

Saturday before Epiphany: January 5

Immaculate Conception, Dunbar

5 January 2013

Dear Father Paul, dear parishioners, and dear friends in Christ gathered for the monthly pro-life Mass:

Introduction

This Saturday during the Christmas season, when we are still illumined by the Light from the Manger of the newborn Christ Child, is an especially appropriate occasion to raise our voices in prayer that the Lord will grant us the strength, courage and perseverance to continue to defend, protect and foster the dignity of each and every human life from conception to its natural end. With the image of the Holy Family before our eyes, how can we fail to implore an outpouring of divine grace upon our world so infatuated by its ability to control the origin, development and ending of human life by its technological interventions?

I want you to know that those of you who month after month and year after year come together on these first Saturdays, under the maternal protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, are an inspiration to the whole Church of Vancouver. You are heralds of hope and life to us and merit our deepest gratitude for your persevering fidelity, especially during this Year of Faith. Thank you for your selfless witness, which is not just in “word or speech” but is fulfilled, as St. John writes in his First Letter, but also “in truth and action” (1 Jn 3:18). Truly, as your Bishop, I cannot thank you enough for your relentless

determination in keeping the pro-life cause every before us.

Cain

In his Letter, St. John mentions Cain, a rather terrifying figure, the first murderer. The Apostle contrasts him to the believers who are admonished to love, not hate, one another (cf. 1 Jn 3:12). He writes that “we must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother [Abel]” (1 Jn 3:12). And then he asks, “Why did he murder him?” (1 Jn 3:12). To this question, John provides the answer which, then as now, provides a key to understanding why people take human life. It is envy. This is how St. John puts it: “Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous” (1 Jn 3:12). And the Book of Wisdom says that “through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it” (Wis 2:24).

As we read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “In the account of Abel’s murder by his brother Cain, Scripture reveals the presence of anger and envy in man, consequences of original sin, from the beginning of human history. Man has become the enemy of his fellow man.”¹

In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, the Gospel of Life, Blessed John Paul writes of the “enormous and dramatic clash between good and

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2259.

evil, death and life, the ‘culture of death’ and the ‘culture of life.’²” At times, it even seems to us, when we look at our world, as if the forces of death have the upper hand. Tragically, the Pope noted, the biblical story of Cain’s murder of Abel (cf. Gen 4:2-16) is “a page rewritten daily, with inexorable and degrading frequency, in the book of human history.”³

Like the first fratricide, every murder, every deliberate taking of innocent human life, is a violation of the *spiritual relationship* uniting humankind in one great family. In this family of man we all share the same dignity as people created in God’s image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26-27). This spiritual kinship is gravely violated when relationships break down between parents and children, such as happens in abortion or when assisted suicide or euthanasia is encouraged or practiced.

At the root of every act of violence against our neighbour there is a fracture in that love that God intends to bind people together. Such acts are “from the evil one” (1 Jn 3:12), the one whom St. John describes in his Gospel as “a murderer from the beginning” (Jn 8:44).

Let’s go back to the beginning as narrated in the Book of Genesis. Before God, who asks Cain about the fate of Abel, the murderer, instead

² Blessed John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 28; cf. 50 and 104.

³ Blessed John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 7.

of showing remorse and apologizing, arrogantly eludes the question: “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9). Think about these words, “I do not know.” Cain tries to cover up his crime with a lie.

“This was and still is the case, when all kinds of ideologies try to justify and disguise the most atrocious crimes against human beings.”⁴ Even the language we use “termination of a pregnancy” or “mercy killing” are attempts to mask reality,

Then Lord’s question to Cain, “What have you done?” This is likewise addressed to the people of today, Blessed John Paul says, “to make them realize the extent and gravity of the attacks against life which continue to mark human history; to make them discover what causes these attacks and feeds them; and to make them ponder seriously the consequences which derive from these attacks for the existence of individuals and peoples.”⁵

And then we have in response Cain’s own insolent question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9). Cain does not wish to think about what he has done to his brother. He wants to brush it aside, pretending it is a matter of no consequence. He refuses to accept the responsibility which every person owes to others: honouring and respecting that

⁴ Blessed John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 8.

⁵ Blessed John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 10.

person's inalienable right to life. Again, today, we see all too frequently, the same tendency for people to refuse to accept responsibility for their brothers and sisters in so many different and varied ways.⁶

Another important truth emerges from this biblical account which forms the backdrop of John's teaching in his Letter. Cain's hatred, rooted in envy, is implicitly contrasted to Christ's love. Christ does not take life away. He bestows it, and does this by offering his own life. As the Apostle writes: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 Jn 3:16). This is the exact opposite of what Cain did: he took; he stole; he did not give or bestow. St. John is describing the culture of life. It is the inheritance of those who, as the Apostle says, "have passed from death to life" (1 Jn 3:14).

As Catholics, we are convinced that the world's salvation is not the work of human beings – of science, of technology, or of an ideology – but it comes from God himself who has revealed himself in salvation history, and culminated that revelation in the Incarnation, Birth, ministry, Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Despite the contemporary Cains who surround us with their murderous intent, and the hells created where human life is trivialized, deprived of its light,

⁶ Cf. Blessed John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 8.

they will not, in the end, prevail. The power of God’s love is stronger than evil. However low we may fall – and fall we do – it is never too low for God, who descended from heaven into our world. However far astray our heart may have gone, God is always “greater than our hearts” (1 Jn 3:20), as John writes.

Even the mark God put on Cain, “lest any who came upon him should kill him” (Gen 4:15), was a distinctive sign intended not to condemn him to the hatred of others, but to protect and defend him from those wishing to kill him, even out of a desire to avenge Abel’s death. But, we should always remember, for God, not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and he himself pledges to guarantee this. This is the paradoxical mystery of God’s merciful justice which places forgiveness and redemption at the centre of the divine plan.⁷ The gentle breath of God’s grace can dispel the darkest clouds and can make life beautiful, even in the most seemingly desperate situations. Christianity is the proclamation of the victory of grace over sin, of life over death.⁸

Conclusion

Christ broke the Gordian knot of murderous violence through his own Blood freely offered for our sake on the altar of the Cross. In the

⁷ Cf. Blessed John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 9.

⁸ Cf. Benedict XVI, Address at Piazza di Spagna, Rome (8 December 2012).

Holy Sacrifice of the Mass which we are now celebrating, this offering is now made present for us gathered in his presence but also for the salvation of the world. Let us ask the Lord to make us ever more attentive to the Holy Spirit who has been poured forth into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5), so that we might abide in the eternal life promised us (cf. Jn 10:10).

✠ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver