

**Nellie Gray Mass
January 22, 2015**

**St. Mary Mother of God Church
Washington, DC**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here in our nation's capital to celebrate this Mass on the occasion of the 42nd Anniversary of the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade* in which abortion was made legal in our country. I say again that it is good that we are here, because our presence, along with that of a few hundred thousand other people, signifies that we have not given up on fighting for the right to life for our brothers and sisters in the womb. As people of faith, we are people of hope, and we have great confidence that our efforts in this regard are not wasted, but that they are contributing in a significant way toward the victory that will be accomplished by the Lord.

An important part of the reason that we come here to Washington, DC, is to make our voices heard to our legislators that we do not accept those unjust laws which threaten the dignity of human life, particularly the life of the most innocent in the wombs of their mothers. It is our hope that

our voices will bring about a conversion of heart to those who continue to support these laws. We pray that the truth of the goodness of every human life will result in the overturning of these laws so that all might have the opportunity to experience this great gift of life which we so thoroughly enjoy.

At the same time, however, we must be aware that there is far more to this problem than a set of unjust laws. Some might think that if *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, the problem would go away. We know better than that. To focus all of our energy simply on changing these laws would be to adopt a Band-Aid approach to the issue, a strategy which only deals with one part of the problem without getting at the underlying causes of the problem.

In his recent address to members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, Pope Francis offered a helpful reflection which gets at the heart of the underlying problem of many of the tragic situations that we are facing in our world. He drew upon the recent celebration of Christmas as a lens through which to view our present circumstances. He said the following:

The Christmas stories themselves show us the hardened heart of a humanity which finds it difficult to accept the Child. From the very start, he is cast aside, left out in the cold, forced to be born in a stable since there was no room in the inn (cf. Lk 2:7). If this is how the Son of God was treated, how much more so is it the case with so many of our brothers and sisters! Rejection is an attitude we all share; it makes us see our neighbor not as a brother or sister to be accepted, but as unworthy of our attention, a rival, or someone to be bent to our will. This is the mindset which fosters that “throwaway culture” which spares nothing and no one: nature, human beings, even God himself. It gives rise to a humanity filled with pain and constantly torn by tensions and conflicts of every sort.¹

The Holy Father goes on to use this theme of the “throwaway culture” to speak of the many ways in which human lives have been affected by this mindset, from terrorism and violence to the treatment of the sick and elderly.

In an address in 2013 to a group of medical professionals, he connected the idea of this throwaway culture to abortion, saying that the mindset behind this culture “enslaves the hearts and minds of so many” and that it “asks for the elimination of human beings, especially if they are physically or socially weaker.”²

In his address to the Diplomatic Corps, the pope highlights how the mindset behind this throwaway culture can be seen in the figure of King Herod who, feeling threatened by this child “orders all the children of

Bethlehem to be killed.” It is therefore fitting for us to be celebrating this Votive Mass for the Holy Innocents, for their fate and the fate of more than 55 million children killed in the United States alone by abortion is the result of a failed leadership which disregards the dignity of human life.

As the Holy Father so clearly describes, what we are up against is more than just a set of laws, but an entire culture that challenges the dignity of human life at its many levels, especially the unborn. Our task, then, is to strive to change not only laws, which is important, but also to work to change the culture in which we find ourselves.

Healing the culture is no small task. It requires a change in how we view human beings around us and it requires a change of heart for an entire society, not just a set of lawmakers. Admittedly, this sounds like an extremely difficult, if not impossible, prospect. It is in moments like this, though, that we must draw upon our faith, the faith which reminds us that “for God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). From this assurance of the Lord’s promise to aid us and the confidence that life will reign victorious, we push forward with renewed energy.

Last September, at our convocation of priests in the diocese, one of our main speakers was Father Robert Spitzer, a very intelligent and

dynamic Jesuit priest. One of his main points was that in order to effect change at various levels, an important thing to focus on is the culture. He mentioned that the best plans for change will be ineffective if the culture in which those changes are proposed is not open to those changes.

Father Spitzer emphasized the importance of focusing on the youth as the target audience when addressing the culture, as they will have the greatest opportunity to effect long-term changes in the culture. This is one of the reasons that our gathering here in Washington DC is so encouraging because it is dominated by so many young people. You are committed to the cause of life and are determined to remain steadfast in fighting for the movement from a throwaway culture to a culture of life in which not only *laws* protect the dignity of human life at every stage, but in which *hearts* understand and believe in that precious gift.

As you return to your homes, it will be critical that you continue the fight for life by constantly seeking to find ways to heal the culture. This begins by looking at ourselves and seeing ways in which we may not be respecting the dignity of ourselves or those around us. We are invited to overcome the temptation to buy in to the materialistic and self-centered culture in which we live and to turn our eyes and our hearts to those

around us, especially those from whom we shy away or who are pushed away by society.

As difficult as it might be to load a bus and ride overnight to march in less than ideal weather, it will be even more difficult to live your faith every day in a culture that is often indifferent, and indeed sometimes hostile to that faith. Being faced with a challenge did not deter the saints from pushing forward, for they took very seriously the words that Jesus gave to His disciples at the Sermon on the Mount, where He told them: “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven” (Matthew 5:11-12). Neither should we be deterred, for that same promise is given to us as we are sent out to be ambassadors for change in our throwaway culture.

At this Mass, we remember the inspiring legacy of Nellie Gray, the founder of the March for Life. Her commitment not to stand idly by as innocent lives were violently being taken through the horrific practice of abortion has resulted not only in the continued growth of this annual event, but has been an instrument by which thousands, if not millions of people in our country have pledged not to remain silent as long as this

tragedy continues. We pray for the repose of her soul, that she might soon enter into the glory of Heaven, and from there, intercede for all of us who remain to continue that battle for life.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist, which is a foretaste of that heavenly reward promised by the Lord, let us be renewed in our commitment to keep moving forward in hope, both today and every day as we seek to spread the truth and beauty of the Gospel of Life to the world around us, so that our culture will become one in which every life is seen and treated as a masterpiece of God's creation, worthy of life and worthy of love.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 12 January 2015.

² Pope Francis, *Address to the Participants in the Meeting Organized by the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations*, 20 September 2013.