

“Denounced and Derided for Affirming Life: Our Conformity to Christ”
Homily at the Mass for the Walk for Life Westcoast
January 23, 2021
Readings from Saturday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time, Year 1

Introduction

I recently learned about an app one can download to their smartphone. Now, most of you are younger than I am, so it’s probably old news to you, but it was a revelation to me that this app allows one to hear the heartbeat of a six-week old baby in the womb. Of course, we know about the sonograms, especially the 3D sonograms, that give us so much information about that little life in the womb.

Have you ever noticed and wondered about how schizophrenic our culture is? Our culture insists on following science and believing in science, but conveniently denies science – even when the truth is staring them in the face or, in the case of this app, blaring it to them in their ears – they conveniently deny science when it becomes just too inconvenient.

Anticipating Christ’s Sacrifice: Hebrews and Abraham

In the Letter to the Hebrews that we have been hearing from during these weekday Masses, and again today, the author speaks about the sacrifice of Christ, how it fulfills and perfects the pattern of what came before. And so we heard in the reading today, describing the Tabernacle – this is the Temple – how the Temple was set up with the sanctuary and the Holy of Holies, set off by veils, and the priest offering that sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. Offering animals in sacrifice, and how Christ’s sacrifice fulfills all of that because of his offering of himself – only his Blood is the one perfect Sacrifice that could take away the sins of the world.

When we look closely at the Old Testament, we see other traces prefiguring the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary. The early Fathers of the Church also speak about the sacrifice of Isaac, by Abraham, as prefiguring Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary. They note how Isaac, the son, carries the wood for his own sacrifice up the mountain, carrying the wood being the duty of the priest, and yet Isaac is the one who will be killed, and so Isaac is representing both priest and victim as is Our Lord in his sacrifice on Calvary.

So we see in the story of the testing of Abraham various meanings. There is first of all, the test, God is putting Abraham to the test of his faith. Will he really trust God and obey what God asks of him? But we also see this prefiguring of the sacrifice of Christ and how as the passage says that Isaac walked up the mountain *next* to Abraham, thus showing equality.

So we have this insight from our Church Fathers, that it shows Christ in his Divine Nature, his co-equality with the Father, consubstantial with the Father, as we pray in the Nicene Creed every Sunday. That represents Christ’s Divine Nature. But then there is the ram that God provides for the sacrifice in place of the son. The Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity had to take on human flesh, a human body, in order to offer that body as a sacrifice on the Cross. So the ram, as an animal, represents flesh, represents Christ in his human nature. It was in his human nature that he mounted the cross and died for us, the lamb, of course, being the animal of sacrifice.

But if we read this story closely, in context with other parts of the Old Testament, we can infer another meaning to this story. We read in other parts of the Bible how the ancient Israelites kept violating this covenant with their God and made covenants with pagan neighbors, which meant they had to pay homage to and worship those pagan idols. But these pagan nations

sacrificed children. The Israelites went over to child sacrifice to the god Moloch in imitation of their pagan neighbors.

So I think we can infer from this story also God's definitive putting an end to this practice of child sacrifice; it was not to be for God's People. Christ's sacrifice fulfills all of this to put an end to that, an end to the realm of sin and opening up the avenue of God's grace. How slow the human race is to learn: just like the ancient Israelites, so us today. Human sacrifice and, in particular, child sacrifice, is emblematic of pagan culture.

So no wonder that as Western society becomes more and more de-Christianized, we see a return to this pagan practice, yet in its own insidious way. Our Lord came to offer his one perfect Sacrifice. Through him we have access to God, through him we have access to life. He is the Way, the better Way, the one and only Way. And as we know, he gave this commission to the Church, to spread this Good News throughout the world to all peoples. And so the Church has.

Missionaries

We are the inheritors of this great legacy here in the Americas, as we think about the missionaries who came here to spread this good news, to introduce people who did not know Jesus Christ to his love and mercy and salvation. The Franciscan Friars, who first arrived here in California, the Dominicans and the Jesuits all throughout the Americas, north, south, and central, these heroic missionaries had to prove to the European governing authorities that the indigenous people here were human.

You can imagine – they discovered this new continent they did not know existed, these people living here. It was probably something like if we were to discover life on another planet, “Are these people human or not?” Of course, for some of those powerful, self-interested ones, it would be very convenient that they not be human, right? Because they could exploit them in all kinds of ways and enslave them.

The missionaries proved that these newly-discovered people were indeed human. They educated them, taught them the arts and the sciences, how to grow crops, animal husbandry, and of course, most of all, introducing them into the faith of Jesus Christ. They demonstrated these people were capable of thinking lofty thoughts, of creating beauty, of being people of faith, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. This is why they came – to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ and to build a new Christian civilization.

They introduced them to Jesus Christ. It is no surprise – they were pagan – that also the practice of human sacrifice and cannibalism was not unknown among some of these people. Unfortunately, as we know, powerful economic and political interests prevailed, and while the efforts of the missionaries made great progress, in some places it was ultimately destroyed and dismantled, as was the mission system here in California before the Franciscan Friars were able to realize their vision of educating the indigenous people and handing the land over to them for their own self-governance.

Conformed to Christ

The missionaries were denounced. The Jesuit order was even suppressed. One wonders how much has changed.

We stand on the shoulders of these giants, as we now defend the humanity of life in the womb in our time, in accordance with the clear evidence of science. And yet we are the ones accused of being anti-science; we too face hostile denunciations. You've heard them all: how we're anti-women, anti-poor, anti-democracy, anti-this, anti-that, the litany goes on.

Our starting point of course is not what we are against, but what we are for. We are for the affirmation of the inherent dignity of all human life. Anyone who is for something is

naturally against the opposite. If you are for good, you are against evil. Human life is good; we are against the evil of the taking of innocent human life.

All the calumny leveled against us, in addition to being lies, is just distraction techniques. Our opponents do not want people to look at the reality of the evil of abortion, and they try to dismantle us. I think of the heroic efforts of Catholics and other people of faith with pro-life crisis pregnancy clinics, how they do not receive government aid, how sometimes they are forced to violate their conscience and their mission by posting information where women can go to have an abortion. And yet these clinics are the ones that are really offering them “choice” because they provide alternatives to abortion. The government does not require abortion clinics to post information where women can go to find alternatives to abortion.

So yes, it can create some anger within us, but let us remember, it puts us in good company – not only with those who first brought the faith of Christ to this continent, but good company with Our Lord himself. This curious gospel passage we heard for Mass today, the shortest one in the lectionary, has this strange ending that the people said of him that he is out of his mind. Maybe God has a message for us in the timing of the reading with our Mass today! God is giving us a chance to be like His Son, as we consider how he was treated, not just for fidelity to the truth, but for *being* the Truth.

Conclusion

All those who love him will share that fate. They will, in their own way, carry the wood for their own sacrifice. But this is the way to life. Not just life in this world, but life with him forever in the next. He paved the way with his one perfect Sacrifice. Now he gives us plenty of opportunity to follow in that way. May we do so, bearing the sacrifices we must for defending life in this world, so that we might inherit eternal life with him in the world that is to come.