

“God’s Mercy in the Eucharist Leads Us from the Darkness of Death to the Light of Life”

*Homily for Mass on the Occasion of the Walk for Life West Coast
January 23, 2016, St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral*

Introduction

The first reading we just heard proclaimed at our Mass today may have a familiar ring to it: it figures prominently in the Christmas season. In particular, it is the appointed first reading for Christmas Mass During the Night, and appropriately so because, of course – as is clear from our Christian perspective – this is a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah, fulfilled in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Out of the Darkness into the Light

At the time of Isaiah, though, this people walking in darkness were the Israelites living in the northern kingdom, intermingled with foreigners, that is, people who did not know the Lord, but were more politically powerful than they were. Thus, these members of God’s people became subject to the influence of these powerful pagan neighbors of theirs. They began to adapt their attitudes, their customs, and even practices in violation of the Law God had given them through Moses. Weakened from within, they were eventually conquered by these foreigners. But Isaiah here proclaims a prophecy of hope, that God will send a king to establish a reign of justice. God will destroy the signs of oppression – “the yoke that burdened them, the pole on their shoulder, the rod of their taskmaster” – and He will usher in an era when His people will be ruled by the “Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.”

Perhaps we feel spiritually close to these ancient ancestors in the faith of ours, as we take account of an ever-encroaching culture of death that seems to have advanced over the course of this last year. Here in California it is now legal for a physician to assist a patient in ending their own life. In a free and just society such matters of grave significance are decided through a process of open and robust debate, but this normal legislative process was circumvented and the bill was pushed through during a special session on health finance. So much for a discussion on how we can best care for the poor, who will be disproportionately adversely affected by this advance of the brave new world, given that the poor already labor under limited resources. As was pointed out in a statement by Californians Against Assisted Suicide: “End-of-life treatment options are already limited for millions of people – constrained by poverty, disability, discrimination, and other obstacles. Adding this so-called ‘choice’ into our dysfunctional healthcare system will push people into cheaper lethal options.”

And then there were the revelations of the grueling practice of killing babies and harvesting their organs for research. I hesitate to even say this as it is such an unspeakable atrocity, and yet there are those who would defend the practice by deflecting the argument to questions of legal technicalities regarding what is and is not against the law, thus side-stepping the real question, the much bigger question. But the

big question cannot be ignored, it has to be answered, there is no getting around it: what does this say about us as a society? How can we do this to ourselves? And what does it say about us as a society that the law violates the sacred bond between parents and their children by intentionally keeping parents in the dark about the most intimate and serious decisions that their young daughters have to face?

Yes, when we consider these and other such advances of the culture of death, we may feel a certain spiritual affinity to the people who walked in darkness and dwelt in a land of gloom. But we don't have to walk in darkness. The prophecy is fulfilled, the Messiah has come, Jesus has set us free from darkness and gloom. He teaches us how to walk in the light, and it is the way of love, love even of enemies. As we heard in this excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount in today's Gospel, he always demands more from us, his followers; he calls us to imitate his perfect sacrifice but always according to the unique circumstances of our own time and place and state in life. Taking a cue from the people to whom Isaiah was preaching, we have to recognize that for us, whatever the circumstances, giving more as a follower of Jesus will always mean *not* allowing ourselves to be subject to the influences all around us that promote the culture of death. We must, instead, be imbued by him who is the Bread of Life, who came – and in every Eucharist comes – so that we might have life, and have it to the full.

The Heart of the Matter

If we wish to build a culture of life, a culture of light and of love, it must begin right here, with what we are doing at this moment. Our worship of God is the heart of the matter: if we have any hope of rightly ordering our society, then our worship of God must be rightly ordered, and worthily centered around the Eucharist. Far from a simple gesture of welcome, the Eucharist is Christ's one perfect sacrifice made present to us, such that no one should dare approach except "with the fear of God, faith, and love" (Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom). The heart of the matter is right here: in how we approach Holy Communion and behave in our act of worship, in doing everything possible to insure that we receive worthily. If we do not understand this, and instead assume a casual attitude toward the most solemn mystery of God's life in our midst, how can we possibly expect to instill a sense of respect for the human life around us? As St. Paul says, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily ... eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor 11:27.29).

If we take God at His word, then we will understand that both the Eucharist and the human person are each in its own way a sacrament: the Eucharist points to and makes present Christ's one sacrifice by which he has forgiven our sins and reconciled us to the Father; at the same time, as God created the man and the woman in His own image and likeness, then the human person, too, points to and makes present God's very life. How, then, can we possibly expect to build a culture that respects each human life, regardless of its stage or condition in life, if we do not respect God's gift of life in the Bread of Life, the Most Blessed Sacrament? If we do not respect the sacredness of this gift, how will we ever respect the sacredness of the gift of human life? It has, in fact, come to the point now where many people see no connection

between respect for the works of justice and charity and the proper disposition for receiving Holy Communion.

Our only hope is God's mercy. Let us rejoice that our God is a merciful God, for we deeply, deeply need God's mercy. We cannot but be filled with gratitude, then, to our Holy Father Pope Francis for declaring this year a Jubilee Year of Mercy, a year which, he says, is "dedicated to living out in our daily lives the mercy which the Father constantly extends to all of us" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 25). Pope Francis has directed that every Cathedral in the world have a dedicated "Door of Mercy," so that all of the faithful throughout the world may more readily participate in this Jubilee Year. The Holy Door of our Cathedral admits passage into this house of God, a symbol of God's eternal dwelling place in heaven. Passage to our eternal home with God is by way of mercy: receiving and giving God's mercy. This is the source of our joy, as we just prayed in Psalm 122: it is always a joy for us to "go up to the house of the Lord."

The path of mercy is the path of repentance and forgiveness: repenting in order to beg God's forgiveness, and in turn forgiving those who have sinned against us. This is the path of freedom from darkness and gloom, and puts us squarely in the light. In his first homily as the Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis spoke of God's call to Abraham, pointing out that the first thing God said to him was, "Walk in my presence and be blameless." He then went on to say: "Our life is a path. When we stop walking there is something that isn't right. To walk always in the presence of the Lord, in the light of the Lord, seeking to live the blamelessness that God asks of Abraham in His promise."

Conclusion

Today we will walk, we will walk in witness to the sanctity of human life. As we do so, let us walk blamelessly before the Lord, so that we may walk in the light of Christ and so be his light shining in the darkness of a culture of death: let us walk the path of receiving and bearing God's mercy, leading those who are far off out of the oppression of sin and sadness into the freedom and joy of the children of God. And so the prophecy will be fulfilled in our own time, too, that "[t]he people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; [and] upon those who lived in a land of gloom a light has shone." That light is Jesus Christ, to whom be honor and glory, forever and ever. Amen.