



On the 40th
anniversary of
Roe v. Wade

Forty years ago this month the Supreme Court handed down the Roe v. Wade decision and threw open the floodgates to abortion on demand. On this sad anniversary we do well to recall Blessed John Paul II's great encyclical, The Gospel of Life. It's Good News is threefold, the pope says. First of all, it is the Gospel of Human Dignity - the Good News that every human being is made "in the image and likeness of God." Secondly, it is the Gospel of God's Love for every one of the human creatures made in His image. Thirdly, it is the Gospel of Life, because it comes from and leads back to the Giver of Life. In short, the Gospel of Life is the Good News of human dignity loved into life. To live this Gospel, the pope tells us, "we must care for the other as a person for whom God has made us responsible." And He has made us responsible for the child in the womb.

Not in the judgment of the Supreme Court in 1973. Roe v. Wade has proved to be an anti-Gospel - the worst of bad news for the "self-evident truths" proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence: "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." An "unalienable" right is one that no one can take away, but that is just what the Justices did in Roe v. Wade: they alienated from the equal protection of the law those least

able to protect themselves, the unborn.

Bypassing democratic deliberation by the American people, the Court unilaterally legalized abortion overnight and enshrined "choice" as the value that now trumps all others. The choice Roe endorsed is the choice to use lethal force without having to give a public reason - to take a life without having to justify why you did. The Court would never extend such an extraordinary concession to death in traffic collisions, in robberies, or in spousal abuse. In such cases whoever causes death will be called to account for it; the taker of life will be required to give an explanation that is subject to the judgment of the community.

Roe exempted the decision to end life in the womb from public scrutiny. In so doing it cleared the way for the burden of this terrible choice to fall overwhelmingly on the women who make it. In the four decades since Roe women beyond counting have informed men of unforeseen pregnancy only to hear them say, "You can have me or you can have an abortion. The choice is yours." So it is. For the law of Roe absolves men of responsibility for the life they have begotten in the body of the woman.

Precisely here the Gospel of Life comes to our rescue. For it is the Gospel of New Life even where life has been lost or destroyed, "Father, forgive them," Jesus prays as he is nailed to the Cross. "Give them life anew, for they know not what they do." These words to the Father as his mission ends bring to completion his words to us as it begins: "Repent and believe in the Gospel."

In a famous passage in his encyclical Pope John Paul II applied these words directly to women who have had an abortion. "The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord. She looked as beautiful as she had when we began: "Your sins are forgiven," I said; "go in peace." And she did.

Recall the words of John Paul: "we must care for the other as a person for whom God has made us responsible." He has made us responsible to care for women tempted by terrible circumstances to have an abortion. He has made us responsible to care for women deeply wounded by the abortion they've had. He has made us responsible to show them that the Gospel of Life is always the Gospel of Hope.

With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life."

It has been my great privilege as a priest to see the truth of the Holy Father's words confirmed time and again in hearing the confessions of women who have had an abortion. One in particular is seared into my memory. She was in her late thirties, and strikingly beautiful. But as she began to confess, she wept away her beauty right before my eyes. Tears of grief poured down her face until only sorrow showed on its surface - sorrow that made no excuse whatsoever, sorrow that simply pleaded for the pardon Jesus promised on the Cross. As his mercy washed over her in the words of absolution, her countenance was utterly transformed once again.