

Thursday 20 January, 2005
Mass and Vigil for the Pro-Life Rally,
“Rise Up for Life”
Cathedral of Christ the King
Atlanta, Georgia

✚ Wilton D. Gregory
Archbishop of Atlanta

My Young Friends in Christ,

I cannot tell you how much it means to me, to be here tonight, gathered together with so many wonderful young people from our Archdiocese, and from all throughout the State of Georgia. I want you to know that I believe the finger of God has played a direct part in the events of my early days here in Atlanta. On the day that our Holy Father Pope John Paul appointed me your Archbishop, I was here to make a quick visit, to meet some of the priests, and some of the people who would be working with me at the Catholic Center.

But also that first day, I was able to go out to St. Pius X and Blessed Trinity High Schools, and perhaps to meet some of you. And I felt the hand of God moving me in a specific direction that day as I saw personally, the great enthusiasm and the Faith of some of the young people of our Archdiocese.

And now, tonight, at my first significant public Mass in Atlanta since becoming the Archbishop, it is once again young people the Lord puts in front of me, as one of the first blessings of my new home town. And the reason this means so much to me is this. Youth, means hope - the very nature of being young is that most of your life is before you, and for those around you who may be older, and who know that a good part of our life may have been lived already, your witness to hope gives us new life, new excitement, new blood - and the gift you are giving me tonight, is to learn all over again, that tomorrow is in very good hands. It is a gift of rejuvenation that I witness as I come to Atlanta.

You will all know that in addition to having been the Bishop of Belleville in Illinois for the past eleven years, I have also been the President of the Bishop's Conference in Washington for the past three years. It has been such a challenging time, because so much of it was spent in facing the terrible problems that have come to light because some of our young people were harmed in our Church. You can't be old, and look at young people, especially young people who may have been hurt, and not feel grief and sorrow and want to do something about it.

We have just heard, in the Gospel, the story of Jesus being so moved by the death of a young girl, that He brought her back to life. I have tried very hard to bring back as much life, and as much love for the Church as I can, to young people especially. And having you here tonight, to help me feel in a special way the hope that I see in your faces, I am certain that God will provide me the strength to serve this Church here in Atlanta and North Georgia, to build on the many wonderful things that have been done over the past decade by Archbishop Donoghue, and to begin and finish many more wonderful things - for you, for your families, for our Lord, and for the glory of God.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart, for bringing this hope to life in me and in the other adults, and it is the first way in which, tonight, you have truly risen to the height proclaimed by the theme of this gathering: "Rise Up for Life." For in my heart, you have given life to those beautiful words from the Book of Job:

"If you set your heart aright and stretch out your hands toward [God]... surely then you may lift up your face in innocence; you may stand firm and unafraid. For then you shall forget your misery, or recall it like waters that have ebbed away. Then your life shall be brighter than the noonday; its gloom shall become as the morning, and you shall be secure, because there is hope..."

This is what you do for me and for the family of the Church - you renew hope within us. And what is hope, but the reason to live. Now, I must ask, what can I do for you? What can I give you in return?

And the most precious thing that a bishop can give to any of his people - young or old - is to speak to them again those words which God, and especially our Lord Jesus Christ, has spoken - has spoken so that they

may have life - life here on earth filled with joy and blessings, and life in Heaven, which is the blessing of living forever.

Pope John Paul recently has used a phrase over and over, to stress the essence of mission for Christians in the world - in other words, a phrase that captures in a few words, what the actions of our lives must be. He says, "Overcome evil, by doing good." Overcome evil by doing good.

At first hearing, the meaning seems obvious - but it is much deeper than that. The truth is that most people attempt to overcome evil, not by doing good, but by talking about doing good. And talking about doing good does very little good. What if Jesus had just stayed home in Nazareth, talking all day with His mother and friends about the nature of good? What if the Apostles had remained hidden in the safety of the Upper Room, discussing among themselves the possible effects of the gifts of the Holy Spirit? What if the saints had been happy to spend their days sitting in caves or cloisters, simply pondering what Jesus had done and shown them? If this had happened, then Christianity would be no more today than a book on a shelf in the library.

But this is not what happened - Jesus *did* leave home - the Apostles *did* strike out on their journeys of conversion - the saints *did* cover the world with the fervor of missionary work - and the world was brought, and is brought to faith in Christ that is *not* theoretical, but that lives, every day, in the choices we make, and in the way we present those choices to the world. And that is how we overcome evil, by doing good.

In relating this all to the reason we are here - of keeping vigil before the 32nd anniversary of the decision Roe vs. Wade - in making this truth of active and vibrant Christianity mean something to you, then we must be blunt, and first face this question: what does abortion mean to you, how does it affect your lives or the lives of your friends?

I am not going to pass over the possibility that you may have had, or will have direct contact with the some young woman who may have had an abortion. You live in the real world with all of its less attractive realities. You are flesh and blood, real young men, real young women - God has made you so - and you will, as we all must, struggle with trials of being flesh and blood. The day may come when you yourself might have to face such a serious question - because of your own actions, or because of

the actions of someone you love. God forbid that it should be you yourself who have to deal with this terrible sin.

It is then, that the profound power of doing good to overcome evil comes into play. I cannot define for you the specific answers to particular situations, but I can tell you how the principle unfolds. Once life is conceived, then there is no turning back. Once life is conceived, then those responsible must turn their lives over to the nurturing of the life they have created. Once life is conceived, no dreams, no hopes can be realized, unless those dreams and hopes include the life of the one who has been brought into being.

It is sad, that when an unwanted life is made, too often one of the partners, simply turns his back and walks away, leaving the other, to face the question, to face the struggle, to face the new life. But God has given women a strength where children are involved, where the protection and nurture of life is involved, that surpasses the strength of men. And even if a woman - young or mature - is left as the sole person responsible for the life created within her, then it is not a curse that God has given her, but a blessing - a new life - a new direction - a new possibility - the possibility of making her own life whole and holy, by dedicating it to the new life within her.

Dear young people, in your witness to those of your friends who perhaps do not value or understand life as you do, you will be a beacon of truth for them and an agent of God Himself. They are free to believe, or not to believe - but you are free only to tell them what you know to be right and good.

Remember again, in the Gospel story - when Jesus came to the place where the little girl lay dead, the people told him that He was too late, to give up and go home, and they made fun of Him, because He did not give up, He went into the room, and brought the little girl back to life. When you speak the words of truth and of life to those who might come to you seeking help, seeking a way to make something good out of something heartbreaking, and to overcome in their own life, the terrible temptation to abort, to end a life that has been already made - and when you speak these words of truth when everyone else is telling them to take the easy way out, then like the Lord, you may be bringing back to life, their faith, their hope, their transformed willingness to accept a human life that God

has fashioned. And this is another way, in your own lives, and in others, you may overcome evil by doing good, and as a witness of the Lord, to rise up for life.

As for encountering this evil yourself, I know you are good, that you have been taught what is good, by your parents, by our Church. But to strengthen yourselves, always remember the wisdom of Scripture, and the force of the words you read there. Remember what St. Paul says, as we have heard: "Sin must not reign over your mortal bodies so that you obey their desires...do not present the parts of your bodies to sin as weapons for wickedness, but present yourselves to God as raised from the dead to life and the parts of your bodies to God as weapons for righteousness. For sin is not to have any power over you, since you are not under the law but under grace."

And truly, no power in the world can compel us to sin - for we have the power of grace on our sides - we received it in Baptism, we put on its full power in Confirmation - and in our daily lives, we can enjoy the power of reconciliation, and the power above all, of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist, when He comes to us, and gives us life, as He came to the dead daughter of Jairus, and gave her life. The Lord Jesus will always help you.

My young friends, this has been a long homily, but this is an important occasion, as I said at the beginning, and I want you to feel the importance I attach to it. But I am not going to talk much longer, since I hope I have covered the important reasons we are here - to get to know one another, to remember the action-oriented life of our Church, to prepare to help those who come to us in distress, and to remain ourselves, faithful to the God's laws, and to the life He has given us.

But we need to end this time, by trying to get to the very deepest level of what life means, and why it is so important for us to dedicate so much of our energy to working for the protection of life in our country.

How did Christ guide us in understanding this love, in the Gospel story of this Mass? Was it when He decided he would restore the dead child to life? Was it when He ignored the jeers of the crowd and continued His mission? Was it at the actual moment when He said, "*Little girl, get up,*" and she did?

These were all important moments in the story, but I think the real lesson is to be learned in the very last line, when Jesus told the ones who were with Him what they should do - after all had seen the great miracle of life restored, Jesus told them to make sure *that the little girl was given something to eat*. Christ really understands young people – he loves you deeply. Then and now, He realizes that young people are always hungry! And when he raised this youngster to life, he gave her back to her parents more filled with life than she had been before. As we continue with the Eucharist, Christ will feed us all with Himself. He wants to strengthen us and to prepare us to be about the challenge of bringing Him to the waiting world. He is the Lord of Life and our task and privilege is to witness to that truth – not just tomorrow, but always and everywhere. God bless you, my young brothers and sisters.