

**Remarks by  
Bishop Felipe J. Estévez  
Annual Florida Respect Life Conference  
October 19, 2013**

“I Give My Heart to Jesus.”

Good evening, my brothers and sisters in the Lord. I greet you in the name of Archbishop Wenski, our host Bishop Gerald Barbarito, and all the bishops of Florida, expressing to you our heartfelt thanks for the sacrifice of time, talent and treasure that you bring to this all-important ministry of our Church.

It is my special honor to be with you here this evening and to serve the Florida Catholic Conference as the episcopal moderator for respect life and family life ministries. The State Pro-Life Coordinating Committee (SPLCC), which has been active in our state since 1975, performs a tremendously valuable service. The members of SPLCC, the diocesan directors of respect life, deserve a great deal of credit for these annual respect life conferences that help each of us to listen to outstanding heroic leaders promising the culture of life, thanks to these conferences are renewed and encouraged, so that we can continue to work in this very special, hard and holy vineyard, where we are called to defend the sanctity of life.

The chairman of the State Pro-Life Coordinating Committee, Mr. Don Kazimir, is also our host for this year's conference. I offer my congratulations and appreciation to Mr. Kazimir and his committee, who have worked very hard and provided for us an excellent conference this weekend.

Our Catholic social teaching and our reasons based on real facts reminds us that human life is sacred at every stage and in whatever condition along life's spectrum, from womb to tomb.

In our conference this weekend we have touched on saving lives by helping to end abortion in a loving proclamation of the Gospel of life to our youth as the Sisters of Life presented it; through ministry to families condemned during an execution; how the Florida bishops have defended life and protected human dignity over the past 40 years; post-abortion healing in prison; the role of the blessed mother and how we will close Planned Parenthood one-by-one in our beloved country, and critical decisions at the end of life.

This is a rich agenda, and I want to express my sincere thanks to all of the presenters who gave up their time to prepare their talks so that we may benefit from their knowledge. However, in our local communities and even in our personal environments, we know there are even more instances in which we will be called to witness and to work to defend the sanctity of human life.

If, on occasion you feel overwhelmed, you are not alone. In fact, I suggest to you that when you feel overwhelmed in this work that you put a smile on your face. It is a reminder from

our Lord that without him we cannot do anything, but with him all things are possible.

In the book of Romans (12:12) we see: “Be joyful in hope, be patient under trial, persevere in prayer.” This is a beautiful reminder for us all. In fact, prayer is the most important part of our work. We must persevere in keeping our foundation of prayer. Yes, as Mother Teresa reminds us, we must be faithful and leave the results to the Lord.

Yes, how we live and how we love are very important in this work. We must, as the theme of our conference suggests, “Give our hearts to Jesus.” Or as Pope Francis might say it, we must have “a big heart open to God.” We in the pro-life movement must take this counsel and persevere in living it.

Spiritual writers have reflected the nature of conversion. Proclamations that elicit fear of hell might bear initial fruit, but the conversions wrought in their wake are neither so profound nor as lasting as those that emerge from recognition of the love of God and a free response to that love.

Saint Paul said, and Benedict XVI reminded us in *Deus Caritas Est*, that “the charity of Christ impels us” in our Christian lives. We must ask ourselves: is our zeal impelled by love, or by anger? In proposing the sanctity of each individual life, we must carefully convey that God loves the person to whom we are speaking.

What a big job this is. It seems so much beyond us. We cannot do this by ourselves. We have to turn to the Lord Jesus. We must give him our hearts!

But, we have another source of hope, Our Lady. For it was she, who through the work of the Holy Spirit, allowed her to have the Son in the flesh. Blessed John Paul II proclaimed Our Lady of Guadalupe as the Patroness of the Americas and the pro-life movement has adopted her as a primary intercessor in our work.

It was a woman who allowed this world to be transformed. It was a woman who showed us how to offer ourselves faithfully, even when the future is unknown, selflessly, saying yes, not only to the Incarnation of our Lord, but to the Redemption of all humankind.

No doubt you are aware of our Holy Father's interview with his fellow Jesuit, Father Spanardo, in which the secular press gave great attention to abortion, gay marriage and contraception, not always in a proper context, and not always as we would perhaps like these issues to be portrayed. In fact, our new Vicar for Christ, Pope Francis, has enjoyed extraordinary coverage in the media, even though the coverage of his lengthy interview has failed to include his reaffirmation of the teachings of the Church and of his being a “son of the Church,” as he put it.

Even so, the attention given to his remarks provide us, who are so pro-life and who profoundly recognize the value of each and every person, to reflect on our own attitudes and our proclamation of the gospel, indeed the witness of our lives.

Consider this quote from the interview by Pope Francis: “I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person’s life. God is in everyone’s life. Even if the life of the person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else – God is in this person’s life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of the person is a land there is always a space in which the good seed to grow. You have to trust God.”

We must endeavor to remember the Holy Father’s words in our work to defend the sanctity of life. Some of you will remember Abby Johnson, who spoke at this conference when it was in the diocese of Venice. In her book, *Unplanned*, she writes about how she came to know the people who were picketing the outside of her abortion clinic. She found them reasonable and kind. They did not fit the stereotypes that abortion advocates portray. That witness further opened the door to the gradual conversion of heart and mind.

In *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 28, the Council Fathers exhorted us:

“Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them.”

This love and good will, to be sure, must in no way render us indifferent to truth and goodness. Indeed, love itself impels the Disciples of Christ to speak the saving truth to all people. But it is necessary to distinguish between error, which always merits repudiation, and the person in error, who never loses the dignity of being a person even when he is flawed by false or inadequate religious notions. (10) God alone is the judge and searcher of hearts, for that reason He forbids us to make judgments about the internal guilt of anyone. (11)

The teaching of Christ even requires that we forgive injuries, (12) and extends the law of love to include every enemy, according to the command of the New Law: “You have heard that it was said: Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thy enemy. But I say to you: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute and calumniate you” (Matt. 5:43-44).

On the road to Calvary, Mary stood with her son, endured humiliation, mocking and ridicule. She symbolizes all who stand in solidarity with those whose pain is public. She stands with all mothers, with women in difficult and unplanned pregnancies, with those who are single mothers. She stands with all of them, and befriends them all.

It was this woman, Mary the Mother of God, and our Mother, who we can go to and rely on in showing us how to work in this special vineyard of pro-life.

We cannot do it by ourselves, but we know our petitions to her are heard and honored. Her Son has trouble denying any of her requests, “Do whatever He tells you,” she said to the

servants when she and her empathy and compassion realized the need for the wedding that day in Cana.

We must remember that wherever the Cross is to be found, she is ready to offer herself for our help. She will be with us in all of our work to bring Christ into this world.

Pope Benedict tells us, "One who has hope lives differently." This certainly was true of Father Jerzy Popieluszko. Let me tell you about this holy man of God. Last year, the Bishop of Phoenix, Bishop Thomas Olmsted, addressed us and talked about having courage to proclaim the gospel of life.

Father Popieluszko began his priestly ministry as a parochial vicar in various parishes, with his final appointment being at St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in Warsaw. From the beginning of his priestly service, he spoke out against abortion, seeing it as a brutal example of a culture of death, a tragedy for the mother and baby, and indeed for all involved; he saw it as evidence of a seriously flawed society because it failed to defend the dignity of the most vulnerable human persons.

Perhaps Father Jerzy's conviction about the tragedy of abortion was heightened by his ministry with medical personnel, which he carried out from the first years of his priesthood. In fact, he was so well known for his ministry with healthcare professionals that he was asked to oversee the medical arrangements for Pope John Paul II's famous pastoral visit to Poland in 1979, recounted in the documentary, *Nine Days that Changed the World*.

Why have more than 20 million people visited Father Jerzy's grave since he died? Why does the Church say that the Blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the faith-filled future for the Church?

You and I gather here today, not because we are courageous like Father Popieluszko, but because we want to be so, and because we know in faith where to find courage and hope. In the love of our Crucified and Risen Lord, truly present with us in the Eucharist, we find the grace to be wiser than despair.

The first shrine built to honor Mary, the mother of the Lord took place in St. Augustine, Fla. Its image is the nursing mother, Our Lady of La Leche y del buen parto. The Native Americans had the greatest devotion to her.

In looking at her the beauty of women stands out, along with the value of motherhood and the unbreakable bond of mother-child, which abortion violates and deeply damages. This sacred image restores our eyes to affirm life with courage.