

Pastoral Letter on Sanctity of Life Sunday 2020

”Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess 5:16). There is an inner connection between joy, prayer and gratitude. It is this that should permeate our inner world and then bear fruit in a life of praise and glory of God and love of our neighbour. We are called to spread this spirit. Sadly, it is more often dissatisfaction, emptiness and resignation that marks the atmosphere in our society, not least during this pandemic. ”Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely” (1Thess 5:23), dear brothers and sisters, so that you may become messengers of joy, prayer and gratitude to our fellow human beings in Sweden today. During this time of contagion, we feel huge gratitude to all who work in health care and do their utmost to help the very ill. Through their dedicated work they strengthen us in our belief in the dignity of all people and the right to good care. We pray for them, as well as for all the sick, that they may receive God’s help and blessings.

We are called to deepen our relationship with God and to follow Jesus with greater fervor. In time for advent, the ”Catholic Study Bible” was published, which helps us delve into the message of the Bible and understand how it elucidates and clarifies our Catholic faith. It should be a matter of course that every Catholic in our diocese reads it and is renewed by it, so that together we may become a more evangelizing Church in Sweden; we may then avoid the temptation of getting caught up in different ideological camps, leading to division and preventing us from being credible witnesses in a world that is already very divided.

In today’s Gospel we encounter John the Baptist. Like him we should be precursors for Jesus. He came as a witness of the light and through our baptism and confirmation we are all witnesses of Him who is the Light of the world. John the Baptist said of himself: ”I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ (Joh 1:23). We too, Jesus’ disciples today, can feel like a voice crying out in the wilderness. Who will listen to us? Who will receive Jesus and listen to his church? We all need the gifts of the Spirit in order to have the courage to stand up for our faith and boldly convey the Good News. When we rely on the constant aid of the Spirit and dare to share our faith, we are often surprised that others listen to us and our message. This is why it is so important that we let the spirit of joy, prayer and gratitude envelop us. We can repeat the Collect prayer in today’s mass with renewed force: ”Sustain our prayers and longings, such that we receive the joy that you prepare for us and see Christ being born in our hearts.”

During Advent we prepare for Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, but also for his birth in our and all people’s hearts. We have received our life as a gift from God. We are created in His image. But even that is not enough. He wants to live in us and through baptism make us a temple for him. Christ wants to increasingly live in our hearts. Every person is called to the deepest possible communion with God. Her true vocation is

to become holy and share in God's life. Therefore, every person is inestimably precious in the eyes of God, however not always in the eyes of man. When we try to convey the message of the Gospel about human beings' God-given calling and inalienable dignity we encounter stiff resistance. Even if one speaks loudly and clearly about human rights, one often, either consciously or unconsciously, ends up restricting or excluding some group or ascribing them less value. Through original sin, there is a tendency to divide people into 'us' and 'them'. History clearly shows this. We do not need to give examples; instead we need to examine our consciences and reflect on which groups of people we look down on ourselves or regard as enemies or less worthy. Satan can mislead us in countless ways. It is always easier to see how others make mistakes than to admit that we ourselves undervalue or exclude a certain group. Satan easily makes us selective.

In our own cultural context, it is often the unborn children, who are at the bottom of the value scale of those worthy of protection. A quarter of them are not even allowed to be born in our country. The inalienable right to life has in the minds of many been cancelled and one speaks instead of a supposed "right to abortion" although no declaration of human rights includes this. But the power of language is great. Pope Francis returns repeatedly to the God-given right to life of the unborn, latest in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: the unborn are also our brothers and sisters. If our love of our fellow human beings does not include them, it is not worth much. God's love is always all-encompassing. He lets the sun rise over good and evil. It is sadly easy to become selective and exclude another from our heart, yes, from life itself. Once we start thinking selectively, it is not long before euthanasia is put on the agenda, that is, what Hitler called *Gnadentod* – mercy death. The power of language is great and can easily deceive us into calling that which is evil good. The gospel and its message are however crystal clear: each person is from the first tender moment when she is formed in her mother's womb until her last dying breath sacrosanct and worthy of protection.

At the same time our God is a compassionate and forgiving God. We must always remember this. The Church is an institution of forgiveness. No state or municipal authority can give forgiveness. It is of the utmost importance for all of us to do what we can to help a woman who would like to give birth but who has ended up in difficult circumstances and needs support. It is important to offer help and forgiveness. How can we create a society in which each child can be received with joy and gratitude? During Advent we anticipate the birth of Jesus. We pray to God that each child may be equally longed for. May God grant that we recognize Jesus in each child waiting to be born.

With my prayers and blessings,

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