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Kansas City Bishop to pro-lifers: 'We are at war!'

Bishop Robert W. Finn | Apr. 28, 2009

Editor?s note: Robert W. Finn, bishop of the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese, delivered the keynote address, "Warriors for the Victory of Life,? at the 2009 Gospel of Life Convention held at St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Overland Park, Kan., earlier this month. He called the ?church militant? ? the church on earth ? into a battle for human souls in defense of the sacredness and dignity of human life. His complete address follows:

Thank you for coming together for this second annual Gospel of Life Convention, cosponsored by the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas and the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. It is a privilege to welcome you and greet you this morning. I am grateful for the encouragement of your presence and ? as a Bishop it is my solemn and joyful duty to do all I can to fortify you in your own faith.

But as I speak a word of encouragement today I also want to tell you soberly, dear friends, ?We are at war!?

We are at war.

Harsh as this may sound it is true ? but it is not new. This war to which I refer did not begin in just the last several months, although new battles are underway ? and they bring an intensity and urgency to our efforts that may rival any time in the past.

But it is correct to acknowledge that you and I are warriors - members of the Church on earth ? often called the Church Militant. Those who have gone ahead of us have already completed their earthly battles. Some make up the Church Triumphant ? Saints in heaven who surround and support us still ? tremendous allies in the battle for our eternal salvation; and the Church Suffering (souls in purgatory who depend on our prayers and meritorious works and suffrages).

But we are the Church on Earth ? The Church Militant. We are engaged in a constant warfare with Satan, with the glamour of evil, and the lure of false truths and empty promises. If we fail to realize how constantly these forces work against us, we are more likely to fall, and even chance forfeiting God?s gift of eternal life. The ultimate promise of the Gospel.

Before I go any further I must proclaim a most important truth ? a truth that we have just been celebrating throughout the last week: Jesus Christ, in His life, death, and Resurrection, has already won the war: definitively and once for all. He has conquered sin and death and has won the prize of life on high in heaven forever.

We know the final outcome, but the battle for eternal life is now played out in each human heart with a free will to love or not, to be faithful or to walk away from the life which has been offered as God?s most wonderful gift. Every day the choice is before us: right or wrong; good or bad; the blessing or the curse; life or death. Our

whole life must be oriented toward choosing right, the good, the blessing; choosing life.

If you and I fail to realize the meaning and finality behind our choices, and the intensity of the constant warfare that confronts us, it is likely that we will drop our guard, be easily and repeatedly deceived, and even lose the life of our eternal soul.

As bishop I have a weighty responsibility to tell you this over and over again. This obligation is not always easy, and constantly I am tempted to say and do less, rather than more. Almost everyday I am confronted with the persuasion of other people who want me to be silent. But ? with God?s grace ? you and I will not be silent.

This work of speaking about the spiritual challenges before us is not just the responsibility of the Bishop. I am not the only one entrusted with the work of faith, hope and charity. You are baptized into this Church militant. You are also entrusted with the mission of righteousness. You have the fortification of the sacraments, and the mandate to love as Jesus loved you. You share in the apostolic mission and work of the Church.

What can we say about this constant warfare?

Our battle is ultimately a spiritual battle for the eternal salvation of souls ? our own and those of other people. We are not engaged in physical battles in the same way military soldiers defend with material weapons. We need not ? we must not ? initiate violence against other persons to accomplish something good, even something as significant as the protection of human life.

But it is true that we might have to endure physical suffering to prosper the victory of Jesus Christ. He carried the Cross. He promised us that ? if we were to follow Him ? we also would share the Cross. We must not expect anything less. When you stand up for what is right ? you will be opposed. The temptation will be to avoid these attacks. But through our responses we must see what kind of soldiers we are.

Who is our enemy in this battle of the Church Militant?

Our enemy is the deceiver, the liar, Satan. Because of his spiritual powers he can turn the minds and hearts of men. He is our spiritual or supernatural enemy when he works to tempt us, and he becomes a kind of natural enemy as he works in the hearts of other people to twist and confound God?s will. In our human experience people deceived by Satan?s distortions and lies may appear as our ?human enemies.?

But, in his Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul makes, for us, a very important distinction. ?Draw strength from the Lord and from His mighty power,? He tells them and us. ?Put on the armor of God, in order that you can stand firm against the tactics of the devil.? ?For, our struggle,? St. Paul tells us, ?is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the rulers of this darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens.? (Eph 6:10-12).

So let?s be clear: Human beings are not Satan, but certainly they can come under his power, even without their fully realizing it. When we, in our sinfulness, put something in the place of God: pleasure and convenience; material success; political power and prestige, we open a door for the principalities and contrary spirits who war against God. They want you and me for their prize. When we forsake God and outwardly reject His law and what we know to be His will, we make an easy victory for our supernatural enemies. We fall right into their hands.

But what about the so-called human enemies? What about the persons who wish to establish a path of living which contravenes God?s law: promoting abortion; unnatural substitutes for marriage, and all such distortions of true freedom? Here Jesus is clear: ?But I say to you, love your enemies: and pray for those who persecute you.? (Matt 5:44)

We cannot hate these human enemies, and we must find a way to love them. But we need not show them any sign of agreement. We pray for them. We do not lie to them ? and we seek that which pertains to their conversion ? not to their worldly comforts, but to their eternal salvation. To ignore their destructive errors, particularly those that cost the lives of others, is to shirk our responsibility to attend to their eternal salvation.

There are people who make themselves the public enemies of the Church. They openly attack belief in Christ, or the Church?s right to exist. Quite honestly such groups or individuals are less prevalent than they might have been in prior moments of history. In some ways they are not the most dangerous opponents in our spiritual warfare, because they show themselves and their intentions more forthrightly.

The more dangerous ?human enemies? in our battle are those who in this age of pluralism and political propriety seek ways to convince us of their sincerity and good will. With malice or with ignorance, or perhaps with an intention of advancing some other personal goal, they are willing to undermine and push aside the values and the institutions that stand in their way.

They may propose ?tolerance? and seem to have a ?live and let live? approach to all human choices ? even if the choice is not to ?let live,? but actually to ?let die,? or ?let life be destroyed.? These more subtle enemies are of all backgrounds. They may be atheists or agnostics, or of any religion, including Christian or Catholic.

This dissension in our own ranks should not surprise us because we all experience some dissension against God?s law of love within our own heart. But the ?battle between believers,? who claim a certain ?common ground? with us, while at the same time, they attack the most fundamental tenets of the Church?s teachings, or disavow the natural law ? this opposition is one of the most discouraging, confusing, and dangerous.

In my first U.S. Bishops? Conference meeting ? June of 2004 ? the bishops passed what seemed to me to be a compromise statement as a result of our lengthy debate on politicians and Communion. There we stated that pro-choice leaders (and specifically, Catholic leaders were mentioned) should not be given public platforms or honors. As we all know, the eminent American Catholic University Notre Dame is poised to bestow such an

opportunity and honor on President Obama, who is, of course, not Catholic. But it doesn?t take another Bishops? Conference statement to know this is wrong: scandalous, discouraging and confusing to many Catholics.

God knows what all motivates such a decision. I suspect that, since Notre Dame will need a scapegoat for this debacle, and Fr. Jenkins will probably lose his job, at this point perhaps he ought to determine to lose it for doing something right instead of something wrong. He ought to disinvite the President, who I believe would graciously accept the decision. Notre Dame, instead, ought to give the honorary degree to Bishop John D?Arcy of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, who has supported and tried to guide the University, despite their too frequent waywardness, faithfully for 25 years.

In my remaining time this morning I want to talk principally about three things: 1) I want to comment briefly on some of the particular battles we face in the cause of the protection of the life of human beings. 2) I want to reflect on some of the costs of doing battle; and 3) I will suggest some ways we can fortify ourselves to go forth in this mission. First ? the battle for Human Life.

The battle we face for the salvation of our souls is the most important one we face ? bar none. Where I spend all eternity; where you spend eternity ? in bliss or in damnation ? is important beyond any individual choice I make. But the individual human choices I make ? even one grave choice in which we remain unrepentant ? can determine the direction of my salvation.

To deliberately destroy a human person, and without any justification of self-defense, is to preempt without an equal and sufficient cause, the right to life bestowed by God alone. Life is a gift which we have from God, not from man. This right cannot be taken away by means of a human law. It ought to be protected and assured by human law.

The constant magnitude of this crime against humanity is staggering. We must never get used to it. In the United States there are 4000 abortions every day. Compare that to the tragedy of September 11, or to any other war, or even to the genocidal Holocaust of 6 million Jews and many others under the Nazi regime.

The count of abortions over the 36 years, since its legalization in January, 1973, is beyond 50 million human lives. These are just the reported abortions. There are more. There are many, many more worldwide. But keep reflecting on 4,000 killings a day of innocent babies. Recently someone told me the number of abortions had gone down. I don?t believe it, but if you wish, you can think of 3,500 killings a day or even 3,000 per day.

Thousands of human lives every day: If we keep saying this ? first of all ? some people will get very upset with us. They will want us to stop. They may quote other statistics about the tragedies of poverty and war. We must truly share their horror at these things too. However, in the end the measure of our society is in how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst. The unifying thread is ?the value of human life and the dignity of the human person.?

4,000 abortions each day in the United States. This is the tally of the enemy. Are we in a war? Absolutely. Are we winning? Are we even battling to win? Or do we consider this someone else?s war?

We can hardly know how many human embryos have been destroyed in pursuing in vitro fertilization, and other experimentation, or through abortifacient contraceptives. Our President has just signed a law providing government funding ? your tax money and mine ? for the funding of these human embryonic stem cell experiments. Are we at war? Absolutely. Are we winning? Missouri lost a valiant battle to constitutionally outlaw human cloning and human embryonic stem cell research. We haven?t given up, but it requires a constant effort. We won many people over through good instruction in the truth. We were outspent 30 to 1.

Assisted Suicide is now legal in Oregon and Washington State. There are more efforts underway and polls, sadly, show a steady decline in the numbers of people opposing such referenda. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that matters concerning the regulation of medicine and other health issues are up to the states. Several state supreme courts have already ruled that assisted suicide would not be unconstitutional.

Are we at war? Absolutely. Are we winning? Unfortunately, there is reason to believe that people are losing their sense of the moral evil of assisted suicide. But we cannot give up.

The fight for life is a constant warfare. Those who vied for the leadership of our country last November offered Americans a clear choice in this regard. The President is keeping his promises ? one by one. We are getting what we chose. Is the war over? Never. Is the battle over? We must not give up. Remember: we already know the final outcome. The battle now is about our readiness to remain faithful ? our readiness to suffer while we peacefully, legally, and prayerfully seek the victory of life.

We must defend life, but also build.

In his encyclical Evangelium Vitae, on the Gospel of Life, Pope John Paul II said that we must oppose the culture of death, and he said we must construct a civilization of life and love. So, we must defend the right to life, but even beyond that we must take action for the promotion of what is good. We must build a civilization that proclaims the Gospel of Life.

Occasionally we still hear an elected official speak of his or her personal opposition to abortion, while they support the legal right to an abortion. We should be very clear: Such a person places him or herself completely OUTSIDE the moral framework, the moral imperative of Evangelium Vitae and other Church teaching on these issues. They are NEITHER defending human life against the forces of death, NOR or they taking steps to build a culture of life. They have abandoned their place in the citizenship of the Church. Quite simply they have become warriors for death rather than life.

Such a person who makes a public stand ? and acts directly ? in defense of the right to kill endangers their eternal salvation. If you and I support such a person who has so flatly told us of their intentions to protect a fraudulent Right to Death, a Right to an Abortion, we make ourselves participants in their attack on life. We risk our salvation, and we better change. Why? ? because Bishop Finn is going to condemn you? No, I must say what the Church says, but I will not finally judge any human soul.

I know Catholics in our country are looking to their bishops for leadership in this. Four out of five letters I receive on these issues urges me to do more, not less. I was not able to attend the installation of Archbishop Timothy Dolan in New York this week, but I watched part of the Mass on EWTN.

I heard the homily and saw how well the new Archbishop was received. But there was one place in the homily that was particularly dramatic. When Archbishop Dolan mentioned the defense of human life, all St. Patrick Cathedral thundered with spontaneous applause and rose to its feet. At no other spot in the homily did any such thing happen.

Please note: This is NOT partisan politics on the part of bishops or their flock. This is zeal for life, pure and powerful. This is care for truth, and attention to the salvation of souls. It cannot and must not be neglected, even if it means we might get scolded at times by those who want us to speak less. We bishops should note it carefully ? how our people are starving for more leadership ? more unanimity ? more courage in this regard.

Every believer is called to be a warrior for righteousness ? a soldier in support of human life. Are we at War? It is clear we are, and we will each stand before Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life.

Dr. Scott Hahn makes an interesting observation about a well-known passage from Matthew?s Gospel. St. Peter is entrusted with the leadership of the Church; he is handed the ?keys? to the Kingdom. ?And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.? (Matt 16:18). Hahn points out that it is not just the work of the Church to hold strong against the powers of hell. Rather: in the battle, the Church must beat upon the gates of hell. We must not give up until those sorry gates fall off their hinges and the victory of Jesus Christ is made full and complete and final. Bishops are called to teach, lead and sanctify. These are not defensive postures ? but elements of a powerful offensive designed to promote and extend the Kingdom of God.

It is not enough for us to defend against the assaults of Satan. It is not enough for us even to defend innocent human life. Of course, if we fail to do this, we fail in our most urgent task. But by good deeds of love and charity, we must build this active culture of life that is ready and capable of turning back hell itself.

If we won?t put the abortionist out of business we are pitiable souls. If we don?t enact laws and work tirelessly to change human hearts so that life is forever reverenced and protected, we have not fought the good fight which is our charge as the Church Militant. As warriors we must first beat back the enemy. But then let us not forget that we are warriors for the victory of life!

How do we arm ourselves for what is first and foremost a supernatural war? First: Unless we are living in God?s life we should not go near this battle. I don?t care if you are the strongest and most brilliant and clever person on the planet. The devil ? as he has shown over and over again ? will turn you inside out. If you are not fortified by the sacraments ? frequent confession and worthy Holy Communion ? you cannot succeed in an ultimately supernatural battle. We must live ? no longer ourselves ? but Christ in us. Be always in the state of grace.

Pray. Be a prayer warrior. One modern-day saint said when you are going out to try to change someone?s heart determine to make your effort 80 percent prayer and 20 percent words or actions.

Prayer defeats the devil. Prayer aligns us with Christ. Pray for the abortionist. Pray for the legislator. Pray for the mother (and father and other family members). Pray for the child in the womb. Pray for yourself and allow God to guide you. Pray that you will be a warrior of faithfulness and love and mercy. Remember that God often chooses the foolish to shame those who are clever.

Use the symbols and instruments of our devotion. Arm yourself with the rosary. Protect yourself with the scapular or a blessed medal. Ask for a blessing as a sign of unity in the Church in what we do: unity with the Holy Father, with your bishop, with your pastor. What I am supposed to do as bishop (teach and lead, and sanctify) I must, in turn, delegate in proper measure to my pastors. They, in turn, need you as soldiers.

Don?t worry very much about numbers. If you read the accounts of the Old Testament battles, over and over again God used a tiny misfit army to overthrow a legion 1,000 times its size. In this way it is so much clearer that God is fighting the battle. We are only His instruments. What will happen to us if we take up this war in faithfulness?

Do you really want to know? You will be hated by some powerful people. You may be rejected by those whose approval you most desire. You will be loved and supported by some and this will be a wonderful encouragement. You will be misunderstood by many ? and this can be very painful. After you have suffered a little in your battle, some will tell you that you have done nothing ? or that you have done it the wrong way.

Yes, if you push ? others will ?push back.? We should always be very careful to obey the law. But, regardless, some will threaten you with legal action, and law suits cost money and you may suffer that difficult hardship. In the end, dear friends, if we err let it be on the side of life. Life! 4,000 human lives a day!

What if I suffer greatly trying to change this tragic trajectory ? through prayerful, legal, peaceful means? It is in God?s hands, and you and I are warriors for the victory of life. The stakes in terms of human life are high. The stakes in terms of human souls are even higher.

A final word

There is much more we might say, and I know that today?s many presentations will be of great value to you all. Years ago I first heard Dr. Janet Smith teach so eloquently about the dangers of contraception: to our souls, on marriages, on our culture, as a preamble to abortion and as a degrading stain on human love. I am so pleased she has joined us to teach this truth so much at the foundation of the sad culture of discarded life and love.

I wish to thank Adrienne Doring and Ron Kelsey who, with much assistance from so many of you, coordinated this event. To my brother and co-worker Archbishop Joseph Naumann, whose leadership in pro-life is so well known throughout our country, I express my thanks and admiration.

May the Peace of the Risen Lord Jesus ? the glory of His Easter triumph? the hope and promise of undying love and the power of Life sustain you all in your high calling as Warriors for the Victory of life.

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