

Sermon Delivered on Sanctity of Life Sunday, January 22, 2017

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

History is replete with paradox. All-too-often, the greatest good and most awesome heroism in history coincide with the the most horrific inhumanity and evil. It seems to me that this is precisely why the Nazis make such memorable “bad guys.” In our pop-culture, with the flash of the swastika, most normal people’s hearts freeze. With that one image, we recall the bitterness of the Nazi creed, the fear they spewed forth on the world, the pernicious lie of demonic racism, the depersonalization of whole classes of people, not least the Jews of Europe, whom the the Nazis all-but-exterminated. Mass killings of Poles, Russians, homosexuals, Gypsies, political undesirables, and--yes--“defective people” characterized this evil regime. In the eyes of the Nazis, all of these people were *unpeople*: genetic debris to be swept away to make room for the new order. It was all about “survival of the fittest.” The *Übermenschen* had come to wipe out the *Untermenschen*. Might would make right... Oh, the horror... One of the great triumphs, you might say, of our collective memory is that we do not hesitate--even for a moment--to call Nazi fascism “evil.”

Yesterday, in part reacting to some of the controversial statements of our newly-inaugurated president, many thousands of women marched in almost every state and in DC, to defend access to health-care, to show solidarity with minority communities and the poor, and to speak out for equal rights. These are, in my personal view, positions that are *entirely* in keeping with our Orthodox Christian Faith. And yet, as I was watching an interview on PBS with two prominent organizers of the DC March express the primary uniting factor of their movement, they both insisted that unfettered access to abortion is their *first principle*! What makes contemporary discourse on abortion so dangerous, brothers and sisters, is how slickly defense of abortion mixes with other Christian positions and how murder of the most defenseless human beings masquerades, perversely, as “defense of human rights.”

What is abortion? Abortion is the killing of human life in the womb of his or her mother. It is murder. It is a grave sin. It is the methodical extermination of a human life. Human life, science tells us, begins at conception. Dr. Micheline Matthews-Roth of Harvard Medical School, testifying before Congress, maintained: "It is incorrect to say that biological data cannot be decisive...It is scientifically *correct* to say that an individual human life begins at conception."¹ Professor Jerome Lejeune, a French pioneer in

¹ <http://naapc.org/why-life-begins-at-conception/> (excerpted from the Report of Subcommittee on Separation of Powers to Senate Judiciary Committee S-158, 97th Congress, 1st Session 1981)

genetics, attested before this same congressional panel that: "To accept the fact that after fertilization has taken place a new human has come into being is no longer a matter of taste or opinion...it is plain experimental evidence. Each individual has a very neat beginning, at conception."

The early Church, naturally, anticipated this later scientific consensus that life begins at conception. We are blessed in the Orthodox Church to maintain among our 12 Great Feasts one celebration that dramatically cues us into this theological truth: the Great Feast of Annunciation. On March 25 each year (during Great Lent,) we remember the Archangel Gabriel announcing to the Virgin Mary that, indeed, she would bear a Son who would save the world. From that very moment, the Gospel of Luke tells us, she carried in her womb the Savior of the world!² And this full reality is confirmed in the Lukan account when Mary, perhaps only several weeks pregnant, visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is expecting herself--John the Baptist being in her womb. We are familiar with what happens next: The pre-born John, it says, recognizing his Savior in utero, leaps and rejoices in his mother's womb!³ What's truly remarkable to note: the Lord Jesus would have only been about the size of a grain of rice.⁴ And yet--ponder the Mystery--we see one fetus proclaiming the Lordship of another fetus. And we Christians raise our gaze to this magnificent fresco of the Virgin Mary with Christ in her womb and ponder the significance of the uncontainable God contained inside a human woman!

So it's not an accident that one of the very earliest Christian documents that comes down to us from the first-century reflects this obvious Christian sensibility: that the sacred reality of human life begins at conception. Dated as early as the year AD 96, the document known as the *Didache* clearly states that Christians may neither procure an abortion nor commit infanticide (both being common practices among pagans of the time.)⁵

And this conviction guided not just Orthodox and Catholic ethicists, but also Protestants after the Reformation and most of the early American feminists.⁶ Virtually all of the women pressing for the woman's right to vote--the Suffragettes--were strongly opposed to abortion and saw it for what it was: the killing of a mother's offspring. Susan B. Anthony, one of the most prominent 19th-century American feminists, wrote: "Sweeter

² Luke 2:30-39

³ Luke 2:39-45

⁴ <https://thrive.kaiserpermanente.org/easier-health-care/maternity/first-trimester/your-pregnancy-weeks-5-8>

⁵ <http://www.biblicalaudio.com/text/didache.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2015/01/07/feminist-case-against-abortion-recovering-pro-life-roots-womens-movement>

even than... the joy of caring for children of my own has... been to help... bring about a better state of things for mothers generally, so [that] their unborn little ones would not be willed away from them.”⁷

But things began to change in the early 20th-century. It was a strange time as ideas of eugenics or “cleaning up the gene-pool,” became fashionable not just in places like Nazi Germany, but even among some vocal American feminists. Among the most frightening adherents of the false-orthodoxy of eugenics was Margaret Sanger, who lived from 1879-1966.⁸ Sanger was convinced that America was being overrun by undesirables: “morons” and “feeble-minded” inferiors who would dilute our national gene pool.⁹ America had to be purified. And the best tool for that, she believed, was the widespread use of abortion.

In 1932, Sanger wrote that “[We should] apply a stern and rigid policy of sterilization and segregation to that grade of population whose progeny is tainted, or whose inheritance is such that objectionable traits may be transmitted to offspring.”¹⁰ She continued: “Give dysgenic groups in our population their choice of segregation or [compulsory] sterilization.”¹¹ She hoped, in particular, that black Americans’ right to reproduce would be curtailed. But she realized that it would be impolitic to simply legislate this, so she created a group--that would later become Planned Parenthood--to convince African-Americans and others to embrace abortion. In a 1939 letter, Sanger laid out her strategy: “We should hire three or four colored ministers, preferably with social-service backgrounds, and with engaging personalities. The most successful educational approach to the Negro is through a religious appeal. We don’t want the word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population, and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members.”¹² Sanger reminisced later in her life about a presentation she gave at a Ku Klux Klan meeting in the 1920’s: “I saw through the door dim figures parading with banners and illuminated crosses ... I was escorted to the platform, was introduced, and began to speak ... In the end, through simple illustrations I believed I had accomplished my purpose. A dozen invitations to speak to similar groups were proffered.”¹³

⁷ <https://www.sba-list.org/suzy-b-blog/setting-record-straight-susan-b-anthony>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Sanger

⁹ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/may/5/grossu-margaret-sanger-eugenicist/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/webedition/app/documents/show.php?sangerDoc=129037.xml>

¹¹ <https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/webedition/app/documents/show.php?sangerDoc=129037.xml>

¹² <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/may/5/grossu-margaret-sanger-eugenicist/>

¹³ Quoting Sanger’s 1938 work, *An Autobiography*, p. 366 (as related at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/may/5/grossu-margaret-sanger-eugenicist/>)

In the person of Margaret Sanger, we see the bald racism that is inextricably bound up with the genesis of the American abortion industry. The de facto reality of racial cleansing remains today and can be seen in these facts:¹⁴

- Abortion clinics are generally located in the inner cities among the poorer residents (and
- About 13% of American women are black, yet account for over 35% of all abortions.
- Less than 1 in 7 Caucasian pregnancies end in abortion while 1 in 2 African-American pregnancies end in abortion.

Just to be fair: Sanger didn't just seek to limit the reproduction of blacks. She argued against immigration from Catholic and Orthodox countries, too, preferring instead to shore up the gene pool with Anglo-Saxon stock. About the immigrant nationalities that tended to produce many children, Sanger advised: "The most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it."¹⁵ And so we begin to go beyond mere abortion...

Which leads us to our next character in this ghastly tale: In 1993, ethicist (and utilitarian philosopher) Peter Singer shocked many Americans by suggesting that no newborn should be considered a person until 30 days after birth and that the attending physician should reserve the right to terminate disabled babies on the spot. It turned out, he wrote, that "Human babies are not born self-aware, or capable of grasping that they exist over time. They are not persons"; therefore, "the life of a newborn is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee."¹⁶ "During the next 35 years," Singer predicted, "the traditional view of the sanctity of human life will collapse under pressure from scientific, technological and demographic developments. By 2040, it may be that only a rump of hard-core, know-nothing religious fundamentalists will defend the view that every human life, from conception to death, is sacrosanct."¹⁷

So... here we are brethren. Are we simply know-nothing fundamentalists? Are we simply ill-informed? Are we clinging to something as obviously wrong as Jim-Crow "racism?" That's how it's being presented to the world: anti-abortion sentiment is merely *one more* type of hate, *one more* strand of patriarchy, *one more* element of control. And

¹⁴ http://media.focusonthefamily.com/heartlink/pdf/2014_Sanctity_of_Human_Life_Guide.pdf, p. 23

¹⁵ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Margaret_Sanger

¹⁶

https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1999/09/11/a-professor-who-argues-for-infanticide/cce7dc81-3775-4ef6-bfea-74cd795fc43f/?utm_term=.ec866db70b33

¹⁷ http://media.focusonthefamily.com/heartlink/pdf/2014_Sanctity_of_Human_Life_Guide.pdf, p. 4

Christians are buying this: nearly ¾ of the women having abortions in America identify as Christians! Christians believe the lie:

- That abortion doesn't really harm anybody
- That abortion is merely a medical procedure
- That "rights" triumph over what is truly right

I would submit to you--in no uncertain terms--that we have an obligation before Almighty God, as men and women who profess to maintain and uphold the Orthodox Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, to reaffirm for ourselves and boldly teach our children the following truths:

- That all human life is sacred and inviolable because we are made in God's image
- That murder is a grave sin against God and Man
- That abortion is murder
- That we must speak up against abortion and support efforts to limit it
- That we must actively support mothers, love them and their babies
- That we must implant this deepest of Christian convictions in the coming generation

If we do not reaffirm these truths and act upon them, we fail to proclaim the glad tidings of Christ and we surrender to an ideology that--forgive me--is worthy of the swastika.

If we are horrified by ethnic cleansing, by racial hatred, by the trampling of human rights for the sake of convenience, let us also be horrified by what abortion does to our people--the unborn who die, the living who must soldier on bearing the stain of this bloodshed, and our whole society which is grossly wounded by this sin of hidden holocaust.

The Good News today is that our God is one who comes to renew and restore. He is waiting for our return, like the father awaiting the prodigal. As we examine ourselves, let us consider the ways in which we have failed to honor and defend the sanctity of life, particularly with regard to abortion. Let us ponder the ways we have been silent, the ways we have inadvertently abetted abortion, and perhaps even ways we ourselves have participated in this sin. Putting confidence in our merciful Lord, who forgives the contrite of heart, may we seek reconciliation with God and with each other. Lord have mercy on us, on our people, and on our country. Amen.

(Rev. Justin Patterson, St. Athanasius Orthodox Church, Jan. 22, 2017)