

March for Life-Billings, Montana

January 21, 2018

Reflections on the Human Life and the Dignity of the Human Person
(By Matthew Brower, Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference)

First of all, thank you for being here and for inviting me to share some words with you today. I am truly sorry I am unable to be with you in person but please know I am with you in spirit.

It is a humbling honor to mark this somber occasion with all of you but to do so with hearts radiating joy and hope. We join together as friends and strangers bound by an unwavering commitment to tirelessly and joyfully witness to the truth about human life and dignity. History and our experiences tells us it can be challenging to do so in the midst of a culture that all too often tempts us to choose convenience over compassion, self-interest over the common good, worldly success over faithfulness and even death over life.

Tomorrow will mark the 45th anniversary of what I can safely say is the most tragic and unjust judicial decision ever issued by our nation's Supreme Court. Certainly prior to 1973 our court had demonstrated its moral fallibility in rendering decisions that, when considered today, shock our conscience and deeply offend our basic sense of justice (think of *Dred Scott* or *Buck v. Bell*). But in the case of *Roe v. Wade*, our court directly paved the way for a barbaric practice that has claimed the lives of over 60 million

innocent unborn children—60 million children denied their right to flourish, grow, love and live.

But the victims of abortion far exceed the 60 million unborn children. We know the wounds that accompany abortion have wound their way into the lives of countless men and women for one generation upon another. Those scars (some visible and many invisible) testify to the truth about abortion—it is gruesome, violent, demeaning to women and destructive. However, we also know that “where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more” (Rom. 5:20) and courageous women and men have sought and found forgiveness and healing, in the same place we find it and to which we’re continually beckoned—the arms of a loving creator, the author of all life, our merciful God. These brave souls who witness to the truth by bearing their scars and sharing their stories remind us that we **MUST NEVER** let the “unthinkable” become acceptable.

We know that the tireless commitment of pro-life advocates stretching back now over decades and generations continues to bear fruit not just in terms of attitudes but in real lives. Abortion numbers and rates continue to decline thanks in no small part to the efforts of people such as all of you. In this work, you have been the hands and feet of Christ and there is no more noble vocation to which one can be called.

At the same time, we know that abortion continues to be all too common with estimates at somewhere around 900,000 abortions nationally in 2016—and that’s 900,000 too many. As long as abortion is deemed legal in this country it will continue to be promoted by certain segments of society as a good, moral, responsible and necessary practice. But,

the law does not merely reflect the culture. It plays an essential role in forming it. The law educates. The law plays a key part in fashioning the moral sense that is then woven into the fabric of society. In a sense, it fashions its creator into its own image making a reversal of any perversion of the law all that more challenging and urgent. Legalized abortion doesn't just open the doors for the killing of unborn children, it conveys to generations of Americans that abortion is morally acceptable and the value of human life is subjective and contingent. Is it any wonder that we see so many in our country living lives that reflect a vision of the human person that is brutal, selfish, unforgiving, intolerant and unloving, devoid of hope and compassion?

That is not to say that this is how all supporters of legalized abortion view the world and our place within it. That would in no way be fair to say. And to suggest that all our social problems can be traced back to legalized abortion as the root cause would be nonsense. However, I do believe that a legal system which allows for the killing of an unborn child conveys an exceptionally destructive message. So, we continue to work for the legal protection of children within the womb not just for their sake (though that would certainly be sufficient reason) but also for the sake of all of us blessed to live in this country.

But more broadly, what ought our pro-life "work" look like as we move forward? Certainly it calls for redoubling our efforts around legislative advocacy and for Christians to articulate clearly and frequently the need for faithful citizenship in accord with our baptismal mission. Advances in science and embryology and a deeper understanding of fetal development provide us with additional insights which can

inform and help direct our advocacy. Even more powerful are the personal stories of the many “victims” and “survivors” of abortion who now speak out so bravely in defense of human life. And for all people of faith, at the center we recognize we must keep our work rooted in a life of prayer.

But this cannot be the sum total of our labors. Prayer and advocacy are essential but alone are insufficient. Serrin Foster, President of Feminists for Life, has been quoted as saying, “Most women ‘choose’ abortion precisely because they believe they have no other choice.” If that’s the case, and I have no reason to think that it isn’t true, then our fundamental failing is not an inability to convincingly articulate moral or legal arguments against abortion. Our fundamental failing is to love fully.

I think it can be helpful for each of us to ask ourselves, “If I knew the abortion laws as they now stand would remain forever, what would my pro-life efforts look like? How would I work to build a culture of life? How would I ensure that no expectant mother would ever again find herself thinking she has no “choice” but abortion?” The point is we must not let our spirit, our heart for the unborn, become constrained or discouraged by the weight of the laws we seek to change. We are NEVER powerless to act on behalf of human life and all that is good and true.

It is evident our culture is in deep need of a renewal of mind AND heart. Consider for a moment the 2013 Salon.com article by Mary Elizabeth Williams who wrote, “I know that throughout my own pregnancies, I never wavered for a moment in the belief that I was

carrying a human life inside of me. I believe that's what a fetus is: a human life. And that doesn't make me one iota less solidly pro-choice . . . all life is not equal.”

I think most of us would agree that Ms. Williams' thinking is deeply flawed. But if she was confronted by well-reasoned scientific, philosophical, legal arguments against abortion would she suddenly be convinced? Perhaps, but I tend to think not. To reach minds we must first reach hearts. And to reach hearts we must first examine our own and what our heart is communicating to others.

I was fortunate to attend last month a private talk given by a very prominent pro-life evangelical theologian. During his talk he shared what I found to be a very insightful observation. He indicated that at the current time he's is more concerned about cynicism than secularization, especially among young people. He sees young people drifting away from Christianity because they see Christianity and the moral precepts that follow as just being used as a means to an end. The assumption being that there is some other motive such as money or power. And there's a serious concern that issues of morality, such as abortion, are being used to serve politics and politicians.

It seems the problem is that all too many young people believe churches and the pro-life movement lack credibility. This isn't to say the impressions of these young people are entirely accurate or reflect the mindset of a majority of their peers. As we know, much of the energy and many of the prophetic voices in the pro-life movement are to be found among the younger population. However, we must take seriously any charge of

inconsistency or lack of credibility if we hope to continue to move forward in changing hearts and minds and building a culture of life.

Consistency is essential to establishing and maintaining credibility so I think it's important that we prayerfully consider the degree to which we, individually and as churches and groups, have embraced what has come to be known, at least in some circles, as the "consistent life ethic" or "consistent ethic of life." Saint John Paul II provided a picture of what this ethic consists when he wrote, "Where life is involved, the service of charity must be profoundly consistent. It cannot tolerate bias and discrimination, for human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage and in every situation; it is an indivisible good. We need then to show care for all life and for the life of everyone" (*The Gospel of Life*, 87).

So, we need to ask, are we showing "care for all life and for the life of everyone"? Is our pro-life witness comprehensive? It would be all too easy at this point to head in a political direction and begin to critique the specific policies we individually espouse and the extent to which those policies promote human life and dignity. Those are important and necessary conversations but they also often involve matters about which people of goodwill can disagree and they are best left for another day and a different forum. And I don't raise these questions to suggest some sort of moral equivalency between abortion and every other moral issue related to human dignity. Such an approach is dangerous and erroneous. But, I do think each of us ought to critically examine the state of our heart, for it is the same heart called to love the unborn child that is also called to love the poor, the incarcerated, the immigrant, the elderly and the marginalized.

Our hearts weep for the helpless child brutally killed in its mother's womb. And our hearts weep for the mothers and fathers who have chosen abortion. But do our hearts weep for the poor and homeless? Do our hearts weep for the refugee (Christian or otherwise) fleeing violence or religious persecution? Do our hearts weep for the immigrant brought here as a child now living in fear of being separated from his wife and children and deported to a country he has never known? Do our hearts weep for veterans scarred by war and struggling to find a life of stability and peace? Do our hearts weep for victims of racism? Do our hearts weep for victims of domestic violence? Do our hearts weep for the elderly, the neglected, the drug-addicted, the abandoned and the lonely?

And if our hearts do weep for each of these, would anyone looking at the lives we live, know this to be true?

You see, we cannot feign true love. We cannot fool the pro-choice critic waiting to shine a spotlight on a real or imagined hypocrisy. More importantly, we cannot fool God.

A heart set on fire for God, for truth, for life cannot help but shine brightly for all to see. And it shines in deeds, in actions, in a selfless outpouring of love and hope directed at the dark creases and crevices of life where nothing seems to flourish and grow. This light of life is what attracts people to pro-life work and effectuates change in the hearts and minds of those previously unaccustomed to the joy, hope and love such light brings. A heart radiating with this love cannot help but bear fruit thirty, sixty or a hundredfold.

Each of you, by your prayer and action, provides an eloquent witness to the power of such love.

So as we go forth our separate ways, let each one of us commit to never weary in our labors for life, to never view any obstacle encountered as insurmountable and never let any setback dampen our joyful expectation. Be courageous, be bold and be not afraid! And let us allow our all-loving, all-powerful God to continually transform our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh so that through us he may do the same for others.

Thank you and may God bless each of you and your families.