

Sunday 21 January, 2007
3rd Sunday of the Church Year [C]
Christ the King Cathedral
Atlanta, Georgia

✚ Wilton D. Gregory,
Archbishop of Atlanta

“A Beauty Hidden From Sight”

We are an incredibly “body” conscious society. And we learn to be aware of the appearance of our bodies at an ever-increasing earlier age. Most folks believe that we may have become too body conscious. They say that we are too focused on physical externals without an appropriate awareness that real beauty is not limited to mere physical image and attractiveness – but ultimately that beauty is a judgment on merits more significant than those that are visible with the human eye.

The ideals of physical beauty continue to become more and more demanding in our society. And it’s not just beauty awareness for girls these days – is it guys! Young men now must measure up to physical standards that are as difficult to achieve and to maintain as the obvious high standards once were for feminine beauty that girls had to and continually are even now asked to match. Ask one of these young men if he can show a “six pack” and he’ll know that you’re not talking about beer – and for my generation of male counter-parts here present -- a six-pack doesn’t refer to the noticeable results of the previous consumption of one too many six packs!

We Americans are among the most attentive – if not the most obsessive – of all peoples of our body-consciousness. We want people to see us as beautiful and impeccable in our appearance. And we readily – if not voluntarily – acknowledge when we are not in shape! We are ashamed when we must admit that we are too overweight as a nation.

Saint Paul's image of the body in describing the Church ought to be particularly appropriate for our world. This same bodily image is a reminder of the sacredness of the human body as a very precious gift from God. Each of us is the heir of an irreplaceable endowment in the body that we have – no matter in what shape we might presently be maintaining it. As our bodies grow older, they do not lose any of the precious human dignity they possess as a Divine legacy. No body – no matter how tiny it might be is devoid of that same Divine dignity. The act of aborting an unborn child or taking the life of a sick elderly or vulnerable person, or the creation of an embryonic human body for spare parts or experimentation is a clear violation of a sacred work of art.

Tomorrow marks a sad anniversary in the life of our nation as we recall that 34 years ago, we began to permit the destruction of human life within the womb – tiny beginnings of human life destroyed before they ever breathed God's air. It seems somehow strange that a society that is so obsessed with the appearance and image of the human body continues to condone the wanton destruction of infant bodies.

These 34 years have harmed much more than simply the millions of lives that have been lost. Many people continue to harbor the pain of sorrow at an earlier or potentially coerced reckless action that has continued to disturb their inner-peace. Today we pray also for their healing and comfort. We pray for the healing of the very soul of our nation and for the restoration of a proper appreciation of the gift of human life as the precious treasure that it is and always will be.

While we can easily become exceptionally concerned about the appearance of our bodies, we can never be too respectful of the great gift of life that God has bestowed on each of us in placing us in the families that are ours. We have been loved and cared for by parents, relatives, and friends who want us in turn to value our bodies and always to be aware of our human dignity. What a precious gift is the gift of human life and how blessed are we to enjoy this treasure. Young people are very much influenced by the standards of beauty in their world – and it has always been this way and I suspect it always will be. It is my prayer that none of the young people here present will ever forget how wonderful they are and how proud their parents and families are of them. As you grow older and strive to be as beautiful, attractive, and handsome as you can become on the outside, never forget the deeper beauty that may be hidden from every eye – except the Eye of God Himself who fashioned you

and loved you before you drew your first breath of life and who finds you absolutely stunning.