

**Ordinary 27**  
**10.4.20**  
**Fr. John Tapp**

For Catholics in the United States, October is referred to as Respect Life month. And today is Respect Life Sunday. The gospel we hear at Mass certainly touches on this topic. In particular, it seems to emphasize a reality present in Jesus' day and a reality present in our world as well: that we can be shockingly and brazenly anti-life. In the gospel, Jesus was making a prediction about how a lack of respect for life will lead to his suffering and death. But the parable also has implications for us today. Jesus is pointing out that if we show a similar lack of respect for life in this day and age, all the world will suffer. Furthermore, we will be judged for the respect or lack of respect we show one another.

When you hear those words – Respect Life – you probably default to thinking about protecting the unborn. You may also think of it in terms of attempting to limit abortion-on-demand which became legal in 1973 in the Supreme Court case Roe versus Wade.

Of course, Respect Life implies showing the highest regard for and protecting the unborn. The notion of Respect Life should also make us pause and reflect on the effects which abortion-on-demand has on individuals and on our society.

While those observations are true, they are simply one-dimensional. Our notion and understanding of Respect Life necessarily need to be broader. Respect Life needs to be understood, not just as a philosophy, but as something which must include action.

Let me give a few examples. This afternoon, a number of us will gather in front of the church at 2:30 pm and remain there for an hour – praying and offering silent witness that life begins at conception. During that time, some will pray the rosary. Others will hold up signs like: life begins at conception; Jesus is pro-life, abortion kills. While that faithful witness is good, what happens with us when those 60 minutes are over? How many of us assist our Life Ministry or even know about Nativity Parish's Life Ministry which continuously supports struggling young mothers – many of them single – with visiting, supporting, and supplying diapers, car seats, and play pens – all things that most of these mothers cannot afford at this point in their lives. How many of you have sought to adopt a child - particularly a special needs child? How many of you have financially supported a couple as they seek to adopt a child – knowing how exorbitant lawyer fees and adoption fees are for such a process?

It's easy to say we are against abortion. It is easy to say I vote pro-life. What God wants from us are actions which bring those words to fulfillment.

And speaking of abortion – there's a good chance that someone in this congregation has had one. To you – who might feel overwrought by your decision – I want to say that the sweet healing of Christ awaits you in the Sacrament of Penance (confession). And, if you are finding the burden of that abortion unbearable, I recommend that you investigate information from the program called Project Rachel. Just Google it. There you will find information to help you begin the process of healing.

A true and expansive Respect Life ethic demands that we look at all aspects of life. It means that we are to love and support to all of God's creatures, in whatever stage or state of life they find themselves in – not just the unborn.

In the past several months, our black sisters and brothers have been calling attention to the indiscriminate and off-handed way they are often treated. It is a fact, born out by statistics, that black infant mortality is at a higher rate than for whites; that black individuals are less likely to have access to quality health care than whites; that black sisters and brothers will experience educational shortcomings in a disproportionate level than whites; that blacks are prosecuted for an arrest to a different degree than whites. Respect Life demands that we hear and listen to those cries. Respect Life means that we seek to support others in their struggle. And Respect Life means that we act in justice for those who do not fair as many or most of us do. Respect Life means saying and advocating that the lives of others really and truly DO matter.

Respecting life doesn't mean that we can arbitrarily say that one life is more valuable than another. I've often heard Catholics argue that they are against abortion but support the death penalty. In this day, and in these United States, that is not an argument that a Catholic can make. Despite committing a serious crime, despite the anguish such a heinous act causes a family and community, even the criminal is worthy of our respect – even if they don't respect you or me in return – because they are created in the image and likeness of God.

The Respect Life ethic also encompasses the immigrant. Certainly, a nation can set up parameters as to who can enter a that land or not. That nation has a right, even the duty, to set up reasonable border controls, as well as defend its citizens from foreign foes. But as people flee crushing (and life-threatening) poverty, oppression, and even the threat of death, they are to be treated with respect and, I daresay, be welcomed by a nation like ours - even if they haven't followed proper procedure for crossing the border.

As a case in point, I'd like you to consider the following: in the time I've been at Nativity, three of our priests who have generously and faithfully served here are from Colombia. One of them has become a citizen of the United States. Another is here on a work visa. And the third remained here illegally with his parents (after their work visas ran out) when he was just a little boy. He had no say in that matter. In time, he grew up. He studied at our seminary. Was ordained a priest and now serves the People of God in the Diocese of St. Petersburg, bringing them to know God and experience His salvation. Just a few weeks ago, he almost lost his privilege to drive a car and was days away from possible deportation. He even longs to become a US citizen, but cannot do so because of the current disarray in our nation's DACA program. Luckily, through a congressional intervention, he has permission to drive once again and can remain legally in this country for another 24 months until this whole process starts up again. However, his long-term future of living and ministering in this country is uncertain as is his life-long desire to become a US citizen. Respecting Life means giving this young man a chance and the peace of mind that he can continue to work as a priest of God without fear of deportation, especially since he wishes to become a citizen like you and me.

The bottom line is Respect Life is an expansive and comprehensive issue. It is not a singular issue. As Catholics we profess that all life is sacred and as such, deserves the utmost of respect. That life could be in the womb, it could be in jail, it could be working in our parish, or it could be someone who is elderly in one of our nursing homes. If we say we respect life, then we must affirm that that means every life – not just the lives we like, or the lives of those who think like us, or the individuals who look, believe, and speak like us.

I know that none of this is easy. But that is the point. Respect Life in all its forms is difficult, is mind-bending, can be frustrating, and can possibly irritate us. Yet, Respect Life in its FULLNESS is what is demanded by our Savior Jesus Christ and must be fully lived by each of us if we are to call ourselves Christian.

In closing, and in light of the election which is just a few short weeks away, I want to leave you with a statement made by the bishops of the United States in 1998. That statement was made around Respect Life Sunday. The statement addressed issues from that day, but those issues still affect our communities and nation today.

As citizens in the world's leading democracy, Catholics in the United States have special responsibilities to protect human life and dignity, and to stand with those who are poor and vulnerable. We are called to welcome the stranger, to combat discrimination, to pursue peace and to promote the common good. Catholic social teaching calls us to practice civic virtues and offers us principles to shape participation in public life. We cannot be indifferent to or cynical about the obligations of citizenship. Our political choices should not reflect simply our own interests, partisan preferences or ideological agendas, but should be shaped by the principles of our faith and our commitment to justice, especially to the weak and vulnerable.

To be Catholic then, means upholding and respecting life – in all forms and in all stages – from conception to natural death. May God help us as we strive to be faithful to this calling – not just in the words we speak, but in our actions toward ALL.