

**Homily for the 12th Sunday of the Year - Cycle A
June 21, 2020**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“Terror on every side!”

These frightening words open our first reading today from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah served God during the reigns of Judah’s last kings. As a prophet he was gifted to preach God’s saving word to those kings and their subjects. King and people sadly resisted Jeremiah’s life-giving message. The chapters of his book are filled with accounts of the verbal and physical attacks he had to endure. In verses leading up to this reading, for example, a chief officer of the temple had Jeremiah struck with blows and then held in the stocks (20:1-2). Now we hear one of Jeremiah’s personal reflections on such hardships.

In spite of such dire circumstances, Jeremiah remains confident of God’s help, as he proclaims, “The LORD is with me, like a mighty champion.”

These days we again hear dire warnings of “Terror on every side!”

We might say that this has been the message repeated almost 24/7 the past three months regarding the coronavirus pandemic: “Terror on every side!” Yes, the prospect of serious illness and possible death from a novel virus for which we do not yet have a vaccine can be terrifying. So the question for us to consider is whether we can still confidently proclaim, as Jeremiah did, that “the LORD is with me, like a mighty champion.”

Then, in today’s Gospel passage from Saint Matthew (10:28-33), Jesus reminds His disciples of the refrain we hear throughout the Scriptures, “Be not afraid,” but this time he adds more specificity: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.” We know that Gehenna is the term used in the Bible to refer to an abyss of darkness, chains, and burning flames in a valley of unquenchable fire – in other words, what we call “hell.”

This has been much on my mind in recent weeks as we hear daily briefings coming from the White House and Governors’ offices across the country where government officials and health experts have been giving dire warnings about a virus that can kill the body. But we have heard very

few warnings about moral hazards that can kill the soul. Some have said that access to liquor, cannabis, and abortion are essential, but going to church is not.

We have also taken the extraordinary and unprecedented step of shutting down a major portion of our economy for the past three months, telling people to stay home, not to go to work, and not to go to school. That may not be too great a problem for those who can work or continue their education online, but that is not possible for everyone.

So as we look back at what we have done and look forward to consider how we will respond in the future if there should be a second wave of COVID-19 or some other novel virus sweeping the world, I think it would be helpful to call to mind some Catholic moral principles to help illuminate how to address a pandemic.

First, we while we recognize that our human life is one of our greatest gifts, it is not a moral absolute and in fact is secondary to the eternal life of our immortal soul. In our fallen though redeemed state, our human life on earth is limited, it is passing. We have the responsibility to treat our life, and the lives of all others with respect and reverence, and as a general rule, we are obliged to maintain its health and strength at all times,

intervening with the blessings of scientific medicine and skilled care when necessary for its continuation. But things like martyrdom, or attempting to save the life of another, are examples of where even our human life on earth can be rightly placed at the service of a higher good.

Second, recognizing that our human life is passing, there are circumstances when it is just to decline medical treatment, due to the fact that they would be considered extraordinary to our situation. Some of the reasons why they could be termed extraordinary would be: that they do not have a significant expectation of success, that they would be judged as too burdensome for the benefit they would offer, that they would only prolong suffering and not give reasonable expectation for recovery based on the suffering they would cause, that they would be too expensive to undertake or exhaust the resources that could be better used to save others, or that they only prolong the inevitable (and approaching) death. Deciding to forego such treatments is in no way a refusal of life, but a recognition that even life is passing.

This is quite separate from the always immoral actions which would intentionally hasten death and are undertaken with that intention, such as euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

Third, medical professionals work with those in competent authority over others – in some cases family members with medical power of attorney for those who cannot make the decision themselves – to make prudent decisions regarding which therapies or treatments to utilize or to decline.

Fourth, medical science and government leaders are now called to act in a way to protect the health of our population. Looking at this by way of analogy to the situations affecting decisions about utilizing or declining treatment in the cases of individual sicknesses and diseases, these principles could be taken into consideration for the societal treatment of a pandemic.

In this regard, Catholic medical ethics has used the standard of ordinary and extraordinary means of preserving life since it was first articulated in these terms by Pope Pius XII in his November 24, 1957 address to Catholic physicians and anesthesiologists. The Holy Father said:

Normally one is held to use only ordinary means--according to the circumstances of persons, places, times and culture--that is to say, means that do not involve any grave burden for oneself or another. A stricter obligation would be too burdensome for most people and would render the attainment of the higher, more important good too difficult. Life, health, all temporal activities are in fact subordinated to

spiritual ends. On the other hand, one is not forbidden to take more than the strictly necessary steps to preserve life and health, as long as one does not fail in some more serious duty.

In other words, while one may *voluntarily* take on an extraordinary burden to preserve life, one has no moral obligation to do so. It is not a sin to decline a treatment, for example, because it is too expensive and one does not have the financial resources. Moreover, it is not a sin to decline artificial life support machines for a terminally ill person when such treatment would only prolong the suffering of a person who is in the active stage of dying. When Pope John Paul II was dying, for example, he was not rushed to the hospital to be kept on life support indefinitely. Rather, the Holy Father, who was staunchly pro-life, was allowed to die peacefully and gave us a powerful example of how to die naturally.

Pope St. John Paul II addressed this question himself in his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, "The Gospel of Life," considered to be the seminal document on the protection of the life and dignity of the human person. In this encyclical, Saint John Paul II made the distinction between euthanasia and forgoing aggressive medical treatment:

Euthanasia must be distinguished from the decision to forego so called “aggressive medical treatment,” in other words, medical procedures which no longer correspond to the real situation of the patient, either because they are by now disproportionate to any expected results or because they impose an excessive burden on the patient and his family.

In such situations when death is clearly imminent and inevitable, one can certainly in conscience “refuse forms of treatment that would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted” (No. 65).

It is important to keep Catholic principles such as these in mind when considering the societal response to a pandemic or, for that matter, to any threat to human life. If we had a moral obligation to use every possible means, even extraordinary means, to preserve life, then we should not even get into our cars, since there is a risk that we could be killed, given the fact that about 1,000 people die every year in Illinois in automobile accidents and over 35,000 people have died nationwide in auto accidents every year since 1951. We do not stop driving, however, and there is no moral imperative to stop driving, because we recognize that it would be an extraordinary burden on everyday life if people could not get to where they need to be for work, school, family, and other obligations to which they must

attend. Instead, we take safety precautions to minimize the risk, such as using seat belts, deploying air bags, and following the rules of the road.

Similarly, in the face of a pandemic, do we have a moral obligation to shut down our society, require people to stay at home, put employees out of work, send businesses into bankruptcy, impair the food supply chain, and prevent worshippers from going to church? I would say no. That would be imposing unduly burdensome and extraordinary means. While some people may voluntarily adopt such means, only ordinary means that are not unduly burdensome are morally required to preserve life, both on the part of individuals as well as society as a whole.

As we reflect on our moral obligations in light of the coronavirus pandemic, we do well to remember these basic teachings of Catholic moral theology as well as the words of Jesus himself: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna."

May God give us this grace. Amen.