

**Homily for the Diocesan Respect Life Mass
October 1, 2016**

**Holy Family Parish
Granite City, IL**

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

Reverend Fathers and deacons, consecrated religious, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here at Holy Family Parish for our annual Diocesan Respect Life Mass and Rosary Walk to Hope Abortion Clinic, which we hope and pray will close soon!. During this Year of Mercy, we pray that all hearts will be moved by mercy to uphold the dignity of all human life, especially the unborn.

Just under a month ago, the Church celebrated the canonization of one of the best known models of mercy in our present age, St. Teresa of Calcutta, better known as Mother Teresa. Of the many things for which she will be remembered, one of her most remarkable attributes was her ability to see Christ in every person. She would often speak of those most overlooked among us, especially the poor and dying as “Jesus in his most distressing disguise.” From that being able to see the inherent dignity in

each human being, she did not hesitate to be an instrument of mercy in whatever way was necessary to those God placed before her.

The ability to see Christ in others is not a matter of developing an intellectual discipline. Rather, it is a gift that comes from faith. It is a gift that comes, as the Gospel for today relates, not to the “wise and learned”, but to the “childlike” (Luke 10:21) who humbly accept the Lord’s will and His way of acting for our good. It is a gift which we, in order to be moved by my mercy, are called to embrace.

Our faith enables us to see beyond the surface to the truth of the situation. Take, for example, the story of Job, of whom we heard in our first reading. Seen from the perspective of our earthly vision, it seems as though God had totally abandoned Job. How could a God who is supposed to be all good and all loving allow such tragedy to happen?

But we see how Job abandons his way of seeing and thinking, saying to God: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be hindered” (Job 42:2). The Lord then blesses him abundantly for his fidelity to God, trusting that the Lord can and will bring good out of the most difficult circumstances. This is an important lesson for us to be reminded of, especially when defending life at every stage. We must look

beyond the surface to see Christ in every person and in every circumstance, trusting that those things which seem unreasonable or incompatible with our understanding of God will indeed be the source of blessing.

In the case of women who are facing a difficult or unexpected pregnancy, all that they often see is what is on the surface. To make matters worse, they have this vision of despair intensified through the words of those who supposedly are concerned for them, just like the friends of Job who tried to convince him that he was being punished by God for something that he had done. People tell them that they do not need to face the burden and inconvenience of bringing a child into the world at this time. They are pressured into thinking that by giving birth, they are actually setting themselves and their children up for misery, and how could they want that? They feel that they have no choice but to abort the child because all that they can see is what is on the surface.

In response to those voices which promote a vision of hopelessness, it can be tempting to lash out with words of anger and condemnation, even against those women who are feeling pressured to have an abortion. While it is certainly true that we have to make people aware of the grave consequences of abortion, we must also recognize that we are dealing with

human beings who are often scared and uncertain. This must be taken into account when we find ourselves in these situations. We want to bring them to conversion, but in our present culture, that does not often happen when the person is feeling attacked with the Gospel message.

We can turn to Mother Teresa again for the example of how this can be lived out. She spoke on this very topic at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. in 1994. She said the following:

How do we persuade a woman not to have an abortion? As always, we must persuade her with love and we remind ourselves that love means to be willing to give until it hurts. Jesus gave even His life to love us. So, the mother who is thinking of abortion, should be helped to love, that is, to give until it hurts her plans, or her free time, to respect the life of her child. The father of that child, whoever he is, must also give until it hurts.¹

Herein lies our obligation and our opportunity as Catholics – to help mothers and fathers in these difficult situations to love. As Pope Francis reminds us, we do not spread the Gospel through imposition, but through the attraction of the witness that each of us is called to offer.² That witness

is one rooted in love for the other person, meeting them where they are at, and accompanying them on the journey that leads to conversion.

Admittedly, this requires a lot more work on our part. And this is where the words of Mother Teresa apply to us as well. We need to be willing to give until it hurts when it comes to assisting these men and women during these times of difficulty. We need to see Christ not just in the child in the womb of the mother, but also in the mother and father themselves. When they know that our love is there, then we can challenge them to conversion, because they know that we want what is truly best for them.

Given that we have such a critical election quickly approaching, it is worth mentioning just how important the issue of abortion is when choosing candidates, both nationally and locally. In the same address mentioned earlier, Mother Teresa issued a very frank assessment of the situation in our country when she said the following:

Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching its people to love, but to use any violence to get what they want. This is why the greatest destroyer of love and peace is abortion.³

Just as slavery was a defining issue in the time of Abraham Lincoln, abortion cannot be just another issue for us, it has to be a defining issue that we consider when choosing our elected representatives. To choose otherwise is to reject love and thus perpetuate the vicious cycle of the disrespect not just for unborn life, but for all life.

As we prepare to draw close to Christ in the Eucharist, we know that it is only through this intimate union with Him that we will develop the vision that can see Christ in every person and in every situation. One author summed it up perfectly when he wrote the following about our newest saint:

Mother Teresa knew how crucial this was. Seeing Christ in the Eucharist enabled her to see him in the streets. "If we recognize [Jesus] under the appearance of bread," she explained, "we will have no difficulty recognizing him in the disguise of the suffering poor." This is why Mother Teresa could say, "I have an opportunity to be with Jesus 24 hours a day." Whether in the chapel or the slums, the pew or the hospital, she recognized the Lord everywhere she went because she trained herself each morning at the altar.⁴

May we follow that same training so that we too might see Christ in every situation and in every man, woman, and child, born and unborn.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Mother Teresa, *Speech of Mother Teresa of Calcutta to the National Prayer Breakfast, Washington, DC, February 3, 1994.* www.priestsforlife.org.

² Pope Francis, Address in Assisi, 4 October 2013.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Brandon Vogt, *Saints and Social Justice: A Guide to Changing the World*, excerpt from wordonfire.org, September 5, 2014.