

Episode: The Sanctity of Life

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence; I beg your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

We can never get over this magnificent truth of our existence, of our infinite dignity, fruit of having been created in God's image and likeness. Just weeks ago, we considered that classic Christmas homily of Pope Leo the Great in the fifth century, "Christian, remember your dignity and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition." Those wonderful words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman can be applied to so many facets of our life, including life itself. The Lord said to the Samaritan woman, if only you knew the gift of God. If only we knew the gift. And we ask that of the Lord right now, to grow in an appreciation of the sanctity of our life, of all human lives. The Lord himself said to us, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." The literal meaning of abundantly in the original text means super abundant, excessive overflowing. The Lord has come that we may have life to excess, overflowing. He wants us to develop a profound reverence towards the gift of life. There are various moments in the life of a human person that demand awe filled respect.

In the first place, the unborn. A great, mysterious miracle takes place in the womb of an expectant mother. If we could fully appreciate that process, we would fall to our knees. Each day we repeat those inspired words of St. Elizabeth at the moment of the visitation of Mary, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb." Our Blessed Mother will surely be delighted if we apply those same sentiments to each and every unborn child, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb." Not many weeks ago, we considered in the Mass a moving passage in the book of Maccabees; a mother and her seven sons had been arrested because they refused to violate the Jewish dietary law. This passage not only shows us what strength of conviction looks like, but it is also especially eloquent in its description of the sacredness of life. We read, "Now, the mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Though she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage, because of her hope in the Lord." She encouraged each of them in the language of their fathers. Filled with a noble spirit, she fired her woman's reasoning with a man's courage and said to them, "I do not know how you were formed in my womb, for I neither gave you breath nor soul nor life, neither did I frame the limbs of every one of you." Holy Spirit, we beg you to soften the hearts

and enlighten the intellects of those who persist in their denial of the humanity of each human being from the moment of conception.

Some of you are old enough to remember that remarkable moment when St. Teresa of Calcutta addressed the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., in 1994. Seated behind her were powerful leaders of the United States, including the president and vice president. In the audience, 3,000 people, including dignitaries from 150 countries. You could hear a pin drop as St. Teresa said in that clear, penetrating voice of hers, "Please don't kill the child. I want the child. Please give me the child. I am willing to accept any child who would be aborted and to give that child to a married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child." One year later, in his 1995 encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*, St. John Paul II argued that human life is inviolable and that Christians have a moral duty to defend it against threats such as abortion, euthanasia, and the culture of death that treats life as disposable. He taught that every person, regardless of age, ability, or stage of life, possesses inherent dignity, because each is created in the image of God. St. John Paul II stressed that even suffering and dying must be approached with reverence, rejecting the notion that life loses value when it is no longer productive or pleasurable. The Pope condemned abortion as an unspeakable crime because it attacks innocent, defenseless human life, and he called for laws to protect life at all stages. He also rejected euthanasia, insisting that true compassion involves caring for the sick and elderly, not ending their lives. And he wrote, "Life, one's own and that of others cannot be disposed of at will. It belongs to the author of life." Our magnificent Christian appreciation for life will also lead us to keep in our prayers those couples who are beseeching the giver of life to bless them with a child. Our vision of the sacredness of life needs to be running in the background, so to speak, each and every day. Pope Francis wrote, "Love is shown above all in the gaze. To love is to gaze upon the other with tender affection and respect, recognizing his or her sacred value. It signifies recognizing the other person as sacred ground where God dwells and where the fire of his love burns." In another document, he encouraged us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other. Removing sandals means approaching others with humility, reverence, and respect. It signifies recognizing the other person as sacred ground where God can be revealed. It is a matter of acknowledging the other's belovedness as a child of God.

You may recall that remarkable anecdote from the life of St. John Paul II. A bishop traveled to Rome to meet with the Holy Father. The day of that appointment, the bishop entered a church just inside the walls of the Vatican in order to pray. As he walked into the church, he saw a beggar sitting on the steps. He acknowledged the presence of that beggar. Perhaps gave him money, I don't know. But the point is that when he got inside the church, he was thinking to himself, "I think I've seen that person before." On the way out, he, once again, greeted the person who was there begging, looked at him and said, "Have we met before?" And the other said, "We studied together in a seminary." It turns out that the beggar was a priest. Well, the bishop was shaken, as you can imagine. Later that day, he met with St. John Paul II and recounted this meeting with a former classmate. Much to his surprise, the Holy Father said to him to go and find that person and bring him here this evening for dinner. You can imagine the surprise of the beggar when he was told this. Well, that evening, the three of them had supper together. That, in itself, is a remarkable anecdote. But, then comes something even more remarkable. At a certain moment, the Holy Father turned to the bishop and said, "Would you kindly leave the two of us alone?" And once the bishop had left, St. John Paul II turned to the beggar and said, "Would you please hear my confession?" The beggar couldn't believe his ears and blabbered, "But I don't have faculties." The Pope said, "I'm the Pope. You have faculties." Afterwards, St. John Paul II named this newly restored priest as special chaplain in charge of beggars in the city of Rome. That is what removing the sandals in the presence of another looks like.

Our faith-filled appreciation for life really is truly magnificent. Here are several vignettes that highlight this reverence. An important book by the economist Dr. Catherine Pakaluk was published in 2024. It is entitled, *Hannah's Children, the Women Quietly Defying the Birth Dearth*. The book has as its biblical inspiration, the Old Testament story of Hannah, who prayed for and was blessed with children, seeing them as her purpose. *Hannah's Children* is based on interviews with mothers of large families, that is five or more children. The interviews are with women who made this decision because they knew that motherhood would give them a new identity, meaning, and inner peace. And the stories, in fact, do reveal a lot of joy, a lot of growth, a very deep sense of fulfillment. The author describes children as quote, "The key to infinity." This striking phrase captures the sense that each child opens out onto something eternal and immeasurable in value. That poignant phrase, the key to infinity, came to mind when I was speaking with an elderly friend who had just become a great grandfather. He explained that at the moment when he held his great grandson for the first time, he was overwhelmed with emotion as he contemplated that new life, whose existence, his own life, had set in motion.

It is so very important that each of us sees all those around us as a brother, a sister, someone who possesses infinite dignity. There is a very moving video of a young boy, perhaps twelve years old, whose dream was to play tackle football. Given his obvious physical limitations, his chances of playing were practically non-existent. And yet- it was all he thought of. His dream came true, when in a championship game, he was allowed to suit up and get on the field for one single play. Both teams had spoken about this beforehand. The quarterback handed off the ball to the boy who took two steps forward and then, without being touched by anyone, fell on his face. The quarterback reassured him, said, "Don't worry, let's do the same play." So, as the boy received the football and started running forward awkwardly, a most unusual scene unfolded, both offense and defense accompanied him as he ran the length of the field. The scene brought to mind the Red Sea parting to allow the Israelites to pass through. The crowds were going wild. As the boy crossed into the end zone, he collapsed, ecstatic. Overwhelmed that he had finally scored a touchdown. Well, God bless those kind souls who made this dream a reality.

One final anecdote, which is very simple, very dear to me, very personal story. One day years ago, when the six of us kids, along with our parents, were sitting in the kitchen doing something very old fashioned, that is, talking. All of a sudden, the phone rang. My father answered the phone and began a very short but warm conversation. At the end of the conversation, he said, "No, no, well, so, thank you so much for calling," and he hung up. We said, "Who was that?" And he said, "No idea. It was a wrong number." Dare we say that that tiny vignette illustrates that which Pope Francis was asking us to do, to remove our sandals in the presence of others, to be kind, to exhibit to others tenderness as a way of respecting, manifesting our appreciation for the sanctity of life. Mary, guide us in this adventure, this marvelous adventure of ours, this adventure of life, and give us not only a tremendous appreciation for life, but also a great eloquence through our words, through our deeds, so that we can create all around us this reverence for the gift of life.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.