

The following sermon was delivered by Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., president of the University of Notre Dame, at the "Respect Life" Mass, January 22, 1975, in Sacred Heart Church, Notre Dame, Indiana.

"I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly"-- words of the Gospel just read.

My dear friends, two years ago today the U.S. Supreme Court made one of its less brilliant decisions. In fact, I think what will over time be seen as one of its most faulty decisions on the very center of what is most important in this world -- that which we celebrate this evening -- the mystery of life. I do not think that this is an unusual thing -- that a group of human beings makes a faulty decision. Although one would hope that on this level of jurisprudential judgment in an area that concerns rights, the judgment might be more solemnly structured and more fittingly argued than it was. And I think all who have studied it from where we sit see it as a very superficial, poorly argued and badly rendered decision.

I say it was not the first time it happened. Towards the close of the last century there was another important decision given by the Supreme Court of the U.S. regarding rights, and it was called Plessy vs. Ferguson. And what it said was that if you happened to be black instead of white you were equal but in a separate kind of way. And it was over a half century later that another Supreme Court said that's not right -- that separate and equal really has meant and does mean today separate and unequal. Blacks educated in the South are educated separately and unequally. One spends one-fourth the amount of money on them as one spends on white education. And blacks are cut off from every aspect of American life and treated with the highest indignity and all of this in the name of Plessy vs Ferguson. And it went on for over

fifty years until the Brown decision of 1954, under the leadership of Chief Justice Earl Warren.

There was, of course, dissent to that original decision as there was dissent to the decision of two years ago. And one would hope that one would not have to wait fifty years for the redress of the wrong that has been done. One is watching a nation torn apart because of this. We are brought up to respect the law and it is difficult to respect the law on the one hand while railing at the law's highest court on the other. But if we think we must, we should. But we should do so with civility and with respect and with persuasion.

Tonight we celebrate the mystery of life. That mystery begins in the life of a Godhead. It really doesn't begin at all. It always was and always will be and it exists that life of God -- Father, Son and Spirit -- in a most mysterious triune fashion. In fact it is the highest mystery of theology -- the Trinity. And we read in the first reading tonight how God created the world, and how the pinnacle of that creation was life. And it was at the pinnacle because it reflected the life of God himself -- a life of intelligence and a life of freedom -- a life so splendid in its dignity because it was God-like. And then Our Lord came, like us born of woman, and he said he had come that we might have life and have it more abundantly than we do now on this earth in this temporal order. And he told us how we would be born again and, indeed, all of us were in the baptism of water and the Holy Spirit. And in that way we shared the life of God himself, so that God himself lives within each one of us this day if we are in grace. And that passing from this life to eternal life will be no great change -- but simply a flowering and a vision and the sight of what we have within us at this very moment.

This mystery of life is what really is at the heart of our concern, because we say that it is a gift so stupendous, so magnificent, so mysterious that no one but God has any rights over it. And even God to our knowledge does not

abuse the right that he has over life. He gives it abundantly, mysteriously to be true, but abundantly and richly throughout the world in all kinds of varieties -- in plants and animals and most of all in man.

There is that mysterious moment when man and woman collaborate to create a body and then they collaborate with God to create a soul. And somehow through the action of man and woman and God there is brought into life a human being. You can argue forever and ever about what this human being is at what stage of his or her development. And there is no reason I know of philosophically or theologically that can say it's now, it's then, except we know that once life begins, it moves along in an inexorable path to be what it was created to be.

Some of these human beings are not born -- some by sheer accident of miscarriage, thousands and perhaps millions each year, and others by the will of man and woman -- also millions each year. Over the first, miscarriage, we have no control. We leave the fate of that human being in the eyes of God. In the second case, where it is the result of human action, we feel terribly wounded, as we should. Because somehow someone has arrogated to himself or herself the omnipotent power of God to say this being shall live and this other being shall not live. And that is a lawful act--which we can never believe it is. You might say if it's all that simple why do so many people think that they are right and we are wrong? And here in a way we have the crux of the great challenge that faces each of us. No law of man can by decree or judgment say that what is wrong in the eyes of God suddenly becomes right. Who knows the depth of depravity that has been said or done in the name of law -- the highest law of the land. It was under the highest law of Germany that six million Jews were burned in incinerators, and the people who did that can say, we were following the will of our fuehrer, Mr. Hitler, and we were following the orders of our legitimate civil authorities, as they were. And yet they

were obscenely wrong in the name of the law.

And people today can say now that the Supreme Court has said it is lawful, we can do it, and that it is legitimate. But one can still say on reflection and with deep conviction that it is obscenely wrong. And yet we are faced in our country in our times with a divided nation on this issue. And we have to ask ourselves why this is so and what might be done about it. Curiously, those who are at the very fount of life, those who are the nurturers of life, women, are in the forefront of those proposing the legitimacy of abortion as a very sacred woman's right. It may be difficult for you and for me to understand this. But it is a fact that nine out of ten people you see arguing abortion happen to be women, and they are arguing it in the name of Women's Liberation. I happen to believe in Women's Liberation, but I do not believe in this deduction from Women's Liberation -- that abortion is a fundamental right of women. I think women have no more right over the life of an unborn human being than I have or anyone else. And if God does not exercise that right, then neither should we.

Some of the people I have known to be most apostolic in the area of supporting human rights are also most apostolic in promoting the right of abortion, as it is called in their nomenclature. Even some of those who have most suffered from the lack of rights -- one of my famous friends who is a black civil rights leader -- one of the best in this world. I heard him say on television two or three nights ago, I'm in favor of abortion.

You might ask yourself, how did it all happen? It seemed for awhile that it wasn't going to happen until it happened in New York and it happened in California and then suddenly there was a bit of a surge against it in Michigan and other states and then suddenly out of the blue came the Supreme Court judgment, which I think few people expected but many cheered, many

millions cheered. And following that they had, with the respectability of the law, gone about their ways procuring abortions by and large for a variety of reasons but often for simple convenience which seems a terrible judgment upon the sacredness of human life -- that it's convenient or inconvenient and on the basis of inconvenience it might be snuffed out. But this is what we face and I tell you this evening that if we are not to wait fifty long years to do something about it we had best be more strategic than we have been to date in doing something about it.

I am not here tonight and it is not part of a homily to tell you what the best strategy is as far as definite ways and means of righting what we think is desperately wrong. But I can tell you some things that I think in the name of the respect for life and the cherishing of life that we must pay more attention to as Catholics. First of all, let us say that life is not simply to be respected and to be defended before birth but after birth as well. And that respect for life means respect for all of those things that make life truly human and truly Christian, and the right to decent respect for each other -- the right to become educated and to unfold oneself to the fullest of one's ability to serve God and men, the right to have at least enough to keep body and soul together, food and clothing and shelter, and medical care.

I have often felt terribly discouraged when arguing with our Congress in Washington about aid to the poor and abandoned of this world. They are counted in the billions, and many hundreds of millions of them are under the age of five and will never see the age of six. Often, I look around the room, and discover I am the only Catholic fighting the fight that the least of our brethren have more food or more education or the barest human essentials for human dignity. I would guess I could take a vote in parts of Louisiana where I had civil rights hearings years ago, and I could have got almost 100 per cent of the Catholic population there to vote against abortion, but these same

such people stood up and yelled insults at poor blacks who were trying to register to vote and to be human citizens in the country of their birth. I would guess you could take a vote in Boston tonight and get a very close to 100 per cent vote from the Catholics on abortion, and yet those same people without any sense of the incongruity of it all will yell "nigger, go home" - sick at the thought that maybe their nice white child will get his education or her education at the side of a nice black child. I think it's a terrible thing that all around this world life is degraded for people unborn and for people born and doomed to die very soon. If we really want to convince the world and our country that we have respect for life, we had better start showing respect for life and the justice that should attend the promise of life for every human being -- black or white or Western or Oriental rich or poor, young or old -- and we ^{had} better start saying that we are for the right to life in its flowering as well as its birth in every part of this world and in every part of this country. And we should indicate our willingness to uphold the right to life everywhere we go and in everything we do and that we will vindicate that right even at any personal sacrifice that might fall upon us to give.

The problem with this issue is that it has become in too many cases a Catholic issue -- a negative issue, a restricted issue -- and it should be as broad as life itself and it should carry with it the fulfillment of the promise of life in all of its parts, in all of its manifestations. It should be attended to the life of the old as well as to the life of the young, the life of those hundreds of thousands of children who will not reach the age of five after a dismal, miserable life as well as those who will never see the light of day. We have to somehow enlarge our vision and our respect for the mystery of life in each of its forms, and we can't on the one hand clamor against abortion and on the other hand rebel in acts of violence or stand still while billions of dollars are being wasted to create engines of

destruction. We cannot go to the movies or watch television and revel in people murdering each other or support that great art form of the cowboys and the Indians where the Indians always get killed by the cowboys and everybody cheers and the story ends happily.

Life is so violent today in so many forms. Human life is so depreciated and denatured in so many ways that if we want to really convince our fellow Americans that we respect the right to life then I think that we are going to have to change many of our judgments and many of our actions. And we have to show that we respect this right right across the board for everyone, right across the board from the conception to the end of life, and we have to be more concerned about the poor and about those suffering injustice here and abroad, those deprived because of our conspicuous consumption. We have to somehow call ourselves out in every way possible for human life in every form and then people will begin to say, "They really mean it...they really believe it." It's not just a little narrow crusade that they are going to fight for this while closing their eyes to that. They are going to be concerned about this great mystery of life and cherish it deeply, whether it is in a poor ghetto child or a child over in Sahil who has a bloated stomach. Whether it's an old person abandoned, a wino on the south side of Chicago. Whether he's black, Oriental, white or poor or young or old. They really respect life. They really are against violence. They really are against anything that brutalizes that enormously beautiful mysterious gift of life.

And I think too that it will have something to say about our attitudes towards sex, because you know there is so much today that is bestial and dehumanizing about the beautiful concept of sex which in a sense is the portal of life, the means by which life was created on the human scale to prepare the material for God to infuse with an immortal soul on the eternal

scale. Somehow we have to resurrect our own respect for sex and for life, viewing with mystery and awe the creation of life itself through sexual activity.

I think one of the great manifestations of the respect for life is celibacy, because one of the great gifts that all priests offer to God when they lay flat here on this floor to be ordained is the power to create life and to collaborate with God in that creation -- the most beautiful, the most eternal creation that takes place on earth. And I think that great gift is great because of what it means and what is given and the symbolism of it, of giving oneself to everyone else in giving up that great gift while receiving the power to nurture others in eternal life which is born in us at baptism and grows throughout our life, our life in grace.

I would think my dear friends that we have a lot of thinking to do and a lot of stock to take if we are going to look ahead the next two years, the next ten years, the next twenty years and see the mentality of this country changing. We must believe in and respect life deeply enough to respect it wherever it is threatened and under whatever conditions it is threatened. Until then I don't think that we are going to win this argument with our fellow citizens. I don't think that we are going to persuade them that we really believe it. And I think that every time Catholics stand up and say something or do something miserable with regard to human rights anywhere in this country or in this world, they are disqualifying themselves to even open their mouths regarding respect for life. Respect for life is a beautiful human trait, but we have to nurture it across the board, not just in this narrow channel.

I would like to leave with you a thought that has occurred to me very often as a way of speaking to other Americans who are generally fair and

open-minded. While all of us are terribly emotional on this issue, I think we are not going to solve it with emotion as much as by reason and civility and understanding and humanity. It is what we do that is going to speak much louder than what we say. And if we have established our credentials across the board, then I think we have a right to speak for respect of respect for life of the yet unborn. But to respect the one and to close our eyes to the atrocities afflicting the other is, I think, to disqualify us from saying anything at all.

I stood once outside a Chinese cemetery in Hong Kong and across the portal of that cemetery was a Chinese inscription, and I asked the gentleman I was with what it said. And he said it's a very curious, old saying. It says, "What you are I once was. What I am you soon will be." It seems to me that that message from one end of the spectrum of life -- from the dead -- can be matched by a similar message from those at the other end,

and it might help us to understand the problem if it were said to us tonight from all the yet unborn. When they say to us, "What I am now, you once were. What you are I shall somehow sometime be." But whether or not this happens for millions of people, I think, will depend upon how well we can portray to others who disagree our deep and abiding respect for life, our willingness to help the unfolding of its mystery in the whole world around us, the generosity with which we are open in our profession of this respect by the use of our own life, by our powers of procreation, by our sensitivity to all of the issues of violence and hunger and bestiality in our day. I think to the extent that we accept life willingly this night from God's hands as all of us have, to that extent we respect that higher life within us that he has given us over and above our temporal life. And if we take this to be the patrimony of all those yet unborn and especially the patrimony of those already born, then I think we shall think more deeply of

life, we shall certainly respect it more deeply and I think we might also defend it more effectively. God bless you all.