

AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

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It was a particular privilege to address the Pro-life Committee for the diocese of Dallas and their guests. Giving retreat conferences is always a special experience because it affords me an opportunity to reflect on the things that truly matter. When I'm giving these conferences there is always a sense that the message is for me, not just for them.

I flew into Dallas on a Wednesday to be warmly greeted by Andrew and Jackie Smith. It was a lovely evening with great food; Jackie is a wonderful cook. The conversation was stimulating as we visited until midnight. Both Andrew and Jackie are among our front line troops in the effort to end abortion.

The day of recollection was on Thursday. After Mass it was a delight to visit with Lyle Paul, a dear friend who just returned from an extended trip to China. The conferences focused on becoming disciples. The topics were: *The Call to Holiness; Embracing Obedience and Humility; Prayer: Becoming Contemplatives in the World; and The Transforming Power of the Mass*. I found the receptiveness of the audience to be very inspiring.

My flight back to New Orleans was not scheduled until Friday afternoon. That afforded Andrew and me the opportunity to attend Mass at a Cistercian Monastery and pray for two hours before a late-term abortion clinic. Every time I pray before an abortion clinic, I am profoundly moved. This was no exception. That experience is the subject of this Newsletter.

We arrived at 8:00 A.M. to be there as the women arrived. As we neared the clinic I sensed a spirit of oppression. Even the air felt dead. I said to Andrew: "Can you feel the air? It's different." He replied, "This is the abortion clinic." Andrew explained that this clinic does late-term abortions, up to 25 weeks. The building was long and rectangular. The entrance is on the right as one faces the building. The killing takes place at the other end. Some weeks before, when Andrew was praying before the windows where these murders take place, a lady saw him quietly praying. She was so moved by grace that she got dressed and decided not to have the abortion. Prayer makes a difference because it is a cry to God: "Help!"

We were soon joined by Carol Seward, a fearless lady whose specialty is sidewalk counseling. Just watching her is inspirational as she tries to get the girls to talk with her. She and Andrew took their place near the entrance. I stood before the windows where these evils are perpetrated. Standing there I sensed the helplessness and horror experienced by John and the holy women at the foot of the cross. There was nothing I could do to end these unjust killings.

Even now I am at a loss of words to adequately describe the inner turmoil I experienced that morning. The one thought that kept coming back like a refrain was: "How did we

get to this place where we are murdering millions of innocent babies simply because they are unwanted?" Since then I have grappled with this question. No society surrenders to a decision this horrendous over night. So how did we get to this place?

I live close to a Benedictine monastery. To get to the abbey grounds one must cross a bridge that spans a small river. Over the years rising water and storms have carried trees down the river under that bridge. Gradually, the pounding of debris weakened the stout bridge supports. As a result the integrity of the entire bridge is in jeopardy. Fortunately, this danger was anticipated and extensive repairs have begun.

Over the years the moral supports of our society have been pounded with false values. Little by little we were weakened in the storms of life by selfishness, pride, materialism, sexual excesses, perverse ideas of freedom, and the shifting sands of relativism. Christians pushed God in the background, or pushed aside him aside altogether. Religion was often reduced to feelings and cultural habits instead of a life to be lived in the greatest of all relationships, God's family. When men and women live as if God did not exist the lines between good and evil become more and more blurred. In the end many see evil as good and good as evil.

St. Paul warned his beloved Timothy: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths" (2 Tim 4:3-4). We live in such a time. The popularity of *The DaVinci Code* is a recent example.

In the dark helplessness of Calvary John and the holy women witnessed the awesome lesson that authentic love does conquer all, even sin and death. In my helplessness standing before that killing field we call an abortion clinic, I began a reflection on the fundamental meaning of pro-life. Certainly, praying before an abortion mill and supporting pro-life causes is important, but it is not enough. It is vital to embrace the core of what it means to be pro-life. The respect for all human life from the moment of conception to the end of by natural death is rooted in eternal life. No pro-life commitment can be effective unless this life is lived fully and faithfully.

When describing himself as the good shepherd Jesus said: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). In the prologue to John's Gospel Jesus is described in terms of life. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (Jn 1:4). This extraordinary life is sharing in God's own nature (2 Pet 1:4). Because of this amazing transformation Jesus gave us an enduring charge. After he performed the humble task of a slave by washing his disciples feet Jesus declared:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. *By this* all men will know that you are my disciples, *if you have love for one another*" (Jn 13:34-35).

Once in prayer St. Catherine of Sienna asked Jesus if there was a way to measure her love for him. Jesus replied, "Think of the person you love least in the world. That is how much you love me." Genuine love is always self-sacrificing and committed. It does not count the cost. Only authentic love can dispel the evil of that is engulfing us into barbarism, because it reflect the life of Christ in us (Gal 2:20). Jesus is the light that "shines in the darkness, and darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5).

When I visited my spiritual director this past week I came across statements made by Mother Teresa of Calcutta that resonate to this topic.

- "None of us, including me, ever do great things. But we can all do small things, with great love, and together we can do something wonderful."
- "Every act of love brings a person face to face with God."
- "Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier."

Mother Teresa is correct. None of us is capable of doing great things in the sense of making the substantial changes our society so desperately needs. However, we can saturate our homes with love making them true sanctuaries of life. When we pour out our love on our spouse and children they are empowered to be love to others. Then it can permeate schools and workplaces. I have seen authentic love transform broken marriages and wounded children. When enough Christians become Christ's true disciples in the manner Jesus defined them, the abortion holocaust will end.

On Mother Theresa's grave marker there is a simple saying: "Love one another as I have loved you." It is an apt testimony to the quality of her life. May this become a fitting epitaph for each of us.