

2019 Address to National Catholic Prayer Breakfast

By Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted

“Christ is risen! He is truly risen!” This traditional greeting of Eastern Christians seems especially fitting on this 3rd day of Easter 2019. For the mission of the Church depends on the fidelity of the living Jesus Christ. The first duty and real privilege of whoever wants to serve the Lord is to be a faithful witness to His glorious Cross and Resurrection.

In that joyful exchange of only seven words, we re-member, that is we literally bring-back-together the reason for our hope as disciples of Jesus called by Him to leadership in the 21st Century. This Easter proclamation *clarifies faith, rings with hope and calls to charity.*

Faith in the crucified and risen Christ shields us from two cold and deadly sins which threaten leaders in every age—arrogant presumption and cynical despair. Neither is allowed the Christian leader!

Presumption looks too much to ourselves—despair too much at the world. The enemy of our souls does not care which of these we prefer, either narcissistically to look in the mirror or pathetically to fret as we look out the window. Either way, the roaring lion finds what he is looking to devour: either someone stupidly self-confident and alone, or someone paralyzed by fear of failure. And if this person whom the devil entices is a leader of others, his devouring of one soul can become a feast on many.

These seven words are our self-forgetful, God-revering battle cry: Christ is risen! He is truly risen!

As I have the honor of addressing leaders, both lay and religious, in all your diverse gifts and duties in Christ, I am reminded of another historic moment which took place here in our nation’s capital, 40 years ago. On October 7, 1979, in his homily on the Capitol Mall, only six years after *Roe vs Wade*, Pope John Paul II told America what the Church would do in response to the legalization of abortion in our country. Listen again to his words:

“...we will stand up every time that human life is threatened. When the sacredness of life before birth is attacked, we will stand up and proclaim that no one ever has the authority to destroy unborn life.

When a child is described as a burden or is looked upon only as a means to satisfy an emotional need, we will stand up and insist that every child is a unique and unrepeatable gift of God, with the right to a loving and united family.

When the institution of marriage is abandoned to human selfishness or reduced to a temporary, conditional arrangement that can easily be terminated, we will stand up..."

By God's providence, I was ordained a priest in the same year as Roe vs. Wade. Throughout my life and ministry, then, walking in the dark shadow cast by the infamous Supreme Court decision, Christ has been summoning me to lift up the truth proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council that abortion is an "unspeakable crime" (Gaudium et Spes, 51). It is my pastoral duty to bear witness to the Gospel of Life, and to pray and work for a restored protection in law of the most vulnerable among us. I do so with undying hope because, as St. Paul wrote, **"...the love of Christ impels me."** (2 Cor 5:14)

It is important to recall that the scandal of Jesus' Cross and Resurrection is bound to His bodiliness. He, the second Person of the Trinity, received a body with His human nature from His mother. Scandal! At the center of many heresies is bodiliness. This includes the current heresy, which is embodied (pun intended) in the Sexual Revolution and now in its radicalized version, the Gender Ideology, as Pope Francis calls it.

Any rejection of bodiliness will immediately target two beautiful but demanding and sometimes inconvenient realities: marriage and the child.

Marriage, God's Plan for the sacred unification of man and woman, which mysteriously images the Trinity, stood in the way of the early Gnostics, the Manicheans of the 1st Millennium, the Albigensians of the 13th Century, King Henry VIII of England and Fr. Martin Luther of Germany during the Reformation; and marriage stands now in the way of the Gender Ideology. Its further weakening will do nothing to strengthen our great country. We Christians, then, must stand up for this reality of marriage today in our homes and in the Public Square, despite the real risk of persecution by doing so.

The child is also targeted when bodiliness is questioned. Look at the vociferous opposition to the Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act.

Where does this blatant disregard for a child's life come from? From a hardened heart. A child needs love, and love costs; and the human heart must be

prepared to pay the cost of love when the child arrives. Christ calls us to stand up for each child and where no human heart has been ready to receive the new life, to allow Him to expand our own hearts to receive that child, to stand in the breach left by a hardened heart.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we can do this. We were made for such a time as this. God destined us for these historical circumstances. May we be ready, each day, to say with Isaiah, **“Here I am, Lord, send me.”**

This morning, I want to say a word to the laity of the Church, who are justly angered at the revelations of so much sin and failure-in-leadership among priests and bishops of our beloved Church. Your concerns are just and need to be answered with both sacrifice and actions that are wiser than despair. Please pray for us, your shepherds, that we might act with radical trust in the grace of the Risen Christ to bear any burden that comes with offering healing for the victims, honestly naming the evil, clearly defending inconvenient truths of the Gospel and exercising decisive leadership in Christ’s Name.

We bishops owe this to you, and more importantly, we owe this to the Lord Himself, nothing less.

As one called by Christ to be a shepherd in these times, I also owe you and the Lord clarity in my teaching and its entailing challenge in your vocation to marriage. Allow me to speak here of your most important leadership and witness to Christ: the leadership of your family. I reflect here on the news that the birth rate in the United States dropped to record lows last year. I speak specifically here in support of the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, the rejection of contraception and the importance of openness to life. A section from my recent Apostolic Exhortation to the husbands and wives, mothers and fathers of the Diocese of Phoenix, *Complete my Joy*, will help me say it most succinctly:

“The disaster invited by theologians, bishops, priests and laity who rejected Pope Paul VI’s [prophetic] letter is upon us. Enough! What further evidence do we need to see that the Sexual Revolution’s divisions: sexual pleasure separated from procreation, sexuality from marriage, man from woman in divorce, woman from child in abortion, youth from the hope that love can be faithful and beautiful, the elderly from children who can care for them at life’s end—[these divisions] are a plague of misery on a scale never known before. Enough! Husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, you are called to have great hearts here, counter-cultural and brave. You can build

something better, freer, more generous, and nobler, beginning in your own home.” (Section 59)

Christians are called not to complacency, but to greatness: to have hearts great enough to be filled with God. We are called to be saints, saints with lives full of the Holy Spirit, women and men who live heroic virtue. This means that while we are committed to the four cardinal virtues, including the practical virtue of prudence, we are not “worldly calculators”. Blessed John Henry Newman, who, praise be to God, will be canonized by Pope Francis this fall, said, “*Calculation never made a hero.*” Absolutely right. And you, the heads of our domestic churches, the smallest and most vital cells of the Church and of society, have as your primary responsibility to be “all-in” for your sacramental marriage vows. This entails an extra-ordinary openness to the gift of new human life, whether the child arrives by way of the marital act or via the generous fostering and adoption of children who have no parents. Embracing this mystery of the blessing of openness to life is the family’s way of living out Jeremiah’s striking imagery (Chapter 17:7ff):

**Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
 whose hope is the LORD.
 He is like a tree planted beside the waters,
 the stretches out its roots to the stream;
 It fears not the heat when it comes,
 its leaves shall stay green;
 In the year of drought it shows no distress,
 but still bears fruit.**

Do not be afraid to sink your roots deeply into the living water that is Jesus Christ. He will not abandon you.

Lead your family, and lead in whatever other place the Lord asks, with deep and childlike faith in Him. Trust in God the Father who loves you, in His Son who frees you by His saving death and glorious Resurrection; He fills you with the Faith, Hope and Love you need to be leaders in the Name of the Risen Christ.