

Respect Life Vigil
Basilica Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
January 19, 2023

Dear friends, today we have so much to celebrate. For the first time in the 49-year-history of the March for Life, we can say that *Roe vs. Wade*, a blight on our nation, our system of justice, and our culture, is no more. This is a moment for joy, and for gratitude; a moment to recall the countless souls who have dedicated themselves to political and social action, to prayer, and to service in the name of this cause. It is a moment to gather before our God to offer praise and thanksgiving for this great, longed for blessing. Today we make the gratitude of today's Psalm our own: "*O Lord, our God, how wonderful your name in all the earth!*"

But even as we celebrate, we must remember: this is the beginning, not the end. A new important phase of work in the pro-life movement *begins now!* As we plan for the future, our efforts to defend life must be as tireless as ever. *Our strength is our vigilance.* At the national level, we must continue our efforts to put an end to policies such as those that target vulnerable global populations with abortion funding or that facilitate alternative means of abortion at home. At the same time, we must turn a greater share of our attention to our local communities, from where we may cultivate opportunities in our states to limit the scope of legalized abortion, to curb its funding, or ideally, ban it all together.

But the most important work that lies ahead is the work not only of changing laws but of changing hearts, with steadfast faith in the grace and power of God to do so. Our work begins with our *knowledge of the truth and our courage to speak it.* We must learn new and compelling ways to communicate the harsh reality of abortion and the damage it inflicts on children, mothers, fathers, and society more broadly. In teaching and proclaiming the Gospel of Life, we must marshal all of the resources at our disposal, including philosophy, the social sciences, technology and psychology. We must engage with experts who understand the landscape on the federal and state levels and coordinate our efforts, strategies and resources in pursuit of making abortion in our nation *unthinkable and illegal.* By deepening our understanding of all the dimensions of this issue, we better equip ourselves to serve.

Still, updating our information is only the first step. The second step is more difficult. We must learn to communicate our views with love. Today this is no small challenge. Social media allows us to disseminate our message widely and efficiently, but it often brings out the worst in those who disagree with and dismiss our beliefs and convictions and may not bring out the best in us as we respond.

But this, my friends, is where our very important work begins. Lasting victories will not come from views or hits or re-tweets; nor from triumphalism, bitterness, or cynicism; but from our sincere efforts to effect true conversion of mind and heart. They will come from acknowledging the dignity of those with whom we disagree; by engaging in respectful discussion; from efforts to persuade rather than attack; *from our desire to convert rather than cancel*. As St. Paul proclaimed this evening: “*The Lord has delivered us from the power of darkness.*” It is his Light we are called to radiate, especially to those who are confused. Like Jesus, the Good Shepherd who sought out the lost in tonight’s Gospel, we can never tire of seeking out those who have wandered.

None of this is to say that we must not hold others accountable for their views, especially those who in their capacity as public officials declare their support for abortion. On the contrary, *charity demands accountability*. Those in public office who endorse policies that protect or grow the evil of abortion must know that they are accountable, yes, to the public they serve, but most importantly to Almighty God, the source of all life. The child in the womb is first and foremost *his* child. We will all stand before God to account for what we did or did not do to safeguard his children. This is especially true for those who profess our faith and have the greatest opportunity to protect the child in the womb.

While we hold public officials accountable, we must remember that each of us is accountable also. “The secret of Christian living is love,” Pope Francis has said. “*Only love fills the empty spaces caused by evil.*” That is our task. That is where our words must be matched by our actions. Our work will not be complete until God’s love is felt in every empty space created by abortion. As we look to the future of the pro-life movement, may we turn our attention to those empty spaces. Into the empty spaces of public discourse on abortion, may we bring *clarity and charity* in communicating with our opponents. Into the empty space of our wounded politics, may we communicate the need to let go of partisanship and to do what is right and just. Into the empty spaces of culture, may we celebrate truth, beauty, and God’s goodness. Into the empty space of fear

and loneliness experienced by women facing an unplanned pregnancy, may we offer God's peace and hope and our untiring commitment to walk with them at every moment. Into the empty spaces within the lives of mothers and fathers who mourn from children lost to abortion, may we gently voice God's endless comfort and mercy.

We can accomplish none of this on our own. Indeed, it is only in letting God fill the empty spaces in our own hearts with the warmth of his love that we may begin to fill the spaces around us. And so, first and foremost, and with the childlike faith and trust to which Jesus calls us in today's Gospel, we must fix our hearts in prayer, asking for the guidance and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. It is here, in prayer, that we will receive the radical love that the world so desperately needs; here that we will find the courage and authenticity to transform the broken culture all around us; here that we will find *the truth that will transform minds and hearts*; here that we will have a taste of true and lasting victory.

As we prepare to bring all of our hopes and aspirations for the future of the pro-life movement to the Altar of our Lord, let me leave you with a final thought. On December 31 of last year, as many of us prepared to welcome the new year, our beloved Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI passed into the hands of our Lord. Like his predecessor, Pope Saint John Paul II, and his successor, Pope Francis, Pope Benedict watched as the world suffered some of the bleakest episodes in human history: war, violence, poverty, and countless human rights violations across the globe — including legalized abortion in this country and around the world.

The late pope emeritus's life was dedicated to espousing the light and truth of the Gospel in love. A cynic might retort, what good did it do? The empty spaces of evil persisted in the world to the moment of his death. Where is the victory? But that is not how Pope Benedict saw it. In his last moments, he spoke not of the bleak things he had witnessed. Nor of the persistence of evil. Nor of regret or sadness or despair. With his final breath, his last bit of strength, he spoke the words; "I love you, Jesus." In the empty space of suffering, he saw Jesus, and loved him. Friends, may we ask our Lord to give us hearts like that — *hearts overflowing with love* for him and one another. Nothing less will heal our suffering world.

Here, in Mary's home, we ask for her powerful intercession, so that as we soon receive the Body and Blood of her Son, we will go forth tonight and then tomorrow on the streets of our nation's capital, witnessing peacefully and courageously to the *truth in*

love, and with childlike trust, in the power of Jesus to heal and transform our minds, hearts and the world in which we live. “O Lord our God how wonderful your name in all the earth!”