

Life: “The most sublime expression of God’s creative activity”

Dear Parish Faithful & Friends in Christ,



Friday, January 22, 2016 marks the 43rd Anniversary of the infamous Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision of 1973 that effectively legalized unrestricted access to abortion in the United States of America. Despite reports of impending ominous weather, tens of thousands of people of faith—including many Orthodox Christians—will march in the nation’s capital to express our strong disagreement with such a law, thus providing us with a glaring and painful example of finding something morally and ethically unacceptable, though it is “legal.”

Our “peaceful protests”—violent protests by “pro-life” advocates are hardly justifiable—afford us the opportunity to remind ourselves of the Church’s ancient rejection of abortion. As the Church began to expand in its initial period of growth, it came into contact and conflict with the Roman Empire and the proliferation of beliefs and practices that characterized the Empire’s prevailing culture. As the “superpower” of its day, the Empire imposed itself both militarily and culturally on its far-flung territories and inhabitants. Both abortion and infanticide were widespread practices, hardly challenged, I believe, for the most part. An early formulation of Christian resistance to

these practices can be found in the *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, a document that dates back to the early second century, in which we read:

“Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not corrupt children; do not fornicate; do not steal; do not practice magic; do not go in for sorcery; do not murder a child by abortion or kill a new-born infant” [II, 2].

In the fourth century, Saint Basil the Great wrote the following:

“Those who give potions for the destruction of the child conceived in the womb are murderers, as are those who take potions which kill the child” [Letter 188, Canon 8].

Saint Basil clearly does not apply all of the responsibility for this decision upon the mother of the child, but includes those who provide the “service.” In today’s world, one can only imagine the enormous pressure placed upon a young and vulnerable woman to “terminate” an “unwanted pregnancy” by those around her, including her “medical advisors.” The pressure increases with the psychological assurance that what is legal cannot be wrong—though one’s maternal intuitions and instincts may be offering an internal protest of a different nature.

It is essential to offer a positive response rather than simply rejecting abortion as immoral, though our very human instincts make such a rejection perfectly natural. As Christians, we must continue to affirm the sacred gift of life within the context of what some have gone so far as to name a “culture of death”—in my opinion, not an unfair characterization. I find such an affirmation at the very beginning of Father John Breck’s wonderful book, *The Sacred Gift of Life*, as he embarks on a theological, bioethical and pastoral articulation of what the Church has proclaimed “from the beginning”—the victory of life over death in Christ.

“Orthodox Christianity affirms that life is a gift, freely bestowed by the God of love,” Father John writes. “Human life, therefore,

“is to be received and welcomed with an attitude of joy and thanksgiving. It is to be cherished, preserved and protected as the most sublime expression of God’s creative activity. God has brought us ‘from non-being into being’ for more than mere biological existence. He has chosen us for Life, of which the ultimate end is participation in the eternal glory of the Risen Christ, ‘in the inheritance of the saints in light’” [Colossians 1:12; Ephesians 1:18].

We cannot simply be content with denouncing abortion as a evil practice, true as that may be. We must actively seek to alleviate the conditions of those tempted into such a decision because of their harsh environments or marginalized social status. Compassion—more than judgment—can be a much more effective response to a deeply troubling practice that wounds the sensibility and soul of any Christian who is aware of the God of life, Who has granted us life abundantly in Christ Jesus.

Currently, every sign indicates that the practice of abortion is here to stay in our secularized society that is experiencing a kind of moral/ethical erosion produced by an ever-expanding moral relativism. (And this moral relativism has elevated "choice" to almost sacred status; while "life" suffers debasement as it is divorced from faith in God).

I am not hearing any presidential candidate publicly speak against abortion, regardless of his/her party's platform or personal position. Why risk undermining one's popularity over a "dead issue?" This can be discouraging. However, a sense of vigilance and discernment should never be far from our minds, directing us to the theological, moral and ethical themes that are irreducible to pragmatic or utilitarian concerns. If "human life" is ... "the most sublime expression of God's creative activity," then that is the only Christian "choice" to make.