April 2012.

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Random House, Image Books, 2012), p. 44.