

## 13<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (June 26, 2022)

Because of recent events on both the archdiocesan and national level, my remarks today will take a different form from the usual.

1. First of all, as you know I attended our annual priest convocation this past week. It was a great two days of renewing our connections with the archbishop and each other. We heard some excellent talks, prayed and celebrated Mass together, spent time in Eucharistic adoration and going to confession (yes, we priests need confession too!)...all in all, a grace-filled time for which I am grateful.

On what we could call the more ‘business side’ of things, we also heard an update about the archdiocesan pastoral planning process. You recall that earlier this year we were all invited to take part in a survey about what we thought are the top signs of parish vitality. Some 16,000 surveys were returned—which far surpassed expectations in Dubuque. They indicated that the top three indicators of parish vitality are: 1) having Mass available every weekend; 2) a sense of belonging, and 3) providing for faith formation for all ages. Other important indicators were identified as well—e.g. good preaching, financial stability and service to others.

Obviously this planning process is just beginning. Among the next steps that are proposed is to develop an instrument or survey to help individual parishes measure their own vitality and viability. For example: are there enough active parishioners to constitute a viable parish and to carry out the various ministry roles and other forms of service? Is there enough money to pay the local bills and also respond to the needs of others? The issue of priest numbers and how many parishes they can serve will also be addressed. It was emphasized once again that there is no pre-determined list of parishes to be closed. However, there is also no promise that there will be no parish closures at all. If that has to become a possibility anywhere, that process will only be done in dialogue with local parish leadership.

So there is clearly much more to be done; this planning process will not be accomplished in a couple of weeks or a couple of months. I can’t give you a specific timetable here; I don’t think the archbishop has a specific sense yet of how long this process will last. But I am heartened by the seriousness and deliberateness with which he is approaching this necessary work. Please continue to pray for the Holy Spirit’s guidance of this really important work.

2. Unless you have entirely shut yourself off from the rest of the world the last few days, you know that the U.S. Supreme Court on Friday overruled the Roe and Casey decisions that created and affirmed abortion as a right guaranteed by the United States Constitution. This followed the decision of the Iowa Supreme Court a week ago Friday that declared that our own state constitution does not include such a right. The reaction, as expected, has been all over the map—from great rejoicing to great anguish and rage. And so much of that reaction ignores or even misrepresents what the Court actually did.

First of all: the Court did not declare that every unborn child has a right to life; they did not address that basic moral issue in any way. As Catholic Christians, of course, we believe that to be true and we will surely need to continue to advocate for that truth. Nor did the Court declare

abortion to be illegal in all 50 states. What the Court did was to state—accurately—that the Roe and Casey decisions were wrong in declaring abortion to be a ‘right’ protected by our federal Constitution. The Constitution in fact says nothing whatsoever about abortion or anything even remotely related to abortion one way or the other. Given that reality and given the limits the Constitution places on federal authority in the first place, the Court simply said that abortion is instead a matter for the individual states to deal with according to their own elected representatives. If California and New York and other states want to continue having abortion legally available up to the very moment of a child’s birth, they will be free to do so. If Iowa and other states want to protect the lives of the unborn to some degree, they will be free to do so. I know this must sound like a law school lecture; given my own background, I almost can’t help it! But it’s so important to be clear about what the Supreme Court ruled and what it did not rule.

Having said all that, we certainly can rejoice in the Court’s decision. Archbishop Jackels released a statement Friday afternoon on this decision, and it began with “Thanks be to God!” Thanks indeed. He went on to say “...it’s a huge step in the right direction. There’s clearly still work to be done to assure the most basic of human rights, the right to life, which is also the foundation of a just society.” He acknowledges those who are angered by this decision, but assures them that ‘we most certainly uphold the rights and dignity of women. And we can do *that* by offering women and children help during pregnancy and after childbirth, as well as working for a just society where they can live with dignity’. This is so very true. We Catholics have been so often accused of caring only about the unborn and not those born into hard situations. That’s a lie, pure and simple—I talked about that a few weeks ago when this opinion was first leaked to the press. But now we do need to strengthen our efforts even more to help those in difficult or crisis pregnancy situations, and to continue that help after birth. I plan to visit with our cluster social concerns committee about what we can do along those lines.

The archbishop included this note of gratitude: “This [Court’s decision] is an answer to untold numbers of prayers and sacrifices offered for the protection of children in the womb, as well as the fruit of years of advocacy by a multitude of people; these pray-ers and workers are to be commended.” Indeed they are. Ever since that dark day in 1973 when Roe v. Wade created a ‘right’ to abortion out of thin air, the Catholic Church and the pro-life movement in general has been steadfast in prayer and advocacy for the unborn. We, and they, did not give up, even when being condemned and dismissed as being on the ‘wrong side of history.’ Well, on this issue we have been on the side of the truth that life is a gift from God with dignity and value as such, and thus worthy of protection. If that is being on ‘the wrong side of history’, then so be it—we’ll take that as a badge of honor!

In our second reading today St. Paul reminds us that the law of God “...is fulfilled in one statement, namely, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” That is precisely why the Church believes and teaches as she does on this and every other aspect of the right to life for every person—since every person, born and unborn, is our neighbor and therefore worthy of our defense, our protection, and our love. It’s also at the heart of the archbishop’s closing words in his statement: “Finally, we entrust to God’s loving care all the innocent children killed by abortion, as well as the people who suffer the wounds from having had or performed an abortion. O God, send your Archangel Raphael [the patron saint of our archdiocese] to bring us your healing.” May we all pray for that healing for everyone in need—and that includes you and me.