

Bishop Sean O'Malley offers Pro-Life Convention homily

(Addresses partial birth abortion issue to be heard in Massachusetts Legislature on May 18, 1999)

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FALL RIVER — The following is the text of Bishop Sean P. O'Malley's homily at Mass during the Diocesan Pro-Life Convention at Bishop Connolly High School on **Saturday, April 24**:

In a telegram sent by Pope John Paul II to the Archbishop of Denver, the Holy Father expressed the 'earnest hope that American society as a whole will react to this latest act of violence among the young by committing itself to promoting and transmitting the moral vision and the values which alone can ensure respect for the inviolable dignity of human life.'

I hope that the massacre in Colorado will be a wake-up call for Americans. Many have scoffed at the terminology, 'culture of death, yet the growing body of evidence is that our society is terribly flawed, and we need to reaffirm our unconditional commitment to the sacredness of life.

In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Peter refers to Christ as the Prince of Life. It is an Easter title for our Risen Savior. We are the disciples of the Prince of Life. It is not easy at the close of the 20th Century to champion the cause of life. The absurdity of making Dr. Kevorkian a celebrity.., the growing hostility to human life on so many fronts.

I am very proud of the fact that the Catholic Church has provided a consistent and unwavering defense of human life. People were surprised that our regard for the sanctity of human life would extend even to those whose crimes merit the severest punishment. As mentioned in my pastoral, 'The Gospel of Life vs. the Death Penalty,' it is the proliferation of abortion in the modern world that has caused the Bishops to re-examine the morality of the death penalty. The popularity of the death penalty seems to flow from a weakened sense of the sacredness of human life, rather than a careful weighing of the ethical principles that render the practice moral or unmoral. In the midst of so many assaults on human life the most outrageous that we face in the United States in 1999 is partial-birth abortion. No matter what you call it, this procedure is the direct killing of a child while it is being born so that it will be born dead.

At the beginning of the abortion debate, the pro-abortion cohorts stated that abortion was not murder because the *fetus* (Latin for child), was not a human being, only a glob of tissue. As the years pass, it is painfully obvious that the issue of when human life begins was only a ruse, and that respect for life has so eroded that a child is not safe from abortionists until its head emerges from the mother's womb.

There has been much misinformation circulated to try to justify this barbaric practice. Those promoting this procedure have consistently concealed facts about the frequency of partial-birth abortions, as well as facts about the reasons these abortions are done. The tragic truth is that this procedure is not so infrequent, and that it is usually an elective operation.

Dr. Martin Haskell, a partial-birth abortion provider, is quoted in congressional testimony as stating that 80 percent of those abortions he performed were 'purely elective,' that is abortion of healthy babies. The other 20 percent aborted in the act of birthing were children with genetic problems. Another 'provider,' Dr. James McMahan, submitted records to Congress showing the various reasons he performed partial-birth abortions, including the young age of the mother, depression, and cleft palate. The medical establishment has made it clear that this is not a necessary procedure to guarantee the safety of a mother. As Surgeon General C. Everett Koop stated in the *American Medical News* (Aug. 19, 1996): "In no way can I twist my mind to see that the late-term abortion as described — you know, partial birth then destruction of the unborn child before the head is born—is a medical necessity for the mother."

In an appeal to the president not to veto a ban on partial-birth abortion, the American Cardinals, speaking in the name of all faithful Catholics in our country, stated:

'The public has learned that partial-birth abortions are performed not a few hundred times a year, but thousands of times each year. It is learned that partial-birth abortion is used primarily in the fifth and sixth months of pregnancy. The public has also learned that the vast majority of these procedures are performed on the healthy babies of healthy women.' (March 7, 1997).

It is a sickening thought that the culture of death has advanced to the point where infanticide is now seen as a right and where political leaders are so morally blind, or so cowardly, that they could support partial-birth abortion. No citizen of this country can in good conscience chalk this up to 'legitimate pluralism.' Indeed, every person of good will should be repulsed by this situation and work by all non-violent means possible for a ban on partial-birth abortion.

For voters to concern themselves only with issues of employment and economy is a serious failure of our civic responsibility. Our 'Declaration of Independence' says that life is an inalienable right, but in 1999 the government is trampling on that right and trying to usurp the right to life and to subordinate it to the right to privacy (of all things).

The only positive aspect of the partial-birth abortion controversy is that it should prove to all reasonable citizens just how slippery and how steep the 'slippery slope' actually is. In Massachusetts, our State Legislature is poised to consider a ban that would outlaw partial-birth abortion in the Commonwealth. I appeal to every Catholic and every citizen of good will to encourage our public officials to enact such a law as quickly as possible.

This week the *Boston Herald* reported that in Dayton, Ohio, a 22-week-old baby girl was born alive during a partial-birth abortion and lived for about three hours, 'traumatizing staff members at the hospital.' For the three hours that the baby girl lived, an emergency room technician rocked and sang to her. She was dubbed Baby Hope by the medical staff.

Connie Boyles, the registered nurse who held Baby Hope after her birth, said that the staff members at the hospital, which has not been identified, have had to spend hours in counseling and 'venting to get over the emotional trauma of the incident' (*Boston Herald*, April 21, 1999). Those poor people in that hospital must feel that they have been accomplices in a murder. What are we doing to the medical profession in the United States? They named that little girl Baby

Hope. How fitting a name. She was born alive to help unmask the brutality of abortion and give us hope that reasonable people who want to live a decent life will help to stop this tragedy, this assault on innocent human life.

We have a chance to do something in Massachusetts. Don't let Baby Hope's death be in vain. Make your voices heard.

Our experience in the United States is clear. Legalized abortion has been a destructive force in the lives of many individuals, especially women who are often left alone to bear the deep sorrow and regret which follow the decision to destroy the life of an unborn child. In our struggle against the evil of abortion, we do not want to lose sight of our need to be concerned with women who confront difficult pregnancies. In the Holy Father's Encyclical 'Evangelium Vitae' ('The Gospel of Life'), Pope John Paul II addressed words of compassion and hope to women who have had abortions (E.V.100). 'The wound in your heart may yet be healed. Certainly what happened was, and remains, terribly wrong; but do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope ... The Father of Mercies is ready to give you His forgiveness and His peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

You will come to understand that nothing is definitely lost, and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord. As a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children, or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life' (E.V.99).

A commitment to 'The Gospel of Life' is a commitment to the whole social teaching of the Church which challenges us to defend the right to life but also to nurture and protect life after the womb. The rampant individualism and consumerism of today have been strong allies to the culture of death. Our convictions that we are our brother's keeper and that people are more important than things must be lived out in our daily life.

The response of believers must always be one of love and of courage. Love for the unborn child who is in danger, love for the mother, love for the abortionist. Meeting Dr. Bernard Nathanson helped me to understand the need to pray for abortionists. They too are God's children. Just as Saul was a fanatic persecutor of the Church and responsible for the death and imprisonment of many Christians and later became St. Paul, the Great Missionary Apostle; so too, Dr. Nathanson, who performed thousands of abortions, is now one of the greatest foes of abortion and recently has become a Catholic.

Catholics who pray and offer sidewalk counseling at abortion clinics have witnessed to their desire to defend human life. It is crucial that they give a testimony of love and reconciliation that will touch the hearts of the women who go there for abortions, as well as the hearts of the abortionists and their staffs. We want to distance ourselves from those who react to abortion with violence, but we also want to defend the right of pro-life people to hold peaceful demonstrations near abortion clinics. Laws designed to curtail their right to free speech are discriminatory and unjust.

The great challenge that we face is not just to change unjust laws, but to change people's hearts. It is spiritual conflict that involves the powers of Light and Darkness. Some devils are cast out only by prayer and fasting. We must begin with our own personal conversion and mending the broken relationships in our lives. Being disciples of the Prince of Life, and witnesses of His Resurrection requires that we be deeply committed to life: the life God gave us when we were born, and the life God gave us when we were baptized.

Today, we gather to witness to one another, to those of the household of the faith, to those who share our convictions. From here we will go forth as messengers to a society that is largely indifferent or hostile our message. The more faithfully we live the life of the Resurrection, the more we will be able to change people's hearts. The most powerful weapon is love. Love is stronger than death. Love pierces the cloud of unknowing, it also pierces the heart of an enemy and transforms that enemy into a brother or sister.

They tell the parable that upon Jesus' arrival in Heaven after the Ascension. He was greeted by a host of angels. After the formalities, they asked Him whom he had left behind on earth to finish the work He had begun. Jesus replied: 'Just a small group of men and women who love me. "That's all?" asked the angels. "What if this tiny group should fail?" Jesus replied: "I have no other plan.'

We who are the disciples of the Prince of Life must carry forth Christ's mission. The more we love Christ, the more successful we will be, the more we will love Baby Hope, the Alzheimer patient, the stranger, even the abortionist.

If we are moved by love, no 'Plan B' will be necessary.