

Annual Florida Respect Life Conference Closing Talk

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By Bishop Victor Galeone

Have you ever been out on a dark night, so dark that you couldn't see two feet in front of you? I was once-during my missionary years in Peru. I had just celebrated Mass in a one-room schoolhouse perched on the slope of mountain for the inhabitants of the hamlet Pampachiri. After Mass, as I started to follow the sound of the catechist's footsteps in front of me, it occurred to me that I couldn't see him. We had no flashlights or kerosene lanterns. There was no moon, just countless stars, filling the pitch-black night, like studded jewels.

Realizing that the pathway straddled the side of the precipice, I panicked. "Remigio, I can't see you! I'm afraid I'll go over the side." Returning, he chuckled as he handed me the back edge of his poncho: "Here, padre, hold onto to this. Just follow me."

That frightening experience of 30 years ago serves as a metaphor for the moral chaos enveloping us at present, brought on by the culture of death. Many of us in the Respect Life movement have been frozen immobile – fearful of a moving forward.

The beauty of these three days is that we have heard the voice of the Lord calling out to us through the bleak darkness: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me, will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Here, Jesus refers to himself as "the light of the world." But doesn't he also say the same about his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, "You are the light of the world?" Just how does our light differ from his?

In fact, it doesn't. It's one and the same light. Jesus is like the sun, blazing in the noonday sky, the true light of the world. Our lives are like mirrors, meant to reflect the light of Christ to those around us.

Now, if a mirror is smeared with muck and filth, what can it reflect? If our souls are steeped in anger, hatred, prejudice and sexual immorality – what can they reflect?

For many years now, in an effort to shed light on the culture of death, the church has held high the Light of Christ – the Gospel of Life. But the darkness seems to be ever more pervasive, where "evil is called good, and good evil."

Such is the case in Vermont where persons of the same sex may now form a civil union with all the benefits of a legal marriage.

Such is the case in Oregon, where a law, momentarily being appealed, would permit gravely ill patients the right to terminate their lives with the help of a physician.

Such is the case in Princeton, N.J., where Professor Peter Singer sees no moral difference between catching fish and killing babies; and he defends the moral superiority of dogs and pigs over infants.

I wonder just how Professor Singer's opinion differs from that of Timothy McVeigh, who absolved himself for the children murdered during his act of terrorism in Oklahoma City, by referring to them as mere “collateral damage.”

How did we ever descend to such degradation? How could this happen in a nation that welcomed millions of immigrants, sailing past the Statue of Liberty bearing the inscription: “Give me your tired, your poor, your feeble, your hungry masses yearning to breath free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

I'm not a lawyer, but those who are tell me that the year 1950 marked the start of a new legal era in America. Prior to then, the laws of our land were based on common law, which in turn, were based on natural law. The Ten Commandments are nothing more than the expression of natural law, which is written in our hearts, as St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans (Chapter 2). For example, until 1950, abortion, adultery, fornication and sodomy were all considered crimes in almost every state of the union. Today, only sodomy remains on the books of a few states and is rarely enforced.

Now around 1950, the Model Penal Code supplanted common law as the basis for interpreting all existing laws. According to the Moral Penal Code, it's human consent – not natural law – that now serves as the bedrock of our legal system. As Professor Dennis Teti, a professor of constitutional law, expressed it in a recent article: “Legal and political practitioners now subscribe to the opinion that we as individuals or as a community are our own law. We do not answer to God, nature, or any authority above our personal or collective will. Freedom does not mean conforming our will to (objective) moral truths... According to the belief that currently dominates law...freedom is radical autonomy, a total separation of human choice and action from any conception of objective, superior truth that could provide moral guidance to man.”

For anyone who doubts Professor Teti's assessment, we have Justice Souter's opinion of 10 years ago in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

In stark contrast to this viewpoint, we have our Holy Father's words in his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*: “To claim the right to abortion, infanticide and euthanasia, and to recognize that right in law, means to attribute to human freedom a perverse and evil significance: That of an absolute power over others and against others. This is the death of true freedom.” (EV No.20)

Going through my files in preparation for this talk, I came across two “Letters to the Editor” of the Baltimore Sun newspaper from the late 1970s. These letters

demonstrate the chasm that exists between the two present-day, opposing worldviews, the Moral Penal Code vs. Natural Law.

In the years since they were written, these letters have lost none of their relevance: “Sir: Imagine a church that decided that it is wrong to eat the flesh of animals. This church of the Holy Vegetarians would have every right in our society, to require its own members to abstain from eating meat. They could also attempt to persuade non-members, of the evils of meat eating.

In either case democratic freedom of choice is not threatened. One may choose not to join their church. One may disagree with their arguments. “Suppose, however, that the Vegetarian Church organizes a political action committee to pressure legislators into passing a law that forces others to conform to their dogma. Imagine also that a present part of their plan is to try to compel the poor to be vegetarians by removing governmental financial assistance in buying meat.

“Surely we will recognize such political activity as a threat to a basic democratic right – the right of freedom of choice. Surely we will resist attempts of such a religious group to use the law to force conformity to their dogma on other citizens.”

While the above analogy, like any such argument, does not perfectly present the situation, it serves to suggest the real danger to democracy in the legislative activity of anti-abortion groups. They have every right to their dogma that the life of the fetus is more important than the quality of life for individuals, for families and for the community as a whole. They have no right to force conformity to their dogma on those who do not agree with them. Rev. Alfred B. Starratt, rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church

The next week the following letter appeared in the same newspaper: “Sir: In his March 2 letter to the editor, the Rev. Alfred B. Starratt compares anti-abortion groups to a hypothetical church of the Holy Vegetarians, who demand that all meat-eaters ‘conform to their dogma.’ If the fetus is merely a growth of disposable tissue like tonsils, the analogy is quite apt, and apologies should be extended to pro-abortionists for attempting to convert them to ‘Vegetarianism.’

If, on the other hand, the fetus is already a member of the human family – albeit its most defenseless – then Dr. Starrett's analogy should be emended as follows: “Imagine a church that decided that it is proper to eat human flesh. This church of the Holy Cannibals even succeeds in persuading the highest court of the land to issue a solemn decree sanctioning their chief dogma.

Legally, they would now have every right in our society to require their own members to partake of human flesh. They could even attempt to persuade non-members of the delight of meat eating. In either case, democratic freedom is not threatened. One may choose not to join their church. One may disagree with their arguments. “Suppose, however, that the cannibalistic church organizes a political action committee to pressure legislators into passing a law that forces others to contribute financially to their practice. Imagine also that a present part of their

plan is to try to compel the poor to become cannibals by extending government financial assistance so that they can afford to buy human flesh.

“Surely we will recognize such political activity as a threat to the most basic of all rights – the right to life. Surely we will resist the attempts of such a religious group to use the law to force conformity to their dogma on other citizens.”

Frankly, it saddens me to think that a fellow clergyman would regard a woman's right to freedom of choice as more important than the life of a fetus. As a firm believer in the Judeo-Christian ethic, I consider the fetus a person: ‘O Lord, You knit me (a person!) together in my mother's womb. (Ps. 139:13) So to deny the fetus his basic right to life is to embark on the road called “Quality of Life,” which leads to Auschwitz. Rev. Victor Galeone, associate pastor, St. William of York Church.

On January 22, 1973, America embarked on that road that leads to Auschwitz. Three years later, Jesuit Father Robert Graham published an article in *The Catholic Historical Review* entitled, “The Right to Kill in the Third Reich: Prelude to Genocide.”

First, Father Graham reminds us that we are not immune to disaster. “Man's memory is short; the same temptations recur in every generation. The power of life and death is a strong, intoxicating potion.”

Then he quotes statistics seldom remembered or mentioned from Germany's journey along the road to death: “Hitler's first victims were his own fellow Germans and Austrians. Upwards of 80,000, perhaps 100,000 countrymen - mentally ill, epileptics, feeble-minded, deformed-were killed without formality, in brand new gas chambers, mostly in 1940-1941.”

Father Graham notes that the euthanasia program was only officially launched as part of the “war effort” in 1939. The battle by the German Catholic Bishops against the road to legalized euthanasia was immediate. Father Graham quotes a letter of 1940 from Cardinal Bertram to a government official: “The point at issue is the practice of government agencies to decree that the incurably insane, the so-called worthless lives, be either destroyed or used as experimental subjects in the search of new methods of curing other diseases...”

Do you hear an echo in that statement for utilizing aborted babies for stem cell research?

In December of the following year, the German bishops sent another strong letter to the government authorities: “At present there is a large-scale campaign for the killing of incurables through a film being recommended by the authorities and designed to calm the public conscience through appeals to compassion.”

Here in America there is no need for pro-death propaganda films to be produced by the government. No, they are being provided by the private sector and even winning Academy Awards, as in the case of “The Cider House Rules.”

Our Lord expressed it well, when he said, “The children of darkness are so much wiser in their generation than the children of light.” The Light of Christ that goes back 2000 years stands upon the foundation of faith extending 2000 years earlier - back to Abraham and then continues on back right to the dawn of creation, where we hear the voice of God calling out, “Let us make man in our own image and likeness.” Yes, we are the only creature that God has made in his own image and consequently we possess intrinsic value.

Therefore, the value of each and every human life – which is intrinsic:

is not dependent upon any outside variable for worth;

is not dependent upon any political or social whimsy;

is not dependent upon the passing shadows of economic aspirations;

is not dependent upon any created being whatsoever!

It just is because it is rooted in the being of God alone, the God who created us in his own image and likeness!

In this war against the forces of darkness, however, we cannot depend solely on our church leaders – the Holy Father, the bishops, priests, and religious – as crucial as their leadership in this cause might be. No, in this battle we must enlist the help of the laity, the shock troops, so to speak. At times in the past, it was precisely the laity who put the church leadership to shame. I would like to conclude with one concrete instance. In what follows, I rely heavily on an article written by Anne Marie Collopy.

On August 9, 1943 an Austrian farmer was beheaded in a military prison outside of Linz, Germany. His crime? He was found guilty of refusing to perform the required service in the German army. His name? Franz Jaggerstatter.

Franz was the handsome, illegitimate son of a soldier slain in World War I. He was well loved in his little village of St. Radegund. The first one to own a motorcycle in the area, he was known as a brazen flirt, dancer, card shark, and sportsman. But in his early twenties something happened that affected him profoundly. A deep religious experience had him give up his life of bon vivant and begin each day, kneeling at the communion rail. Shortly afterwards, he married and soon became the father of three daughters.

When Hitler's troops occupied Austria, Franz was the only person in his village to vote against the Anschluss – that is, the annexation of his homeland by Germany.

In 1941, he briefly underwent military training, but then vowed never again to cooperate with the Nazis. Throughout the following year, he wrote a series of commentaries on the Christian duty to resist.

Many priests – even his own bishop – advised him repeatedly that he had a greater responsibility to protect his family than to oppose a civil authority against which he had virtually no power.

His mother and relatives implored him to quit worrying about the Germans and to answer the call to military service by requesting noncombatant duties.

On March 1, 1943, reporting to the draft board as required, Jaggerstatter affirmed that he would not perform any service whatsoever for the Nazis, and he also refused to sign the oath of obedience to the Fuehrer.

For the next five months, Franz was imprisoned in Linz. During that time, military officials, clergy and family members strove to persuade him to compromise by serving in the ambulance corps. The authorities even brought his wife from Austria by train to plead with him.

When his own attorney challenged him to name a single priest encouraging his flock to behave in this fashion, Franz answered: “I cannot believe that just because a man has a wife and children, he is free to offend God by lying, not to mention all the other atrocities he would be required to do thereafter.”

In the end, he wrote to his wife of the unbearable anguish in his soul throughout the ordeal. “It is not possible for me to free you from the pain you must suffer on my account...I now understand how hard it must have been for Christ to prepare such a great sorrow for his Mother. And now my dear ones, farewell, and do not forget me in your prayers. Keep the commandments, and through God's grace we will soon meet again in heaven.”

In the eyes of those who treat abortion on demand, euthanasia, stem cell research, and capital punishment as legal “rights” and view those of us who resist as fools – Franz Jaggerstatter was a “religious fanatic.” In the eyes of God and those who continue to fight for life, he is a hero and a saintly role model.

Jaggerstatter's ashes lie buried in the cemetery of his native town, which now acknowledges him with a plaque in the town square as a prophet ahead of his time.

May the Lord rise up among us, other heroes and heroines to be prophets in our day of the Gospel of Life – beacons of light shining brilliantly in the midst of the despairing darkness of the culture of death.