

About two and a half years ago I was privileged to participate in a Rachel's Vineyard Retreat. These retreats focus on healing after abortion, mostly for women who have had abortions but also for anyone who has been complicit. One recurring theme of that weekend which has stuck with me is the consistency of the message of human dignity: the dignity of the women who were suffering from the trauma of abortion, and the dignity of the children whose lives were ended. To see these women's love for their children and their remorse for abortion was one of the most consistent pro-life messages I have ever heard.

A few weeks ago, I spoke here about one of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching: the option for the poor and vulnerable. Today, I will speak about a related principle: the life and dignity of the Human Person. What makes human beings, what makes each of us, inherently valuable. What makes the unborn have value, and why their mothers continue to be of infinite value and dignity even after abortion. What makes the poor and vulnerable have value.

To see this, let's go back to the beginning. In the book of Genesis which we heard today, from the very beginning of creation God saw us, human beings, and he said it was not good for us to be alone. It's not good for us to be alone. We were created to be in relationships, first with God, but also with other people. We are made for relationships, and indeed we're made already in relationships.

From this we see that the fundamental dignity of each human person is found in our capacity for relationship. First comes our relationship with God, but also our human relationships with each other. One of the most powerful things to witness on that Rachel's Vineyard Retreat was the painful process towards reconciliation between mothers and their children in heaven. The difficulty and suffering of mothers asking for forgiveness, and the simplicity of children in heaven who love their mothers anyway and are ready to forgive. That relationship of mother and child is stronger even than abortion, and healing is possible.

I'm sure most of you have heard the saying that you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family. Family relationships exist whether we choose them or not. We hear in the Gospel today about how marriage relationships are also truly family relationships and cannot be broken except by the death of a spouse: What God has joined, humans cannot separate. And while it is the will and choice of the husband and wife which first *creates* that relationship, even spouses cannot

break it once it is made. Similarly, while abortion ends a child's life, it does not end their dignity or their relationships.

The dignity of human life is never dependent on human will or human choices, because we as human beings are in relationships whether we want to be or not. We are in relationship with God as his creations, capable of love. We are in relationship with our family members from the moment of conception. Nothing we choose can ever break any of these relationships.

Every year the Catholic Church in the United States observes the month of October as Respect Life month, and today in particular, October 7th, is Respect Life Sunday. Today in particular we acknowledge the dignity of all persons at every stage of life, and in every circumstance in life. Every pope for the last century has taught this message of consistency.

Pope Francis says, "When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, *a human embryo*, a person with disabilities – to offer just a few examples – it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected." Care for creation cannot be separated from care for the unborn. Pope Benedict said, "The dignity of the individual and the demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner." The economy serves people, not the other way around. Pope John XXIII sums it up well: "Individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution." Everything we do must promote the dignity and lives of human beings.

To be pro-life means more than just to be pro-birth. Respect for life must be consistent. We must respect the equal dignity and value of poor peoples, people with various disabilities both mental and physical, immigrants, marginalized or vulnerable people, expectant mothers, unborn children, and even those who have participated in horrible crimes. But it is vital to note that we cannot speak of other human rights for everybody if we deny some people the right to live and have those other rights. To be consistently in favor of human rights, we must first be grounded in being pro-life.