

27th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (October 4, 2009)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

Our readings today certainly have a ‘wedding feel’ about them, don’t they? The Genesis account of the creation of woman from man and how husband and wife become one flesh, and Jesus’ repetition of those words, are often used at wedding celebrations (in fact they were used at the wedding held here [today] yesterday). That Genesis story is especially interesting, with God creating woman from the rib he had taken from the man. It calls to mind the story of Jon, a 6-year-old, who heard his pastor speak about that story at Mass. Jon thought about it a lot, even after he got home. Later that day he was playing outside when he ran into the house and complained: “Mom, my side hurts—I think I’m having a wife!” I’m not married, of course, but I don’t think it works that way...

It is a happy coincidence that we hear these readings on the first Sunday of October, designated by the U.S. Catholic bishops as Respect Life Sunday. After all, it is the union of man and woman in the marital embrace—“the two of them becom[ing] one”—that leads to the miracle, the gift of new life. That new life, that new and unique and separate human person comes into being at conception. Everything that happens thereafter is further growth and maturation. Birth, of course, is a most special moment, but that life and that person’s existence began about nine months beforehand. Further growth after birth occurs—through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and the various stages of adulthood. Of course, with adulthood comes those signs of further aging—signs that some do not like and may even try to hide. Here I take great comfort in the Bible: “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained by virtuous living.” Book of Proverbs: chapter 16, verse 31. You can look it up!

Our Catholic faith continues to remind us of the fundamental truth: life is a gift from God, a gift that has infinite worth, value and dignity—from its beginning at conception to its conclusion at natural death. It is a gift, therefore, that is deserving of respect and protection—including legal protection. At no stage on that entire spectrum of life is the person anything less than a living, human person, made in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. That is true of the newly-fertilized egg, the embryo, the severely handicapped newborn, the convicted murderer, and patient who is terminally ill or in the nursing home’s Alzheimer’s unit. The details of their stories vary, but they and we share the same fundamental gift: life, the gift of God who is the author and creator of life.

It is so sad that there is a need to remind ourselves of these truths. They seem and indeed are so obvious, but it is also all too obvious that our world and even our own nation have forgotten them far too often. And I speak not only about abortion—the deliberate taking of the life of an unborn child—although that situation is a special tragedy, attacking as it does someone who is totally innocent and completely helpless. I will not repeat now what I have said before about abortion as the grave offense against the unborn child that it is. I do, however, want to address briefly one argument that is often raised on this front; in fact, I saw it again recently in a letter to the editor in the Courier. The claim is this: those who are against abortion are concerned only about the unborn—they don’t care about what happens after birth.

I must confess that my blood pressure rises when I see or hear that argument, because it is not true. As a counter-example, take the Catholic Church on any level: worldwide, national, diocesan or parish. In fact, let’s look at our own St. Edward parish:

--yes, we have parishioners who advocate specifically for the unborn through their prayers and through their active helping presence to expectant mothers in great organizations like Birthright. And we also have parishioners who take children into their homes and families through foster care or adoption—children who might not otherwise have a loving home and family.

--we also have parishioners who literally feed the hungry through Community meals, who prepare houses to be fit for families through Habitat for Humanity, and—through other forms of social outreach—perform these and the other corporal works of mercy.

--we have parishioners who reach out to others who are sick, lonely, or in need of an open ear and a friendly presence; for example, those who take Holy Communion to our homebound, in nursing homes or at the Hospice House.

--we have parishioners who provide such an important and comforting presence and service to those who mourn the death of loved ones and who help them through every stage of the funeral process.

I could go on and on and on. In these and so many other ways, the Church **on all levels** not only teaches but also lives out the call to respect and defend the right to life and the dignity and value of every human life...even if there is always more to do and perhaps to be done more effectively. The Church would not fulfill her role as guardian of God's truth if she did not continue to teach and proclaim this truth—even if that teaching provokes hostility and ridicule as it surely does. In *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Benedict's recent encyclical on social justice and human development, he addresses these issues of human life and their necessary connection to justice issues. For example, he addresses the genuine need to be good stewards and caretakers of the environment—but he then connects that concern with those life issues: “If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death...if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology...It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves.” In other words, we human beings—made in the image and likeness of God—are also part of the environment. If we do not protect human life across its whole spectrum, then our alleged concern for the rest of the environment rings hollow.

Later on, Pope Benedict raises this question: “How can we be surprised by the indifference shown towards situations of human degradation, when such indifference extends even to our attitude towards what is and is not human?” This pope really has a knack for nailing it. Of course we cannot focus so exclusively on the unborn that we forget or ignore the threats against the life and dignity of others. But if we as a culture and as a nation do not acknowledge and protect the life and dignity of the unborn person, the disabled person, the terminally ill person—if we consider them as somehow less than human and therefore ‘disposable’—then how can we logically be amazed at the other forms of human poverty, oppression and injustice? Pope Benedict is absolutely right—it is all of one piece. As he said: “The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations; in a word, integral human development.”

And so we come back to the beginning, back to Genesis and to God's creation of man and woman and God's gift of life and new life that comes from their love. Life comes from God, and God the Son himself took on our human life and condition; as our reading from Hebrews reminds us, Jesus “was made ‘lower than the angels’ that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” That is why these things matter—that is why **life** matters. God gave us incomparable dignity and worth when he made us in his image and likeness and even more so when his Son became one of us. How can we do anything less than to thank God daily for that gift of life and to pray and work tirelessly to defend and advocate for that gift for every person?