

Life Begins

Afterfeast of the Presentation of Christ
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Fr. John Touloumes
Holy Trinity Church, Pittsburgh, PA

I have seen a lot of beautiful artwork in my life: The Mona Lisa at the Louvre in Paris, the Parthenon Marbles at the British Museum in London, Van Gogh's Starry Night at the Metropolitan Museum in NY and more. But none of the thousands of murals and masterworks can for me match the beauty of one painted by the hand of God. It's not famous and it doesn't possess a lot of artistic richness for anyone but me. Well, that's not true. There is someone else who holds the beauty of that art close to her heart as well: Presvytera Becky, my wife.

What was this magnificent art we were convinced was painted by the Lord Himself? Just a little blue line. No more than about a quarter inch long. We were first enraptured by this magnificent work sometime in the fall of 1990. If you haven't guessed by now, it was the little blue line on an early pregnancy test that told us God had breathed the essence of life on our prayers and literally into the womb that was to bear our first-born son, George. Married for two years, we had been hoping for a child from a while, so when it finally happened we didn't know the gender, the name or the due date, but we knew life had begun.

Over the course of time the baby bump grew and we followed the progress in a book called, "What to Expect When You're Expecting," which used familiar objects to know us how big our baby actually was at each week. It went from a blueberry to cherry to a cumquat to an eggplant and so on to full-term. Sketches showed the growth of fingers, toes and other physical features. Back then the sonograms were simple and grainy (today they're full-color and 3D) but, they were also more beautiful than we could put into words.

Two more times over the next three years, we experienced the same awe and excitement, each leading, thank God, to a safe and healthy delivery for baby and Mom. Today all three are married and someday hopefully sharing some of those little blue lines of their own. That is obviously in God's good time and, like ours, they are magnificent works of human art that are unique, precious and real from the very first moment.

Some of the toughest pastoral experiences I have had as a priest over the past 28 years have been those times when it doesn't end so well. I have been at the hospital with parents whose God-created children have not been delivered into life in this world but directly into the life of the heavenly kingdom, embraced by the Lord Himself, the arms of His holy mother and the prayers of the saints. We know this from the words of the Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19.15). That was a statement without a qualifier. No minimum age, no required status, no ability to contribute to society, simply a child. Each one a life created. A life begun by God. Because life begins with the breath of God blessing the ultimate creative work of a man and a woman.

Following on that theme, today I am compelled to share with you the following statement just released on Thursday by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops regarding the sanctity of life. What I am about to read is not a political statement. It is not a moral debate. And it is not new. It is evidence of our Orthodox hierarchs in America stepping up to their God-ordained responsibility to shepherd the faithful flock of Orthodox Christians in America and to state clearly and without equivocation the Orthodox Church's position on the wonder of the creation of life by God and the horror of its deliberate destruction by mankind through the abortion of unborn children. It is also part of my responsibility as the priest of this community, along Father Radu, to bear witness to the truth and the teachings of the Church, however contrary they may be to social trends and the world around us. Please listen closely: this is your Church's teaching, this is your faith:

"The Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America affirms the sanctity of life based on the firm conviction that life begins at the moment of conception. The Assembly remains steadfast in its

conviction that any interference in the development of life is a serious issue, and therefore it regularly participates in a variety of relevant events and also releases pertinent statements on the topic.

While recognizing that there are rare but serious medical instances where mother and child may require extraordinary actions, the Assembly of Bishops is deeply concerned that the taking of innocent life through abortion has become an acceptable cultural norm. This phenomenon – increasingly prevalent throughout contemporary societies – was exacerbated by a recent law of the New York State Senate (Bill S.240). The Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America categorically denounces these adverse developments that allow for abortion, under certain unjustifiable circumstances, even within the third trimester of existence.

The Assembly of Bishops further reminds the faithful that Christ is a beacon of hope in this challenging world. Accordingly, the Church is always prepared and willing to support women who are considering abortion to find alternative avenues to alleviate any burden, physical and spiritual. The Church is ever a mother – loving, understanding, nurturing, praying, and protecting all human life.”

www.assemblyofbishops.org/assets/files/messages/2019-01%20Assembly%20of%20Bishops%20Sanctity%20of%20Life%20Statement.pdf

Let's be clear about why that statement was issued this week. New York Bill S.240 was signed into law this with much celebration. It removes previous restrictions for the termination of the life of children all the way through to the point of delivery. That means full-term children, real, living children, who would be born otherwise healthy in a few minutes. This goes so far beyond the already horrible practice of taking the life of unborn children in the first trimester, where abortion proponents like to categorize them as blobs of flesh; we all started that way. And it goes beyond the second trimester when the those who promote abortion try to characterize them as unviable; we all went through that stage, too. No, this goes far enough to qualify as what would be qualified by almost any view of the law, but for a few seconds and a few inches, as full-fledged infanticide – the deliberate murder of children. May God have mercy on us!

Why have I shared this today? During our “Journey to Fullness” teaching series with Father Barnabas Powell, he uses a phrase over and over: “This is how the Orthodox Church understands herself.” In other words a debate in which one person says “I believe this, I'm right and you're wrong” goes nowhere and convinces no one. But clarity of what a person's or church's beliefs are at least makes understanding possible. So in that spirit, just as the events in New York this past week compelled the Assembly of Bishops to release their statement, I am compelled to share that statement and affirm our teaching so that no one leaves this sacred place today with anything but a crystal clear understanding of the teachings of your church, our church, the church of the Saints and the Church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Christians and other defenders of the life of the unborn person have been engaging the legal system for years. Despite all that, numbers verified even by abortion-defending sources estimate that since the landmark decision of Roe v. Wade in 1972, over 58 million children's lives have been terminated. If you have ever known the sorrow of even one child taken from this life for any reason, that number represents an absolutely unfathomable pain. May the Lord receive each of those beautiful souls in His mercy.

So we must do more than talk about this. All the talking solves nothing for a woman who finds the answer to her crisis in the arms of abortion providers such as the euphemistically-titled “Planned Parenthood.” If we are to heed the entire statement of the hierarchs, we cannot avoid the challenge. We must be, in their words, “always prepared and willing to support women who are considering abortion to find alternative avenues to alleviate any burden, physical and spiritual.” That means we must be ready for action.

For us as a church community that means first and foremost having the courage to raise our children in the truth of the Church's teachings so that abortion is for them an unthinkable option. It also means that pregnant women who choose life for their child through single parenting or adoption must be cared for and received in love and compassion in the Christian family, including this parish family. And we must provide material support for the agencies and ministries that provide support for women and children, something that our own Philoptochos Society will do today in their budget

meeting through their donations to children's and women's services. But above all we must protect our hearts and minds from being seduced into buying the worldly arguments and philosophies that seek to implant themselves within our thoughts and beliefs to deaden our opposition to the horrors of abortion.

Just yesterday the Church presented to us an image on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord: the tender embrace of the Elder Symeon carrying the newborn Jesus in the Temple for blessing. It is indeed a beautiful image in iconography, but even more magnificent and precious in real life. May we leave today even more attuned to that beauty, starting from the little blue line and all it represents through to the masterpieces wrought by the hand of the God, each one according to Saint Paul, as life begins, "God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2.10). Amen.

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