

Address to the Florida Council of Catholic Women

October 28, 2002

By Bishop Victor Galeone

Twenty-four years ago this month, Carol Woytila stepped out onto the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square in Rome as John Paul II, and addressed the expectant crowd below with the words: "Non abiate paura! – Be not afraid!"

"What a strange way to address the world for the first time," I thought. The intervening years, however, have proved him a prophet.

When the Florida Council of Catholic Women (FCCW) selected the theme for this year's annual convention, I was delighted to learn that it was the same as John Paul's encouraging words to a fragile world in 1978: "Be not afraid!"

This evening I would like to focus our attention on that theme in so far as it relates to you, the Catholic women of the Florida Council.

I've pointed out on other occasions that women are often stereotyped as "the weaker sex." As I used to tell the men of my mission in Peru, "If we're talking about physical strength, that may be true. But when it comes to real moral stamina, the women invariably have it over us men. "Then I would go on to say to those macho types, sitting in front of me for the obligatory baptismal talk, "Tell me, that burro in your corral is physically stronger than you, right? Well, does that make your burro superior to you?"

No, when it comes to real moral endurance, you women, as a group, surpass us men. For example, on Easter Sunday morning, where were the brave, tough disciples? Shaking in their sandals behind locked doors. And where were the members of the so-called weaker sex? Long before dawn, while it was still dark, they were heading for the tomb to complete what the men should have been doing – embalming the body.

Time and again, Holy Scripture brings home the point of women's moral stamina:

- When King Ahab was whining over Naboth's refusal to sell him his vineyard, Jezebel, the king's wife, reproached him, "A fine ruler over Israel you are! Get up, eat, and be cheerful. I will obtain that vineyard for you." And she did! (As an aside, I don't recommend your imitating Jezebel's tactics, however. It might wind you up in jail.)
- As David was preparing to avenge Nabal's angry rebuff to David's soldiers, it was Nabal's wife, Abigail, who risked her own life to pacify the situation.
- We also have the example of Judith and Esther, both of whom were willing to die in order to save the chosen people from extinction!
- Moving into the New Testament, we have one of my favorites, that nameless woman from Syrophenicia, pleading with Jesus to rid her daughter of an evil spirit. Here she was a pagan, asking this favor from the

wandering Jewish preacher, only to be told, “Woman, it's not right to take the children's bread away from them and toss it to the dogs.” Her response would have dissolved a heart of stone: “Ay, Lord, but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.” “Lord, I'm not asking for a whole loaf, just a few crumbs.” And he replied, “Woman, great is your faith. Go, your daughter is healed.”

- The Samaritan woman exemplifies that same spirit of fearlessness in dealing with Our Lord. “How dare you, a Jew, asking me, a decent Samaritan woman for a drink.” Jesus, the ever-patient Hound of Heaven, broke through her brazen façade by taking her one step at a time to full faith in him.
- But the prime example of fearlessness in all of Scripture is Mary, our Mother. The first time we meet her, the Angel Gabriel assures her with the very theme of this conference: “Don't be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God...” So often many people incorrectly think that humility means becoming a doormat. Not so! While Mary accepted God's invitation by calling herself the Lord's handmaiden (the word in the original means slave-girl), still she could recognize the full truth about herself: “Behold, all generations to come will call me blessed.” And was it anything other than self-assured fearlessness that permitted Mary – after Jesus had reminded her that his hour had not yet come – to say to the waiters, “Do whatever he tells you?” If it had not been for Mary's insistence, would there have been a miracle at Cana?
- Moving on through the long history of the church, we have sterling examples of women who changed the course of history by stepping in where men had failed or feared to tread. It was an illiterate shepherdess, Joan of Arc, who rallied the French troops in the siege of Orleans, which ultimately – within a few years – sent the English forces fleeing back across the channel.
- And it was another illiterate, Catherine of Sienna, the tanner's daughter, who was responsible for ending the so-called Babylonian Captivity of the papacy by going to Avignon and confronting Gregory XI to his face with the mandate from God to return to Rome and reform the church.
- In our own day, we have the example of Mother Teresa, the diminutive nun wrapped in her sari, leading the full assembly of the United Nations in praying together the prayer of Francis of Assisi for world peace. And a few years later, it was the same Mother Teresa at the Washington Prayer Breakfast, publicly chiding the President of the United States who had already vetoed the bill banning partial-birth abortions, with the ominous words: “If we can allow a mother the right to kill her own child in the womb, how can we deny anyone the right to kill perfect strangers on the street?”
- And more recently last month to be exact – we have the case of Erika Harold, Miss America 2003. As an op-ed piece in the Washington Times pointed out, “Erika Harold is the multiculturalists' dream. Her mother traces her ancestry to black slaves and her great-great grandparents were Choctaw and Cherokee.

- Her father tells of traces of Greek, German, Welsh and English forbears in the melting pot from which she sprang.” But the promoters of the Miss America Pageant nixed Miss Harold's platform. You see, her platform was simple and direct: “Teenage Sexual Abstinence: Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself.” Refusing to tone down her message in the face pressure from the Planned Parenthood-types, Miss Harold sensed that abstinence was important to and for teens, that to tone it down was to betray her young audience and her own principles. She prizes a letter from a fan in the Chicago inner city, who wrote: “You changed my life because of what you said and now I made the decision to be abstinent because of what you said...”

I suspect that some of you may be thinking, “Bishop Vic, what does all this do with us? Here you are filling our heads with images of saintly women and beauty queens, while we're just ordinary garden-variety moms and grandmothers. How do we fit into this picture of making a difference in our consumerist, sex-saturated culture?”

I'm glad you asked. You see, I've saved the best for last. An ordinary, garden-variety mother of six, who 30 years ago stood up to confront the politically correct powers of the feminist movement to derail the ERA train that was zooming through our nation. That woman was Phyllis Schlafly. What follows depends heavily on an article from Citizen Magazine, Nov. 2002.

When Schlafly entered the fray, the ERA had been written into the Democratic and Republican Party platforms, passed by the House and Senate, rubber-stamped by President Nixon and ratified by 13 states. Within a year, it would have 30 of the 38 ratifications it needed by 1979 to be added to the United States Constitution.

Schlafly gave her readers the tools they needed to make a difference outlining the case against the ERA in her plainspoken, Midwestern way, and then telling them how to contact and lobby their legislators.

In September 1972, 100 women from 30 states came to a conference Schlafly organized in St. Louis. The resulting group's name was the same as its sole purpose - Stop ERA. By 1973, members were asking their state legislators for hearings on the amendment so they could present their side. Schlafly was often invited to speak, with supporters paying her plane fare.

The ERA gained five more states over the next few years – but four states, which had already ratified it, rescinded their support after Schlafly's grassroots army went to work. Not even President Carter's extending the ratification deadline by three years was able to save the amendment. It was officially defeated in 1982, when it ran out of time, three states shy of ratification. Talk about the power of a woman! If you would like to learn more about Phyllis Schlafly's work today, you can log onto www.eagleforum.org.

Again, I can hear some of you wondering, “Bishop Vic, we hear what you're

saying, but still, where do we fit in?" I'm getting to that now.

Last Friday evening I attended a special dinner presentation outlining a new grassroots movement whose agenda is very similar to Phyllis Schlafly's. Before talking about them, however, I would like to tell you about what brought this group into existence. It was Emily's List. May I ask for a show of hands, how many of you have heard of Emily's List?

Back in 1985, 25 women gathered to send letters about a network, known as Emily's List, which they were forming to raise money for pro-abortion, Democratic women candidates in the 1986 election cycle. That year they raised \$350 thousand for two Senate Candidates, one of whom was Barbara Mikulski. Every election year since then, they have successfully increased their donor base to almost \$11 million for eight candidates two years ago, the 2000 election. For this year's election, they have raised over \$23 million! And all of their candidates are staunchly pro-abortion.

On May 1st this year, a group of committed Christians got together to form "Ave Maria List." The purpose was to raise awareness on how crucial it is that the Senate returns to the pro-life camp. Justices with impeccable credentials, are not meeting with approval because they fail to pass the pro-choice litmus test, set up by the present Senate. Ave Maria List will support only those candidates who are pro-life, pro-family, and pro-subsidarity. They are channeling funds into three key senate races that are too close to call at the present moment.

In making these remarks, I am not endorsing any political party. I am merely trying to highlight the challenging times in which we live. As Pope John Paul has said: "We are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the 'culture of death' and 'the culture of life.'"

Ladies, how can you help? In three ways:

First, learn who the pro-life candidates are in your voting district. Vote for them next week. If you are so blessed, send them a contribution, large or small, to help them get their message out. Remember Emily's List and the success that they have had.

Second, for those who are free and able, volunteer to make phone calls for the pro-life candidates in your district. You can do so from the comfort of your own home. Better still, volunteer to hand out leaflets at your polling place on behalf of the candidates. Get involved. Recall Phyllis Schlafly's cadre of volunteers and what they accomplished.

Third – and this is something for all of us and the most important thing of all – let us pray. I strongly – even passionately – ask all of us to pray the rosary from now until Election Day for the success of the pro-life candidates in the close races. In 1571, the forces of the Turks were defeated through the power of Our Lady's beads. The forces of the culture of death can likewise be defeated if only we storm heaven with the power of that same marvelous prayer.

I repeat, let's make that promise now, before we leave this banquet hall, that from now until Election Day, we will pray the rosary daily for the triumph of the forces of life in the election next week.

“Be not afraid!” He who is with us is far more powerful than the forces of darkness against us. “Ladies, be not afraid! It is the Lord – the Lord of Light and the Lord of Life!”