

Charlotte March for Life 2021
January 15, 2021

I want to begin by offering an overwhelming word of thanks. Thank you to all of you who have gathered today as a living witness to the sanctity of human life. God has graced us with a beautiful day. I couldn't have said that last Friday, which is why the organizers moved the March to today. But I doubt that any inclement weather would have deterred your presence and your witness to the right that every person has to breathe the fresh air and enjoy the sunlight that we today enjoy. I give my greatest thanks, however, to God Almighty. It is he who knit each of us together in our mothers' wombs, who saw each of us from eternity and the life that we would live. He indeed saw this day, smiles with delight upon our event, and blesses us.

It's an honor and privilege to address you all today for the Charlotte March for Life. When I was sitting in my parish office and received a call regarding delivering remarks this year, I said, "Well, you must be scraping the bottom of the barrel." The response came, "To be honest, we asked fourteen other people who said no." If that's not a moment to grow in humility, I don't know what is! To be fair, though, to prepare for remarks such as those that I will offer today is a very difficult task. The reason for this is because these types of events mean that a speaker is normally preaching to the choir. You are present, you have marched, and you are praying. I don't have to convince you that life is precious from the moment of conception until natural death. So, this year, I want to trace a history of how we got to this moment, then speak to our present crisis against human life, and finally propose some renewed paths forward that we can take to stand for life.

At the time of colonial America, the legality of abortion followed English common law. This meant that abortion was illegal after fetal movements could be detected. This was generally 15 to 20 weeks after conception. In the 1820's, abortion became illegal in the United Kingdom and many states in America followed suit. Interestingly enough, laws to ban abortion were motivated mainly by physicians who were encouraged more and more by modern medical science that showed a *continuous* development of a fetus from conception to birth. It was, therefore, a medically established fact that conception was the inception of a human life.

Conception and inception were two realities that went hand in hand. The word conception comes from Latin and is a combination of the prefix “con,” meaning “together with,” and the verb “capere,” meaning “to take.” Together, conception literally means “to take with” or “to hold with.” In terms of human life, conception means that the mother is taking or holding within herself another person. Now, I may be considered outdated when I say that I believe that words communicate reality. But this was the view in the 19th Century world, too. When both doctors and parents used the word “conception” and said, “We have conceived a child,” it meant, we have taken in and hold within ourselves a new person. It is the inception, then, of a new life. Inception, to continue our study of etymology, means to “to take in.” More usually, it means to begin an undertaking or layer something within something else. New life is not just about the moment of conception, but to begin something that has a future, something that will continue with proper care and nurturing. It also is a layering of a new life within another life.

In the 19th and 20th Century, then, there was really no opposition to the reality that human life in the womb had dignity and worth. This was supported by the culture at the time and the medical field. Moreover, the modern iteration of the Hippocratic Oath took hold across the Western world through the early 19th Century. This was considered absolute. This is not to say that abortion was extinct. But it did mean that medical professionals were not the ones performing abortions. Abortions were executed — and I use that word deliberately — and performed by those who were untrained in the medical field and not connected to healthcare institutions like a hospital or clinic.

There was a drawback, though, to modern medical science in the 19th and 20th Centuries. With the advance of medical sciences, there developed a more precise understanding of prenatal chemicals and prenatal health. From this advancement came the advent of more precise and effective abortifacient “medicines” and consumables. This was also a response to the fact that by the 1900’s, abortion was a felony in every State. It was much easier to “take care” of an unwanted pregnancy through a pill since procured abortion was illegal.

The turn of the 20th Century brought about a revolutionary change in American perspective regarding abortion. Margaret Sanger founded the American Birth Control League in 1921, which became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 1942. Any student of history — true history through the studying of sources and not the revisionist history of secular education and modern, government-sponsored curricula — any honest student of history will find that Margaret Sanger’s philosophy at the foundation of Planned Parenthood was racist and dysmorphophobic. Her writings and speeches clearly show that she only wanted white, healthy babies born in families without any hint of economic hardship or uncertainty. If there was any sign of deformity in the child, that warranted a termination of pregnancy. If the family dynamics did not fit her bill of eugenics, that warranted a termination of pregnancy.

I say all of this because the pro-life movement focuses so much on *Roe v. Wade* that we can forget to counter the cultural shift that developed prior to that pivotal case and continues to pervade our society. We can forget or not even be aware of the mindset that was disseminated before the 1970’s in America which said that some children are wanted, and some children are unwanted. Therefore, if a child is unwanted, his or her life was somehow less than a wanted child because its life would be one of greater difficulty and trial. However, I am not aware of any guarantee that one has a right to a life without suffering or distress. There is no guarantee that says that one has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness without having to overcome difficulties and obstacles. No, the right to life is absolute in and of itself. It means that the child has a right to be brought to term, delivered, and cared for.

But herein lies the rub. In the early 20th Century and coming to the forefront in the 1950’s, there was a movement gathering steam to allow abortions “when the life of the mother was in danger.” As intelligent people, we can recognize and accept that there are situations in which the mother must receive medical care that will endanger the life of her unborn child or even cause the foreseeable death of her child. These situations are extremely rare, but they are flaunted as the way to “get at” pro-life advocates. This definition of “health of the mother” began to expand and evolve based on the undercurrents of Margaret Sanger’s philosophy. A child, the pro-choice advocates would say, should not be brought into this world if it will

endanger the life of the mother. But what does that mean? The “life of the mother” used to mean the extremely rare situation in which a medically unsound *pregnancy* placed the mother’s life in *near danger of death*. It evolved, however, to mean that the life of the *child* would place an *undue burden* on the mother’s life. Therefore, life no longer meant the objective criterion of existing, but the quality of status and advancement in material gain of the mother. This is the underpinning of the majority of social and personal arguments for abortion, and these were present long before *Roe v. Wade* and the current societal epidemic of irrational individualism. If the mother will not be able to go to college, make the desired amount of money she wants to make, or even have the same comforts she hoped for, this was considered a danger to the life of the mother, the qualitative live of the mother.

Since *Roe v. Wade*, the pro-life struggle has been a grassroots movement that has sought to unify as many voices as possible to convince legislators to enact laws that protect the sanctity of human life and overturn the judicial decision which legalized abortion in all fifty states. It is also a struggle at the doors of abortion mills. Countless numbers of decent human beings who have been given the gift of life gather, pray, and counsel on the sidewalks outside of abortion facilities throughout the country. An innumerable collection of men and women have been hauled off in handcuffs across the country over the last fifty years simply for trying to bring a message of hope and support to women who have been told that there is no other option but to eradicate the life of their child. And we must also acknowledge the brave women who have healed from their own abortions and men who have found redemption after supporting, encouraging, or remained silent as their child’s mother went through such a horrific tragedy. A great number of them speak up regularly attempting to dissuade expectant mothers from making the same mistake.

But we must not delude ourselves into thinking that the undercurrents of a materialistic and prosperous society have not driven this push for the continued legalization of abortion in our country. We are currently standing at a precipice. We have allowed for too long the mentality that life should be without difficulty and suffering. We have fooled ourselves into making comfort our goal. For those with common sense, however, which, as G.K. Chesterton wrote is not so common anymore, our current global epidemic reminds us that the effects of the fall are

inescapable. Human life, indeed, is more than quality and length, but something to be valued in itself. Human life at the moment of conception is about relationship. No matter the situation of the family or the circumstances of the conception, human life produces irrevocable relationships that define and undergird its sanctity. First and foremost, there is the relationship of the child with the God who has seen to its formation. Secondly is the relationship between the child and its mother, a relationship of caring and nurturing, a relationship of guardianship and responsibility. These relationships go beyond biology and science. These relationships are merely the foreshadowing of future connections and associations between that child and those he or she will meet throughout its life. But some will say that certain lives have less value because of social circumstances or some foreseeable illness or complication.

A brother priest once told me a story of setting out during Holy Week because he wanted to do mission work in another country. He sought out a place where true need was present. So, he went to an orphanage run by the Missionaries of Charity in, I believe, a country in Eastern Europe. There, the sisters cared for the children who were unwanted. When the Iron Curtain fell and Communism was vanquished, Mother Theresa and her sisters went in to help clean up the spiritual wasteland that socialism caused. The children that the sisters cared for were deformed, sickly, and many incoherent as they made signs and noises. One of the children was particularly mutilated by having their arms and legs develop in a such a way that they were extended out in front of them, much like a child might play dead or, as we say, play opossum. The sisters explained to him that the child, as an infant, was hogtied to a railroad track and left to be killed by an oncoming train. The sisters found the child and took her in, but she was left there for so long that the joints, tendons, and muscles developed in such a way as to render her unable to walk for life.

The sisters, however, saw the value of life. As he prepared to celebrate the Triduum liturgies with the sisters in the convent, he was surprised that they had gathered the children for Holy Thursday Mass. Throughout the whole Mass, the children made noises and were distracting. The sisters bustled about to tend to the children. But when it came time for the consecration, the children fell silent. The sisters had taught them about the Holy Eucharist. For the moments that the Sacred

Host was elevated for adoration, they adored. In the end, the children showed that they could form new relationships. Yes, there was the relationship of the caring and loving sisters toward the children. But that had fostered through catechesis and education a relationship of the children with their sacramental God.

My friends, our work in the pro-life movement is to show forth the powerful reality that human life is valuable beyond socio-economic situations. It is valuable beyond quality and means. The value of human life is about forming bonds of love and caring. And that is what makes our work and advocacy so important today. We stand, I repeat, at a precipice. Rather than forming unifying relationships of love and caring, our country is divided. I don't mean to expose every facet of these divisions. But I do mean to speak to the situation we find ourselves in. It is a position of post-modern sensationalism where everyone reacts rather than responds. It is a time of cancel culture wherein every disagreeable voice is shut out and shut down. It is a time in which we raise our voice to fight for the unborn and we can be canceled, silenced, and mocked. But do not despair. This only means that our country right now is a proving ground for the principled voices of reason and truth. It is a time for your voices to be heard.

At this point, I must be careful in my rhetoric. If I mention the word "march" or "demonstration," someone might accuse me of inciting violence, and I'll be kicked off of Facebook and Twitter. But we cannot let this plight of intimidation keep us from being bold. For too long, we have allowed the official pro-life groups to brand our message. It is time we seek a renewal in our convictions. I hope I do not cause too much controversy with my following remarks. It is no longer enough to hold up signs that say, "Abortion hurts women," and "Abortion stops a beating heart." With the trash that the majority of Americans watch on TV, pictures of aborted babies are ignored by the masses during marches and demonstrations. On a cultural level, I even now question the effectiveness of youth groups marching in Washington while chanting their slogans back and forth. Yes, the numbers are strong and demonstrate a continuous growth of the pro-life cause. I also do not mean to dissuade these practices which have converted the hearts and minds of many. But are we as pro-lifers able to engage intelligently in daily discourse that changes the fabric of our society? That is where the change and renewal need to take place! Not only do the abortion laws need to be changed, but we must also

weave our pro-life message into a movement that changes the heart of our country. If we only work toward legal changes, then stronger and better marketing tactics can hinder the changes we seek. In fact, it's precisely the shrewd marketing and cleverness of pro-abortion advocates that got us to where we are today.

So, I would like to propose a couple of suggestions. First and foremost, we must engage our neighbors. I have repeated for years that politics is a derivative of our values and our culture. We must invest ourselves in our local communities, in our neighborhoods, in our local governments in order to show those who have the power to change the course of our country that the pro-life movement is founded upon love and that acknowledgment of the goodness of an unborn life is beneficial to the common good.

Marches and demonstrations only go so far. In fact, since *Roe v. Wade*, we have seen presidents go back and forth with executive orders and unilateral decisions regarding abortions, taxpayer funding, limits on procedures, and even American financial support for abortion abroad. Our voice on the national and state level is heard at least yearly. But our work as pro-lifers is not finished here in Charlotte or tomorrow in Raleigh or two weeks from now in Washington. Our work is drawing others into the ability to demand from state and federal legislators that they respect human life by enacting laws that protect the unborn. And if they don't, they must be voted out. The least effective way to ensure this is by waving political signs and posting who we're voting for on Facebook. Instead, it must begin in our community and with our neighbors. It begins by forming relationships that are based upon the question: "How can we reflect in our community, township, neighborhood, the values that we hold dear as Americans?" If we are all on our own and not engaging with those who live around us, we don't think much about enshrining values; instead, we simply worry about what's going to get me ahead and secure my comfort.

My second proposal is one that is challenging but rewarding. The pro-life movement must be explicitly ecumenical and inter-religious. When we march, when we stand outside of abortion mills, and when we engage our local communities, we are not Catholic, Methodist, Orthodox, Jewish, Lutheran, atheist, Mormon, or Buddhist. We are human beings seeking to save human beings. Since

I'm Catholic, I'll pick on the Catholics. Too often, we shy away from the "other churches" who organize events, gatherings, and walks. Why? "We want to be the silent witness." Just leave us alone and let us pray our rosaries. Don't get me wrong, the Rosary is a great spiritual weapon in the fight against abortion. And then, other churches look at the Catholics and say, "They just want to be left alone to pray in their way, so we'll gather over here and pray our way." What is that? Instead, we must be taken out of our comfort zone. The pro-life movement is an all-humans movement. Mary won't be disappointed if you pray four decades instead of five in order to stop and sing a Christian song with some non-Catholics. And God won't be disappointed if non-Catholics stand and pray in silence with those funny Catholics holding onto their string of beads.

I was once separated from my group at the national March for Life years ago. I was with a brother seminarian. We stepped out of the street to the sidewalk and looked for the red and white striped hats everyone in our group was wearing. Thinking we walked ahead of them, we must have stood there for fifteen minutes. Eventually, I said, "We've got to just keep marching. We'll find them at the end." So, I took a step into the crowd that was moving toward the Supreme Court building. There was a group who was walking by, a Protestant church group, alternating between singing praise songs and their youth pastor reading Scripture and praying extemporaneously. My classmate grabbed my arm and said, "Let's wait for a Catholic group to walk with. I'm not comfortable with that style of prayer." I looked at him and said, "You know what else is uncomfortable? Abortion. We are making that known and so are they, we're just speaking different languages. Let's have an immersion experience." So, we marched with that group and met some fantastic people. Can we share communion at the altar? No. But we shared the communion of prayer and praise as we walked together that day. We must be willing to recognize that one faith group's efforts are not enough alone to win this war. If there is any movement that people of all faiths and creeds should be able to agree on and work together to promote, it is the sanctity of life and the end of abortion in our land.

Lastly, we must always educate ourselves holistically. I emphasize education because the pro-abortion argument is inherently illogical or, in some cases, pro-choice advocates have done no thinking about it at all. It all boils down to the

question, “Does human life have intrinsic value?” If so, the taking of an innocent life inside or outside the womb is wrong and evil. But the pro-life movement goes far beyond that awful reality of prenatal infanticide. If we are honest about the historical change in opinion on abortion in our country, it traces all the way back to the separation between the gift of human sexuality and God’s purpose for marriage and the human family. It is no coincidence that the fight for abortion went hand-in-hand with the movement to separate the genital expression of sexuality from marriage and family. This gave rise to premarital sex, adultery, and fornication. Marital intimacy dropped the word marital and has become recreational. So there had to be a means to prevent the “unwanted consequences” of sexual activity. Hence the rise in the market for contraceptives, birth control, and abortifacients. When those fail, abortion is the last resort.

So, what does this education look like? It looks like self-mastery and virtue. It is those who profess that life is sacred from the moment of conception until natural death and then treat everyone they encounter as sacred and valuable. It means homes in which children experience their parents treating each other with value and dignity. It means entertainment and recreation that do not contradict the worth of the human person. It means a rejection of the secular message that we should love things and use people to get what we want. It means going out of our way and out of our comfort zone to help the needy and support the poor in our community because all life is sacred. It means being honest about our selfishness and seeking God’s forgiveness for the times that I chose my own interests over the good of my neighbor.

In the end, my message is this: we must break the stereotypes, structures, and programming that up until now we have clung to. We each must live a new pro-life movement that can confront not only the evil of abortion, but also the evil of division where everyone does their own thing in their own silos. We must stand united with a voice that is courageous, bold, and unrelenting. It is the work of a pro-life movement that culminates not only in marches and gatherings, but consists of living out daily the values that used to be in our country self-evident, that every person has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But that pursuit cannot have fruit unless we walk hand-in-hand with our neighbor. No matter his creed, skin color, or life experience, we all have an obligation to band together to

cry out that abortion is division par excellence. It is the division of the body parts of a child in the womb. It is a division of a child from its mother. It is a division of family life. It is a division of relationships that are sacred. It divides the virtue of hope from our thoughts of the future. So, our response must be one that is unifying, bold, and new.

Thank you for your boldness and courage today as we march and pray together in unison. Thank you for the opportunity to offer these remarks, and may God bless and reward each of you for standing for life. Let us never miss an opportunity to not only proclaim but live out the reality of the sanctity of human life.