

Ascension Sunday (C)
May 23, 2004
Fr. Derek Lappe

Most of you have seen, I am sure, over the past few weeks, stories in the newspaper and on the TV about some of the Bishops who are talking about denying communion to Catholic Politicians who publicly dissent from Church teaching –Not trusting the media to get it straight I would like to try to explain a little about what is going on.

As I begin I would like to point out that the Church has no interest in supporting political parties or particular candidates. Tax laws in fact mandate that the Church not promote either of these. This is, in fact, a great good, because it frees us from the mire of political debate so that we might use our voice to support the *common good* of all members of society through the various important issues which come before the American people, legislatures and judiciaries.

It was interesting to get the perspective of my brother Jay, who is a Captain in the Marine Corp, and teaches in a school where they train new officers to be leaders. He compared the bishops situation to that of officers during a war. When Jay was in Iraq he was part of a Battalion Command Group which worked in an Amtrak near the battle line. This group's job was to coordinate artillery and air support for the soldiers up front –they all had to be in the vehicle together to make sure everything was coordinated. You probably saw many pictures of Amtraks during the war: just a big metal box on wheels. And you can probably imagine how hot and miserable it must get in there, filled with marines and diesel fumes. In fact all they ever wanted to do was get out of this vehicle. They would always whine and complain to their Colonel, asking to separate and work out of humvees, but all he ever said was, "get in the track, we have to stay together so we can communicate with one another."

Because of his position of teaching leadership Jay was given a report of another battalion during the war, with the same situation. But in this case the Colonel, in the face of their constant whining and complaining, and probably from a desire to be well liked and popular didn't say no. He let them separate, so that when the call came in requesting an air-strike on what were believed to be Iraqis, the operations officer wasn't sitting right there to correct the mistake, as a result ten Marines were killed by friendly fire. Men died because their leaders took the easy way out, they didn't want to do or say the unpopular thing.

When we transfer this story over into the Spiritual life, it becomes even more important than life and death, because in the spiritual life it is a matter of eternal life and death, in the Church *souls* are lost for eternity due to a lack of strong leadership willing to teach the truth, even when it is hard.

Our first reading today relates a somewhat funny scene immediately after the Ascension of our Lord. The Apostles are all standing there looking up into the sky, maybe they thought that was what they were supposed to be doing, just standing there waiting for the

Lord to return in Glory —until two angels appear to them and tell them to quit looking up in the sky and get to work. Jesus had entrusted a mission to those disciples, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth.” The Mission of the Apostles and of all the Church is to be a witness to Jesus Christ: living a life faithful to him, and teaching the Truths which he taught all the way to the end of the world.

For the past couple of years many have been wondering if the successors of the Apostles had been just staring up in the sky, neglecting to protect and defend their flock from predators, failing to teach with the necessary clarity and conviction. It seems now that they are beginning to get to work.

As they do, I think that the first objection many will raise is, **What moral authority do they have, what possible moral high ground after their past failings?** ”

Well, their moral authority comes from Christ and from being successors of the Apostles, but many of them certainly don't have any moral high ground. This might actually be the point however —where we find a strong link between the problem of Episcopal inaction in the face of the sexual abuse of children and the stand they are taking on dissident Catholic Politicians.

Maybe, justly humiliated by their inaction at defending young people from predator priests, they are trying to avoid the same type of *scandal* that comes from silence and failing to confront those who are complicit in the slaughter of innocent pre-born children. The principles involved are the same: Catholic politicians, for better or worse, have the role of being lay leaders in the Church, they have their picture taken at Mass, shaking hands with bishops, and when it is convenient they wear their Catholicism on their sleeve. Thus, when they publicly dissent —and publicly vote for laws which continue and support the scourge of abortion, or on other essential matters of faith and morals they cause *grave scandal* for Christians.

They weaken and undercut of the moral voice of the Church due to their well-known and scandalous dissent. Every time the Church tries to proclaim her belief in the dignity of every human life the media raises the issue of division and debate within the Church by pointing to these politicians who vote against the Gospel of life, which is truly at the heart of Jesus' message.

This *scandal* is not mitigated by those politicians who use the tired old defense that they are personally opposed, but must not impose their beliefs and morality on others. “It is a nonsensical phrase. Maybe they learned it from that great statesman Pontius Pilate — personally I'm opposed —but my constituency wants the Son of God dead.” It is somewhat perplexing to me that the media lets them get away with such an absurd apology. Could you imagine an elected official saying, personally I'm opposed to slavery, but every white man needs to make his own judgment as to whether or not he should own slaves. “Yet, the action of abortion involves an even greater infringement on

the rights of another –it takes away not just the right to liberty, but the most fundamental right we possess as persons, the right to life.

Thus the bishops have begun to call to conversion those who would water down their faith for the sake of personal gain. They are calling them back to Jesus Christ and asking them to allow the Gospel to guide them in their public life –and not to separate their faith from the way they live in the world. This is integrity of belief and life is central to the message of Jesus who says: why do you say to me, Lord, Lord, and not do what I tell you? What respect would you have for the Catholic businessman who goes to Mass on Sunday, and then goes out and does not allow his faith to affect the way he runs his business, cheating and stealing from his employees, being dishonest and embezzling? Or a Catholic parent who refuses to allow their faith to inform the way they raise their children?

What about all the other issues, capital punishment, welfare that make up the seamless garment approach? ”

This is a good question but the Church would respond, unapologetically that abortion is *the issue*. There is no more terrible attack on innocent human life. With modern science and technology the argument against the personhood of the pre-born child is meaningless and absurd: from conception a unique human person, with their own absolutely unique and unchanging DNA, comes into existence. That human being is the most vulnerable and defenseless, and sadly, in the western world the most in jeopardy. There is no person in greater danger in this country than a child in its mother s womb, as abortion kills nearly 4000 babies each and every day in the United States –a number greater than the tragedy of September 11th.

It is *the issue*, because as Mother Theresa put it so simply: We must not be surprised when we hear of murders, of killings of wars, of hatred. If a mother can kill her own child, what is left but for us to kill each other. ”

If a candidate does not understand that you cannot kill an innocent person for the sake of some greater good –they have a fundamental flaw. Any candidate who says abortion should be kept legal disqualifies him/herself from public service. We need look no further; we need pay no attention to what the candidate says on other issues. If there were a candidate who supported terrorism –would you say, Well, I disagree with you on that issue, but where do you stand on Medicare and minimum-wage. ”

John Paul II, Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights –for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture –is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights is not defended with the maximum determination. ”
(*Christifideles Laici* #38)

The right to life is the most fundamental right that must be defended because all other rights depend upon it. Issues of immigration, care for the poor, health care, the economy, capital punishment are all important issues, but nō amount of calculating can make them

equal in gravity, with abortion. (Chaput, *How to tell a duck from a fox*. Column April 14, 2004)

Abortion is an issue which admits of no circumstance or situation that could justify its evil, thus it is called intrinsically evil, a term which is also applied to direct procured euthanasia, the destruction of embryos through the harvesting of stem cells, cloning, and same-sex marriage.

What about the separation between Church and State? ”

The separation of Church and State does not mean that the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the morality embraced by Christians for the last two thousand years have no application in political life. The separation of Church and State means that our government will not fund or seek to set up some particular religious sect as a state religion. But we as Roman Catholics certainly have the right to speak out and to influence, and to vote according to the teachings of our Church, just as much as the devout atheists and secular humanist seek to push forward their vision of America. As the Bishops begin to find their voice many will say that a Catholic legislator should be only answerable to his constituency — there is a necessary separation between Church and State — a constituency voted him/her into office and they have to represent that public.

In 1953 Three Catholics, a judge, a senator, and a politically powerful woman made that exact claim in Louisiana. Then the issue was over school segregation. Years before public schools desegregated, the Catholic Bishop of New Orleans, Joseph Rummel, was integrating his schools. He was vilified and opposed by these Catholic leaders who were acting with the support of their constituency. But, we do not look back with pride on the courage of those Catholics who so conscientiously represented a bigoted society and racist community. In fact I take great pride as a Catholic that, after warning them of their grave spiritual danger due to rejecting Church teaching, Archbishop Rummel excommunicated those so-called Catholic politicians.

What it boils down to simply is a call for basic integrity from people to admit that if you are not in communion with the Church, don't receive communion. Don't continue to give this awful and scandalous witness that it is somehow okay to be a pro-abortion or pro-choice Catholic, or that there is such a thing.

As Archbishop John Myers of Newark has pointed out,

Catholics who publicly dissent from the Church's teaching on the right to life of all unborn children should recognize that they have freely chosen by their own actions to separate themselves from what the Church believes and teaches. They have also separated themselves in a significant way from the Catholic community. The Church cannot force such people to change their position; but she can and does ask them honestly to admit in the public forum that they are not in full union with the Church.

This is not a new teaching of the Church. From the earliest years, it has been pointed out that one cannot claim to be a Christian and yet believe other than what

the Church teaches. In the second century St. Justin Martyr described the Eucharist in this way: No one may share the Eucharist with us unless he believes that what we teach is true, unless he is washed in the regenerating waters of baptism for the remission of his sins, and unless he lives in accordance with the principles given us by Christ. (*A Time for Honesty* "May 5th, 2004)

Fr. Richard McBrien has said that for the Church and her bishops to take this stand, will backfire into the most spectacular thing. With all due respect to Fr. McBrien, I think he bases his opinion on a great deception which has plagued many in the Church. It is the lie that we will be able to have one foot in the world, and one foot in heaven, and that we will be able to be faithful to the Gospel and yet loved by the world. Jesus promises us:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. "

If there is a backlash because we preach the truth about the dignity of the human person and about the Eucharist it is all the better for the Roman Catholic Church. The time is long past since we can bother ourselves with trying to curry the favor of the world —only fidelity to Jesus Christ, who founded this Church, matters.

Most of those disciples who looked up to heaven at the Ascension, and who were sent out to proclaim the Gospel, preached and witnessed most convincingly by the shedding of their blood.