



Some Reflections on End-of-Life Issues

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Thank you, my friends. I appreciate this chance to share some more reflections with you on the culture of life.

I am very conscious, as I'm sure you are, that this is an election year. And in these times I think we need to look to the example of our great patron and intercessor, the martyr, St. Thomas More.

More's life and witness seems more timely to me than ever. Thomas More, the selfless servant of truth and servant of the people. The loving father and husband. The loyal son of the Church. The Catholic lawyer who obeyed the law of God rather than the law of men. The man of conscience. Who gave his life rather than compromise the law of God.

These are all points for reflection in our day. I'm reminded tonight of the lines from that great play, *A Man for All Seasons*. Perhaps you remember the dramatic scene from More's trial where he says:

"Is it my place to say 'good' to the State's sickness? Can I help my king by giving him lies when he asks for truth? Will you help England by populating her with liars?"

Important questions for each of us here in America in these days before the election.

I offer my reflections tonight as a pastor, not as a politician. And in the eyes of a pastor, America seems somehow sick. Sick with deception. Or better, sick with unresolved contradictions between the ideals of our great country and the reality of our policies.

"You denied ... the Author of life" (Acts 3:15). These words from St. Peter's great speech in the Book of Acts come back to me.

Haven't we done that in America, my friends? Haven't we—through our licensing of abortion, our slow drift towards euthanasia, the steady erosion of respect for life—haven't we in all this denied the authority of God? Haven't we denied the authority of the Author of life?

I talked tonight in my homily about abortion. In part that was because one has to preach on the texts that one is given. And the text before me, the Visitation, has been interpreted since the earliest days of the Church as one that teaches about the dignity of unborn life.

But I also talked about abortion because I believe that abortion is the foundational issue of our time. It is a matter of fundamental human rights. I say abortion is “foundational” because so much of our attitude toward life in America is based upon our attitude toward life in the womb.

When life in the womb is not valued, life outside the womb is devalued as well. If life has no value at its beginning, it can't have any value at its end. And its value at all points in between is also called into question.

I quoted Blessed Mother Teresa in my homily. And I want to quote her again here: “We must not be surprised when we hear of murders, of killings, of wars. If a mother can kill her own child, what is left but for us to kill each other?”

This is why, my friends, when we talk about end-of-life issues, we can't separate them from “beginning-of-life” issues. If a mother can kill her own child, then we should not be surprised to see grown children killing their aged and sick parents and calling it a “good death.” We should not be surprised by the movements toward legalized euthanasia.

And if we have licensed the killing of the unborn, how can we be surprised to see the killing of the sick and the handicapped?

In the last few years we have witness a series of new laws and events that promote the so called ‘mercy killing’. At the same time, because our population is growing older more and more we all experience the reality of people coming to the end of life.

So, with the help of other some experts in the field of moral ethics, I wrote a little book about end-of-life issues. It's called *A Will to Live*. It's kind of a question-and-answer catechism about the whole issue of euthanasia and the care of the sick and the terminally ill.

In that book, I said: “Euthanasia does not eliminate suffering, but instead eliminates the person who suffers.”

This is why euthanasia, in the ancient teaching of the Church, is always considered murder. It always involves the intent to kill another person. It's the same as abortion. That's why we have to call it ‘mercy killing’ instead of truthfully saying what it is.

Nobody wants to believe that our society would condone the active destruction of an innocent human life.

They say that the reason for ‘terminating a life’ is that their life is not worth anything. I remember reading an editorial in the *New York Times* in which the editors lectured us that “true respect for life includes recognizing ... when it ceases to be meaningful.”

Therein lies the problem, of course. Who gets to decide when life is meaningful? What are the standards for determining what constitutes a “meaningful” life? And who gets to draw up those standards?

“You have denied the Author of life.” My brothers and sisters, we have replaced the Author of life with our own authority—or the authority of “experts.” Experts in law. Experts in medicine. Experts in bioethics. These people decide, not God, who can live and who can die.

Who should decide whether these people’s lives are “meaningful” or “worth living”? Should it be the Author of life, or should it be what a well know pro-life and civil liberties writer called, the new priests of death?

And what about a person who isn’t self-sufficient? Who can’t feed himself or herself and needs to be fed through a gastric tube? Some of the experts tell us that such people are being kept alive “artificially,” or by “extraordinary” means.

My friends, if we start treating ordinary food and water delivered through a feeding tube as an “optional” treatment for the terminally ill or for anyone else, we will have descended down a dark moral slope, from which we can never climb back.

And let’s be clear, friends. Removing a feeding tube is not a simple medical procedure. It is sentencing a person to a slow, agonizing death by starvation. It doesn’t become any less agonizing or horrible because the person can’t communicate. Or because the doctors, lawyers, and ethicists have turned their backs and walked away.

I worry about the end-of-life issues in our country. I worry especially because nobody seems to be talking about them anymore, except the Catholic Church and other few advocates.

I worry that with the rise of a revived cult of the survival of the fittest—we will see more pressures to terminate the lives of those deemed to be “less fit” or not “meaningful.” I worry that this ideology, coupled with economic pressures to ration health care, will lead to the routinization of euthanasia. Just like we have today the routinization of abortion—more than a million a year.

And as Catholics, as heirs to the legacy of Thomas More, we can’t say “good” to our country’s sickness. We can’t participate in the deceptions that are told about these issues.

Our country needs the truth. And that truth is what I talked about tonight in my homily. It is the truth about the profound reverence for life that lies at the heart of our faith.

In my homily I spoke of the early Church's outspoken attitudes against abortion. The early Church was equally adamant that our life was not our own.

Lactantius, a Christian philosopher from the early fourth century, wrote these profound words:

“For it was God who placed us in this abode of the flesh. It was he who gave us the temporary habitation of the body. That we should inhabit it as long as he pleased. Therefore, it is to be considered impious to wish to depart from it without the command of God. Therefore, violence must not be applied to nature” (*The Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, Chap. 39).

That's what euthanasia and abortion are, my friends. Violence applied to nature, to the plan of God. We cannot allow the courts, or the legislature, or the whims of public opinion, to do violence to nature, to replace God as the Author of life.

The great truth that we must proclaim as Catholics is that life is not simply *biological*. Our life is also *theological*. Our life is conceived and lived in dialogue, in a relationship with God.

That relationship begins before we are conceived in the womb. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,” God told us through the prophets (Jer. 1:5). He chose to know us and to cherish us as his sons and daughters from “before the foundation of the world,” St. Paul says (Eph. 1:4).

This dialogue with God, this relationship, is not interrupted by illness, disability, or disease. Suffering and sickness can never diminish the dignity of our lives, the great mystery of our lives in the plan of God.

A person who is diseased, who suffers cognitive disabilities, or who is in a persistent vegetative state, remains a person in relationship with God. In the beautiful words of Pope John Paul II, “The loving gaze of God the Father still falls upon them, acknowledging them as his sons and daughters, especially in need of help” (*Address to International Congress on Life-Sustaining Treatments and the Vegetative State*, March 2004)

I pray that you will work closely with Bishop Farrell in seeking to spread these truths in our state and in our country. I pray that you will support each other in mutual service of the Gospel of Life.

End-of-life issues, like the issue of abortion, aren't simply "Catholic" issues or matters of faith. They concern the most fundamental questions in any human civilization: Who gets to live and who doesn't—and who gets to decide this question? Can one's rights or freedoms include the right and freedom to extinguish the life of one who is weaker?

I pray that you will follow the example of your patron in the service of the truth. May our Mother Mary, the help of the sick, continue to intercede for you, that you may be people of life bringing the Gospel of life to our nation.