

The Courage to Proclaim the Gospel of Life

At the close of his encyclical on the Gospel of Life, *Evangelium Vitae*, our great Pope, John Paul II has left us a beautiful prayer to Our Lady, part of which I would like to paraphrase and say with you as the opening of my reflections on the courage to proclaim the Gospel of Life:

O Mary,
 obtain for us the grace to accept the Gospel of life as a gift ever new,
 the joy of celebrating it with gratitude throughout our lives
 and the courage to bear witness to it resolutely
 in order to build the civilisation of truth and love
 to the praise and glory of God, the Creator and lover of life. Amen.

I would like to use this prayer to guide our reflections on the courage we need to proclaim the Gospel of Life in 21st century Great Britain.

O Mary, obtain for us the grace to accept the Gospel of life as a gift ever new

So, I would first like to reflect on the importance of Mary to our work in promoting and defending the sanctity of life and the dignity of the family.

If you look at my coat of arms as the previous Bishop of Lancaster you will see in the top right an image of Our Lady holding the baby Jesus. And in baby Jesus' hand he holds the globe of the world.

As it says about Mary in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Only faith can embrace the mysterious ways of God's almighty power. This faith glories in its weaknesses in order to draw to itself Christ's power. The Virgin Mary is the supreme model of this faith, for she believed that 'nothing will be impossible with God'. (CCC 273).

The example of the Virgin of Nazareth shows us not to be afraid because our pro-life cause seems so weak and powerless compared to the growing power, wealth and influence of the abortion industry in the European Union, the United Nations, and the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States of America. 'Nothing is impossible for God'.

It is only when we are exhausted and at the end of our human ingenuity and resources that we truly become open to the power and creative will of God. It is only when we admit that we don't know the lobbying or political answer that we are open to the power of Christ. As St Paul says, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me... for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

When I was summoned before the House of Commons select committee to answer their accusations that I was a fundamentalist for insisting that catholic schools under my care must teach Catholic sexual morality to our children, I did not feel powerful and strong! Believe me when I tell you that when I walked before those politicians

and reporters I felt weak and little, but I also felt calm and at peace because I had faith that 'nothing is impossible for God'.

Christianity didn't defeat the infanticide, slavery and the human degradation of the Roman Empire through force of arms or wealth but through the power of faith, the faith that we share with the Virgin Mary.

Only faith can embrace the mysterious ways of God's almighty power. Only faith will close down the abortion abattoirs, only faith will stop human trafficking for the sex industry, only faith will stop the degradation of our children in so called 'safe sex' workshops.

Let be clear here, I'm not saying we should not use all our intellectual, political and analytical skills in promoting God's plan for marriage and human life, but we should at the same time also embrace our apparent powerlessness and littleness because in this way we make space for God's grace to act.

There's another passage from the *Catechism* that we need to especially hear that will orientate us towards the grace of hope:

Faith in God the Father Almighty can be put to the test by the experience of evil and suffering. God can sometimes seem to be absent and incapable of stopping evil. But in the most mysterious way God the Father has revealed his almighty power in the voluntary humiliation and Resurrection of his Son, by which he conquered evil. (CCC 272).

Sometimes it seems that the Catholic Church is going from one defeat after another in our battle to protect the preborn and the family in this country – the recent vote in parliament to allow further experiments on embryonic human beings, the repeated failure to even reduce the limit of abortions, despite the best scientific evidence, and the draconian imposition of the requirement to accept homosexuals in the adoption of children.

As some of you may know I have been involved in the struggle to promote the welfare of children, both the pre-born and other vulnerable children who need the love of a mother and a father, most particularly in attempting with all my might to persuade *Catholic Caring Services*, the former social care agency of the Diocese of Lancaster, to uphold the teaching of the Church regarding so called gay adoption.

One of the hardest things to bear during my time as the Bishop of Lancaster was to witness the other trustees refuse point blank to even consider the Church's reasoned opposition to homosexuals as adoptive parents and to defiantly vote by a majority to accept government legislation, forced on us with the explicit threat of withdrawing funding.

In my disappointment and frustration at my own sense of powerlessness I looked to the Cross of Christ, and He gave me hope to go on, no matter how many defeats and set backs we have to face in this long, hard struggle.

Christ crucified is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God', a power and a wisdom that gives us hope when at times all else fails.

All my life as a priest and a bishop one the greatest gifts God has given me is the gift of hope. I try to be a man of hope. What do I mean by this? I am not an optimist, that is someone who, by temperament, chooses to seek out the positive in any situation. My sense of hope does not come from within, but rather it comes from the Gospel of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and glorification.

Looking back over my life in the Church I am more convinced than ever that unless we are people of hope we will be unable to 'accept the Gospel of life as a gift ever new'. Mary has shown us that this hope is not an illusion, because it rests on the historical foundation of the paschal mystery, 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.'

And hope makes us sensitive to the little victories that are all around us – like mustard seeds – for example, in the enthusiastic response from ordinary Catholics – priests and laity – to our *Fit for Mission?* initiative, and the obvious love and respect of millions for our Holy Father, Pope Benedict.

Some of you may have read my document *Fit for Mission? Church* published by the Catholic Truth Society. In it I write about the importance of hope for Catholics in the modern world:

Hope protects us from discouragement, it preserves us from naïve optimism, or undue pessimism, it keeps us orientated towards the true goal of our journey as the people of God – the coming of the Kingdom of God and the beatific vision of God.

I want to ask you all here today the questions I then posed in *Fit for Mission? Church*:

- Are you a person of hope?
- Have you cultivated the virtue of hope that you received at baptism?
- Do you pray for the virtue of hope?
- And one extra one – have you got hope enough to face with me the sacrifices and struggle that the Church must endure to proclaim the Gospel of Life?

Pope Benedict has reassured us about the importance of hope to our Catholic identity and life:

...We have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal...and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey. (Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 1).

So, the first point I want to leave you with is be people of hope.

The joy of celebrating the Gospel of life with gratitude throughout our lives

As we have just heard, Pope Benedict points out the vital importance of knowing the goal of our journey in order to sustain us in our hope. What is the goal of our journey in faith?

The second sentence of Pope John Paul's prayer from *Evangelium Vitae* gives us the clue – the goal of our journey is JOY or as Catholic tradition expresses it, beatitude!

God has placed the desire for joy in the human heart to draw us to the one who alone can fulfil it – God Himself.

Jesus is the Prophet of joy and more than this He is the embodiment of joy, expressed through His Sermon on the Mount – Jesus' rallying cry to live lives of joy. As the *Catechism* puts it:

The Beatitudes reveal the goal of human existence, the ultimate end of human acts: God calls us to his own beatitude. (CCC 1719)

I want to say two things about the importance of joy for the pro-life movement:

First and foremost, the pro-life and pro-family movement must make visible the joy experienced in truly living and celebrating the Gospel of life in our families, parishes and religious communities.

Through the sacraments, Scripture and Tradition of the Catholic Church we participate in the innermost life and love of the Holy Trinity! Your lives as men and women, your lives as husbands and wives, your lives as celibate priests, religious and lay people are enriched and ennobled with the very life of God!

We are not called to live lives of quiet desperation, but rather lives of exuberant joy. As Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta taught us:

Never let anything so fill us with sorrow as to make us forget the joy of Christ risen

All of us in the Pro-life movement must take Mother Teresa's words to heart because there is a danger in campaigning against abortion, experiments on embryonic human beings and euthanasia for us to become so overwhelmed by the relentless suffering and sheer evil that we become joyless, even despairing.

Mother Teresa knew the depth and contours of the heart of darkness that is at the heart of our society – no one better – and yet she tells us never let this sorrow make us forget the joy of Christ risen.

This joy was the hallmark of the early Christians, who were alive with the Holy Spirit. The pagan Romans were amazed at the joy of the Christian martyrs as they went to their deaths, often suffering the most cruel and degrading torments. This joy, a fruit of the Holy Spirit, must have won many converts to the Way of Christ.

And it will be the same for us confronting the new pagan World Order of the political elites and their allies in the media, education and health establishment. They must come to know us as people aflame with the joy of Christ risen. In practice, this will mean treating the new pagans with respect and civility, never with ridicule and hostility. The Cross teaches us that only love can triumph, never hostility or revenge.

Secondly, not only is there the danger that we become joyless people, but worse still that we become people of anger, people of rage. I've lost count of the number of times I've witnessed or even been on the receiving end of the out rage of someone who cares passionately about the pre-born or sex education, or any aspect of the pro-life agenda!

I understand where the rage comes from, because we all feel its siren call when we hear the latest assault on human life. I know it feels ghastly to be so powerless and impotent to protect so many millions of unique and precious babies from being killed in their mother's wombs, or to hear of the Government's latest plans to sexualise our primary school children or degrade our young men and women with so called safe sex demonstrations.

The danger is that instead of allowing God's grace to fill our empty feeling of powerlessness and impotence it is so much easier to let anger and rage fill our minds and hearts. If you look within your heart today and you see rage or its disguised form as mocking cynicism looking back at you, seek out the sacrament of reconciliation as soon as possible because you have strayed from the way of Christ and you will do harm to our common cause.

We need to be clear here about having the right attitude to anger. Anger is an emotion, and like other feeling it flares up in ways beyond our conscious control. We all know that some people are more prone to anger than other for various reasons, including temperament and background. It's our attitude to having angry feelings that important, what we do with the anger.

In Christian circles, some people justify their rage by referring to Jesus' cleansing of the Temple or cursing the fig tree outside Jerusalem. But this is to forget that Jesus' was free from the weakness of original sin, which gives him a freedom to express emotion in a just and virtuous way.

St Paul knew that we do not have that freedom, because though baptism frees us from original sin, we still have to live with the constitutional consequences. Anger is just too powerful an emotion for us to express it safely. As St Paul puts it:

Do not let resentment lead you into sin; the sunset must not find you still angry. Do not give the devil his opportunity. (Ephesians 4:26-27).

You may have read in the Catholic press or seen the Catholic Truth Society shop in the Plaza that I have just released my third and final *Fit for Mission?* book, *Fit for Mission? Marriage: A preparation course*. In the preface for Course Presenter's I introduce the whole programme with a reflection on the importance of joy. This is what I say:

Christianity is, first and foremost, a religion of joy. There was so much joy at the birth of the Church at Pentecost that people thought the first Christians were drunk! (Acts 2:15)... One of the most important occasions of joy in the life of the Church – which brings all of these other joys together – is the celebration of the sacrament of marriage. Is it any wonder that marriage is one of the most powerful and ancient images of God's love for humanity in the Bible?

This is one of the reasons why the work of Fr Paul Marx O.S.B and Family Life International is so important for the Church because you are called to promote and protect the principal means of realising God's purpose in giving us such a strong desire for joy – the sacrament of marriage, including its generous openness to life, and the family formed around the love of husband and wife.

You are called to be apostles of authentic and true joy, in order to challenge the many counterfeit 'joys' that are causing so much suffering and harm.

The second point I want to leave you with is be people of joy.

The courage to bear witness to the Gospel of life resolutely in order to build the civilisation of truth and love

We are blessed to be living through one of the great ages of the Popes. Future generations will look back on our time and say what a privilege to have lived during the time of Blessed John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II and now Benedict XVI.

Pope John Paul II wrote a lot. I mean a lot! And there's a collection of his thoughts under different themes called 'Agenda for the Third Millennium'. And to me that sums up one of the legacies of this great Pope, he has set out the agenda for the future of the Church.

And high up the list of John Paul's agenda for each one of us in this room is 'Build a civilisation of truth and love.'

Pope John Paul reminds us of one of the geniuses of Catholicism – we build world civilisations! And the place where we build this civilisation of love isn't primarily the floor of the House of Commons or the General Assembly of the United Nations.

The civilisation of love is built on loving and praying marriages and on loving and praying families.

The marriage bed, the family dinner table, the parish altar, and the school classroom are the foundations of the civilisation of truth and love.

As Pope John Paul puts it in his wonderful Letter to Families which is one lyric meditation on the civilisation of love:

The family is an expression and source of this love. Through the family passes the primary current of the civilisation of love, which finds therein its "social foundations".

Obviously, the sacrament of marriage is fundamental to building the civilisation of truth and love. This is why my last *Fit for Mission?* document is a marriage preparation course.

The Catholic vision of a civilisation of truth and love is not a foreign idea forced on human nature, but something intrinsic to all human beings who are made in the image and likeness of the God of love.

Men and women are hard-wired by biology, psychology and spiritual nature to thrive in monogamous, faithful, life-long marriages that are open to the new life of children.

This is why sexual love is the epicentre of the conflict between the Catholic Church and the secular atheistic State. Sexual love between men and women has been created by God to be the guarantee and safeguard of the civilisation of truth and love.

If you destroy the truth and love of sexual love between husband and wife you destroy the truth and love of our civilisation.

Some people hearing this may say, 'Bishop, you are idealising sexual love too much! Sex can't carry the weight of a civilisation!'

And my response to this criticism is this quote from the Second Vatican Council document, *Gaudium et Spes* about the fundamental law written in human nature:

Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24)

The theology of the Body is revealing the awesome beauty of the fact that men and women have been physically created to express – through the sacrament of marriage – humanity's vocation to self-giving love – which has its origins in God.

The ultimate expression of our self-gift in marriage is the pro-creation of children. This is because it is not only a share in God's creative power, but also expresses the inner life of God, which is a communion of persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. When a husband and wife conceive a child they too become a communion of persons.

This is why contraception and abortion are so evil and so harmful to society because they not only obstruct or destroy the creation of unique human beings, but also obstruct and destroy the sincere gift of self between husband and wife.

I am convinced that if a mother and father are honest and sincere in their mutual self-giving then their children will grow up in a spiritual and moral atmosphere of self-gift, where self-giving love will become their basic option towards the world.

It is only when we achieve a critical mass or tipping point of people who have accepted Christ's attitude of self-giving love that we will begin to transform this suffering, impoverished world into a civilisation of truth and love.

And Jesus is central to our achieving this goal. Jesus reveals and heals our capacity for self-giving love. The Church teaches that we can only know our true dignity and the depth of our ability to love through Jesus Christ.

Jesus is important to all our lives, and to our marriages and families, because 'he fully reveals man to man himself'. Only in the mystery of God becoming a human being in Jesus Christ do we learn what it means to be human, what we are really capable of doing in the name of love.

He shows us the one thing necessary to fulfil our God given calling to build a civilisation of truth and love based on self-giving service, and that one thing is **courage**.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13).

We need courage to love as Jesus loves. We need courage to follow him to the Cross. We need courage to stand up to the politicians, journalists, and educationalists who promote the selfishness of contraception, abortion, experiments on embryonic human beings, gay life-styles and euthanasia.

You only have to see how Pope John Paul and Pope Benedict, and to a much lesser extent, myself and other bishops are vilified and ridiculed for speaking out against these intrinsically evil acts to see how much we need the gift of courage in order to build the civilisation of truth and love.

The Gospels show us – in the behaviour of the apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane and in the aftermath of Jesus' arrest – that it is very human and understandable for the followers of Jesus to lack the courage to stand by Him in the face of hostility and violence.

The Gospels also show us the courage granted to the apostles through the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Men who had run away into the night, stood fearlessly before the crowds and authorities that had mocked Jesus and condemned Him to death. Through the gifts of the Holy Spirit they had the courage to proclaim the fullness of the truth – Jesus is the Risen Lord (Acts 2: 14-40).

We, too, have a hidden potential for such courage, and it's called the sacrament of confirmation.

Through the sacrament of Confirmation we, too, can share in this Pentecost courage if we fully co-operate with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit that we received through the anointing with Chrism on the forehead, the laying on of hands, and through the words: 'Accipe signaculum doni Spiritus Sancti', Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit'.

All seven gifts are integral to the Pentecost courage needed for proclaiming the Gospel of Life before today's crowds and authorities – wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord.

The *Catechism* explains this particular effect of Confirmation as giving us :

The special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross. (CCC 1303).

The third point I want to leave you with is be people of courage.

To the praise and glory of God, the Creator and lover of life. Amen.

Finally, I want to encourage you to inculcate a sense of wonder about God's creation of the natural world and, in particular, God's creation of the human person in your work with young people.

A sense of wonder is vital to all our aspects of our work to promote and defend the sanctity of life –

- Wonder at the complementarity of masculinity and femininity in the pro-creation of human life.
- Wonder at the development of the preborn child in the mother's womb and the changes in the mother's body.
- Wonder at the human capacity for self-giving, heroic love.
- Wonder at the transformation of suffering and pain into meaningful sacrifice.
- Wonder at the mystery of natural death, and the transcendence of the human soul.
- Wonder at this vast and incredibly beautiful universe.
- And wonder at the glory and humility of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But you know, one of the greatest tragedies of our time in this country, and I suspect elsewhere in the developed world, is to meet young people who have lost the sense of wonder. Already at 13 and upward so many young people are cynical, world-weary, and impoverished in their vision of life.

At the beginning of my document on Catholic education, *Fit for Mission? Schools*, I asked the question:

How do we enable our pupils to experience the wonder and richness of possessing the freedom and dignity of being made in God's image? (*Fit for Mission? Schools*, p. 12).

Why is having a sense of wonder so important?

Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, about wonder as a fundamental impulse in human beings that correctly orders their relationship with the physical and spiritual world.

Driven by the desire to discover the ultimate truth of existence, human beings seek to acquire those universal elements of knowledge which enable them to understand themselves better and to advance in their own self-realisation. These fundamental elements of knowledge spring from the *wonder* awakened in them by the contemplation of creation...Without wonder, men and women would lapse into deadening routine and little by little would become incapable of a life which is genuinely personal. (Fides et Ratio, 4).

I am convinced that this lack of wonder among so many men and women is the reason why they are prepared to accept as normal and morally acceptable wearing condoms for the most sensitive and intimate expression of love, pumping their bodies with toxic chemicals that stop ovulation or the implantation of the embryonic human being in the womb, or saturating their bodies with the human pesticide of the morning after-pill and so many other unspeakable crimes against human life.

If they had a true sensitivity to the wonder of life they would be as incapable of doing these abhorrent things as we are!

How do we help our young people develop and retain this sense of wonder about human life?

Pope John Paul II's answer to this question is one of the great contributions that his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, makes to the pro-life movement in the Church.

The Holy Father says we must learn individuals and as the Church to celebrate the Gospel of life. This means:

- First of all we need to foster, in ourselves and in others, a contemplative outlook. By which he means, 'it is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility.' (EV 83).
- We need to teach young people to accept life as a gift not a thing to use, helping them to discover in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image'.
- We must help our young people to rise to the challenge of finding meaning in sickness, suffering, and death.
- We must give them the opportunity for adoration of God, so that it becomes natural for them to celebrate the God of life, the God who gives life

If we open up our young people's hearts and minds to the wonder of God, the world and themselves we will inoculate them against the corruption that assails them from the media, secular education programmes and so called health experts.

To do this with conviction we must, too, be people of wonder and praise

To conclude, let me leave you with my four exhortations to you as men and women committed to promote and protect the sanctity of life:

- Be people of hope.
- Be people of joy.
- Be people of courage, and,
- Be people of wonder and praise.

Finally, lets join together in prayer as I recite Pope John Paul's prayer from *Evangelium Vitae*:

O Mary,
obtain for us the grace to accept the Gospel of life as a gift ever new,
the joy of celebrating it with gratitude throughout our lives
and the courage to bear witness to it resolutely
in order to build the civilisation of truth and love,
to the praise and glory of God, the Creator and lover of life. Amen.

+Patrick O'Donoghue, Emeritus Bishop of Lancaster

This address was first given at the Family Life International Conference which took place in London on Saturday 9th May 2009 and is reproduced with permission.

Version: 15th May 2009