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Right to Life Homily

Herbert Ratner, M.D.

This homily was given at St. Ferdinand Church, Chicago, on Oct. 7, 1979, the twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Two texts from today's liturgy echo the thoughts in my homily. The first is from the entrance song:

O Lord, you have given everything its place in the world,
and no one can make it otherwise.
For it is your creation,
the heavens and the earth and the stars:
You are the Lord of all (Est. 13: 9-11).

The second is the first verse of Psalm 128:

Happy are you who revere the Lord, who walk in his ways!
For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork;
happy shall you be and favored.

I am the former health director of Oak Park, Ill. and now editor of *Child and Family Quarterly*, a pro-life publication.

Several years after finishing medical school at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, I was baptized in the Catholic faith. My youth was spent in New York City before and after World War I. My parents were Jewish; my father, a physician, was a socialist who had escaped from czarist Russia. I was raised in a liberal and atheistic environment.

I was first attracted to the Catholic Church through her moral teachings. What had led some to leave the Church led me into the Church. Today we see many Catholics who rebel against the teaching Church and refuse to accept its guidance in matters of morality. During the visit to Chicago by His Holiness, we even heard a prominent Catholic priest state over the air that though Pope John Paul II had a great message of love and unity, "He really doesn't understand the American Church. It is not the Polish Church."

God help and preserve us from those who prefer their own concept of the Church and their own infallibility to that of the Vicar of Christ on earth!

After becoming a Catholic in 1938 — and my first assignment by the Dominican Fathers was to conduct a seminar at the University of Chicago on *Casti Connubii*, the great encyclical of Pope Pius XI on marriage — I quickly discovered that under the cultural influence of the puritanism of an Anglo-American heritage, most Catholics I encountered looked upon the moral teachings of the Church as a strait jacket which robbed them of many pleasures on earth — a strait jacket which had to be suffered on earth in order to attain heaven. I knew of some Catholic physicians who actually believed that the teachings of the Church handicapped them in their competition with Protestant and Jewish doctors. How shortsighted they were!

In the great controversy raging today, with dissident theologians pitting themselves against the teachings of the Magisterium — a dissidence which seduces and confuses many of the laity — there is a fundamental teaching of our faith which we must never forget:

- That our God is trinitarian.
- That God the Father, the first Person of the Trinity — Who is, in many ways, the forgotten Person in the Trinity — created heaven and earth. As the Credo states: “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty maker of heaven and earth, and all that is seen and unseen.”
- That, accordingly, the book of nature, the book studied by scientists, is a revelation of God, as is the book of Scriptures.
- That truths do not contradict one another. God does not tell us one truth in His book of nature and a contrary truth in the Scriptures or through His representative on earth, the Magisterial Church.
- That the Church gives us answers which harmonize with nature.

Paradoxically, while some Catholics are rebelling against certain teachings of the Church, feminists, because of bitter experiences undergone in the past 20 years, are beginning to discover the truth of these same teachings which God mercifully presents to His people on a silver platter.

Let me cite one of many examples. In a column entitled *Hers*, written by women in the *New York Times* the writer speaks of “The New Celibacy.” Apparently, women are discovering that love without commitment — the kind of commitment that goes with marriage — is love not worthwhile. These women reject promiscuity. They find that “lack of sex does not make you blind or ruin your complexion.” They discover the benefits of solitude, and say that “solitude grows on you.” They develop a deep concern about losing their “new-found, hard-won autonomy.” They discover that “The New Celibacy is really a matter of maintenance rather than of abstinence, more of acquiring self-hood than of giving up sex.” The writer concludes: “It’s fabulous. So fabulous that The New Celibacy could very easily lead to the old celibacy” (Sept. 27, 1979).

We ourselves may add further that The New Celibacy protects women against abortion, venereal disease, the ravages of the birth control pill, suicide and other psychiatric disturbances. The feminists are beginning to discover that their real opponent is not the so-called old-fashioned morality and old-fashioned religion, but that their real opponent is nature. Whereas God always forgives and man sometimes forgives, nature never forgives. The bitter lesson of repeated human experience is that, when one thwarts nature, nature rebukes, retaliates, strikes back.

By contrast, the grace which is available to us in the sacraments and the teachings of the Church helps make good the promise of nature. As St. Thomas puts it, grace is a perfection given to nature which fulfills nature (*Prima Secundae*, q. 57, a. 4, ad 3).

In light of this, we should never forget — and I direct this particularly to the young of the parish — that God has given each of us only one body. It is not a rehearsal body. It cannot be traded in for a new one after the fun is over. So, take good care of the body you have; it is intended to last for a lifetime.

I urge you, therefore, as an experienced physician, to beware of abortion, of sterilization, of the IUD and the Pill (which is chemical warfare against the women of the world, and the tool of social engineers to whom women are expendable). And, more to the point, both the Pill in its current dosage and the IUD are abortifacients.

I would urge you also, as an experienced physician, that if you really love the family — the natural institution given to us by God the Father and the supernatural institution given to us by His Son — you must beware of artificial contraception. As one can readily observe in our society, it has given rise to widespread fornication among the young, an increase in adultery, a tremendous increase in abortions, and a pandemic of venereal diseases and their consequences, primarily, a sharp increase in undesired and involuntary sterility, robbing young women of their greatest creative power, the gift of motherhood.

In closing, I would like to cite the pledge to Pope John Paul II of the Catholic physicians of Chicago, which appeared in our diocesan newspaper, *The Chicago Catholic* on Oct. 5, 1979:

In honor of the visit of Pope John Paul II, we physicians pledge our obedience, support and loyalty, and wish to publicly affirm the following:

1. All life is sacred and given by God.
2. Life is scientifically and medically proven to begin at conception.
3. Abortion is the taking of human life.
4. In our experience, abortion is never a medical necessity.

Furthermore, we pledge not to perform, advise, or refer for abortion; nor will we support or condone the practice of abortion.

One does not have to be a Catholic to be against abortion. Five centuries before the Christian Church came into existence, Hippocrates,

who read the book of nature well, included the following in his famous Physician's Oath, to which most physicians today still adhere:

I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrongdoing. Neither will I administer a poison to anyone when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course. Similarly, I will not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion. But I will keep pure and holy my life and my art.

As we see, Hippocrates not only came out against abortion, but against euthanasia as well. And, were there ever a time when euthanasia, or so-called "mercy killing," may have been justified, it would have been 2,500 years ago, when the best anesthetic available was a crack on the head with a wooden mallet to render the patient unconscious.

Finally, let me say that these are times for courage and a renewed confidence in and a renewed commitment to God and His representative on earth. This is the meaning of Pope John Paul's visit to Chicago. Do not succumb to cowardly suggestions which omit all appeal to self-discipline. That road leads only to disaster on earth, and jeopardizes eternal life.

Above all, rediscover your love of children. Pass on to your sons and daughters the joys of children and the value of children in marriage. Do not cultivate stinginess in this matter; emulate the generosity of God. The child is a gift both biologically and theologically, a gift in the natural and in the supernatural order. For those of you who are fearful of an unplanned pregnancy, remember that this is certainly not the worst that can befall you. It is not cancer. A child is not only a parent's greatest treasure; it is the greatest gift you can give your other children.

In rediscovering the love of children — and His Holiness has given us so many demonstrations of his love of children during his visit — you will learn to appreciate the great teaching of *Humanae Vitae*: not to shut out the life-giving from the love-giving; to keep integral the unitive and the procreative, the unitive which is for the sake of procreating not only the newborn but of procreating in an environment of love the mature adult son or daughter as well.

Happy are you who revere the Lord, who walk in his ways!
For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork;
happy shall you be and favored.
