



Day of the Unborn Child Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth

One day, not too many years after the opening of the Pinnaroo cemetery in Whitford, I walked through one of its sections where I noticed the large number of graves of babies and young children. Some of the babies had been alive for only a few days or months. I was astonished at the number, and I had a real sense of the sadness and grief that must have been felt by their parents. The numbing grief would eventually fade but the memory would persist and leave a mark on those parents.

In my own family, an uncle and aunt lost their first born. It was so devastating to them that they dared not have another child.

As I came away from the cemetery, I thought to myself: How can we support parents who have suffered the loss of a child? What are the needs that they have which are not being addressed? Many years later, I became aware of the practice in some of our parishes where people were invited to participate in a Mass to pray for their children who had died before, during or after their birth. For some, it was the opportunity to give a name to the child and this gave them great peace as they recognised the personality of their child. We gather today in the same spirit to pray for the children who have died so early and tragically, and for their mothers and fathers who carry with them the pain of their loss.

The International Day of the Unborn Child has been celebrated since 1999, beginning in Argentina, and gradually in countries around the world. For ten years, we have celebrated it with Mass in the Archdiocese. We remind ourselves in this celebration that every person has value and dignity from the moment of their conception. We pray for all the children who have died, including those whose lives were ended by an abortion. The Feast of the Annunciation has been chosen for the Day of the Unborn because, on that day, we recall how Mary consented to be taken up into the plan of God so that the Saviour could be sent at last. Her womb became the sanctuary for the Son of God.

The birth of a child is an amazing moment. Now that a father is encouraged to be involved and present at the birth of his child, it means that he, too, shares with the mother in this moment of grace. It is an event that he cherishes for the rest of his life.

We know that the journey to birth is not an easy one. Each pregnancy can be likened to an experiment that nature conducts throughout the process of development of the child. There are threshold moments in pregnancy, as Professor Lord Winston of London has written, where the development of a viable human being will either proceed or stop. Even the beginning point,



conception, has the odds stacked against it. The development through each stage to birth he considers as miraculous.

We know, too, that the loss of an unborn child is devastating and so very common. The needs of the mother, the father and the family are many in this situation, and they include the needs for consolation, compassion and healing.

We also know the effects of abortion on women and men. The healing required is enormous and can only be achieved through those involved having an encounter with the God of mercy. Unfortunately, the destruction of a life can be the beginning of a downward, spiralling path to self-destruction for a mother.

The work that is done by Pregnancy Assistance and others in the Archdiocese, who promote the defence of human life at all stages, is bold work. Our support of those who are engaged in being there for people in desperate moments of decision is vital. They are the ones who must be the face of understanding, compassion and mercy for mothers. They are the ones who are prepared to hang in with frightened women, offering support beyond the first contact.

This is bold work. It takes great courage and determination which all involved can draw from the Holy Spirit, especially when the voices from our individualistic society focus only on the rights of the mother. It is hard work and still there are miracles where hearts are changed. These moments of grace we acknowledge as the work of God.

The small excerpt from the Acts of the Apostles with which we began the liturgy of the Word is part of a longer episode, about Peter and John being examined by the Jewish leaders following the cure of the crippled man. They are taken to the Council of Jewish leaders and warned not to preach Christ. They boldly answer the questions put to them but, in the end, the leaders were unable to deny that there stood with the apostles the man who had been cured in the name of Jesus. The miracle silenced them.

We draw close to the Risen Lord today in this Mass in order to be strengthened for our bold work of defending and conserving human life, and of standing alongside the parents who are frightened and desperate. We can be, by our presence and faith, the eloquent preaching of the Gospel of life to those who we encounter in this ministry of care and compassion; and the means through which Jesus may work the miracle of the change of heart, whereby the unborn child is respected, accepted and loved.

Let us bring to the Lord our prayer for each child whose life was so short, and yet whose life has delighted our heavenly Father.