



A REFLECTION ON THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY AND THE CULTURE OF LIFE

by the Most Reverend Martin D. Holley

In a September 2007 visit to Austria, Pope Benedict XVI expressed his great concern about the future of Europe. He stated that Europe “may extinguish itself, in numbers and spirit, if it embraces abortion and rejects Christianity,” which has “profoundly shaped the continent.”

The Pope went on to warn political leaders “not to allow children to be considered as a form of illness,” stating that, “out of concern for humanity,” there is a “need to do everything possible to make European countries once again open to welcoming children,” and to “encourage young married couples to establish new families and to become mothers and fathers!”

The Holy Father said that the “fundamental human right is the right to life itself,” and that “this is true of life from the moment of conception until its natural end.” His Holiness stated that “abortion, consequently, cannot be a human right—it is the very opposite.” He proposed that “rather than legalize abortion, governments create a climate of joy and confidence in life ... in which children are not seen as a burden, but rather as a gift to all.”

As an African American Catholic Bishop who was born in a family of fourteen children, with five girls and nine boys, it should not be surprising that the issue of abortion, particularly in the African American family, is of extreme importance to me. My knowledge that my father, mother, and siblings were all baptized into the Catholic Church on the same day (June 20, 1954), while my mother was six months’ pregnant with me, had a lot to do with

forming in me a pro-life attitude. The witness of my parents taught all my siblings and me to respect the dignity of every human person and to always welcome the gift of life.

We were also mentored by our family priest, who left a solid impression on all of us as he mailed every one of his letters sealed with a stamp that said, “Stop Abortions.” He understood the damage that abortion was doing to humanity and what it would eventually do to the Black family.

FAMILY EXPERIENCES

Sometime ago, I received phone calls from two different family members informing me that they were expecting a baby. Neither was married. Naturally, I had mixed emotions. I was extremely happy to know that my young relatives would never consider an abortion, but also concerned that they were not in a Christian marriage. In contrast, I rejoiced after a phone conversation with a married relative whose spouse and two-year-old son informed me that they were expecting another baby. I was just as happy for them, but in their case I had no major concerns.

There is no doubt in my mind that all of my relatives will have many family members and friends to assist and support them in providing for their children, because they have experienced a Culture of Life in their own families. But this is not always the case in today’s world, where the Culture of Death is so prevalent in society, especially among the poor in the African American community.

Over hundreds of years, African Americans have traditionally been pro-life. Human life was greatly valued, especially by those who were baptized and raised Catholic, or who received a Catholic education. It would have been highly unlikely, almost unheard of, for a baby in the womb to be aborted, and treated as something other than what it is, a human person loved by God. A pregnant, unmarried couple, regardless of age or circumstances, could count on someone in their families to help raise, love and educate their child well into adulthood. This has happened more than once in my own family.

Today, discerning what is morally correct is a difficult challenge for many in the African American community because the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973 “legitimized” abortion as a legal “option.” In addition, poverty, lack of education, and the proximity and empty promises of Planned Parenthood, have helped to drive an epidemic of abortions in the African American community. The voices that would normally alarm the community, in the pulpits of many of our predominantly Black Churches, are now often silenced or muted.

In my own homilies I have often referred to African Americans as an endangered species. Abortion is currently taking a deadly toll on pregnant Black women because abortion facilities, which promote the Culture of Death, seem strategically placed in or near African American neighborhoods to make abortions easily accessible, especially to the poor. Statistics show that abortion has the greatest impact on Black, unwed women who live in an urban environment where there may not be much support from family, friends or social service networks.

THE STATISTICS TELL THE TRUTH

An article posted on the website of The National Black Catholic Congress states that since the *Roe v. Wade* decision, the number one cause of death in the African American community is abortion. We have lost over 13 million lives. To put that in perspective, that is one third of our present Black population. *1,452 Black children are lost each day to abortion!*

TODAY’S CHALLENGE

In my opinion, the abortion challenge in the African American community is deeply interwoven with many other concerns. The Black family constantly strives for social justice in confronting racism, poverty, violence, a lack of education, high unemployment, substance abuse, incarceration, AIDS, teen pregnancy, a lack of affordable housing, and many other needs, especially in urban areas. This endless and seamless garment of social concerns often tends to push the primary moral issue of abortion onto the back burner, when in reality it clearly must be at the heart and center of our discussion on the survival of African American people.

At times I am told by some leaders in the Black community, however, that the residue of racism in America often clouds the reality of abortion’s destruction. Many African Americans view their present situation only through the lens of a struggle for social equality. Some feel that until racism is honestly confronted by all, the Black family will continue to have great challenges in addressing the issues mentioned above, as well as trying to move to a process of healing. But even as we work toward social equality, African Americans are challenged to accept the reality that abortion remains the number one destroyer of the Black family.

Through evangelization, preaching, and solid catechesis, the Catholic Church will need to intensify its efforts to reach the broader African American community, both Catholic and non-Catholic, to help everyone understand how critical this issue is for the survival of African Americans. Stated plainly: With abortion in the Black family, there is no future, only further extinction. Our primary concern has to begin with life in the womb, and respecting the dignity of the human person until natural death.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

First and foremost, the local Ordinary and his diocesan staff need to make the issue of abortion in the African American community a priority. This entails a commitment to allocate funds to conduct workshops to train the laity in Pope John Paul II’s

“theology of the body” and his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, along with the encyclicals of Pope Benedict XVI, all of which promote the Culture of Life. These noble efforts can be greatly assisted by collaborative relationships with the Office of Black Catholics in each diocese, the National Black Catholic Congress, the USCCB Sub-Committee on African American Affairs and the USCCB Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities.

African American Catholic laity should be welcomed by their pastor and staff to be trained in the various life issues and become more involved with the parish pro-life committee. This means that pastors will need to offer opportunities for educational leadership and, perhaps, financial assistance as they support the formation of African American parishioners to become leaders in the pro-life movement. Pastors can support, encourage and empower the laity to learn more about how the abortion crisis is affecting the Black family. Like any other ethnic group, African Americans respond to welcoming invitations to learn about the Culture of Life when they sense that the Church authentically cares about their needs and concerns. In parishes and in personal encounters, this can be done through one-on-one ministry, right where the person is, at any moment. We are called always to invite, embrace, and evangelize in our efforts to build a Culture of Life.

We can begin this evangelization effort by helping African Americans develop a relationship with Jesus Christ, and through good catechesis on all levels, educating families about the dignity of every human person. At the earliest appropriate age in our parish religious education programs, in Catholic schools and community service outreach, we have a grave responsibility to tell the truth about the scourge of abortion on the African American family. At the same time, we have a profound social justice obligation to continue to provide funding and volunteer support for programs that offer assistance to unwed pregnant teens, women and families in the Black community, both Catholic and non-Catholic.

Because the Black family has been affected physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually by racism and social injustices, and is

being damaged even further by the trauma of abortion, there is an urgent need to offer forgiveness and healing to all those involved in an abortion decision.

Even as we mourn the staggering loss of over 13 million lives of African American children in the United States, how much more immense this tragedy would be if we failed to reach out in love to those family members who may not yet have repented of their involvement in abortion and not been reconciled to the Father of Mercies. Christ, who died to redeem all humankind, does not desire that one soul should be lost. How urgent, then, is our task to seek out and invite these wounded souls to reconciliation with Our Lord and healing through the sacrament of Reconciliation and the Project Rachel ministry.

The invitation of Pope John Paul the Great to women who have had an abortion needs to resound in every Catholic church:

I would now like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed.

Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance.

The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord.

With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life.

Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life. (The Gospel of Life, no. 99)

Those touched by abortion and all of us need to “become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.”

In addition to caring for those wounded by abortion through the Church’s Project Rachel ministry, greater emphasis must be placed—at national, diocesan and parish levels—on helping the Christian family through better catechesis on the Sacrament of Marriage, the gift of children, and the resources of Natural Family Planning. As long as American culture persists in viewing sexual activity as recreational, marriage as optional, and children as burdens, it will be very difficult to promote a Culture of Life. In this regard, the Church should also offer programs to help spouses and parents live out their roles in the Christian family.

African American Catholics should fight for abstinence programs in their local schools and institute such programs in the parish as well. They should organize to lobby their local, state and federal governments for assistance in implementing sound abstinence curricula.

Evangelization is truly the key, as it leads to developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and to a deeper understanding of his teachings. This, in turn, promotes a desire to act according to the virtues exemplified by Jesus, taught by our Catholic faith and tradition as found in Scripture and explained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church should be willing and ready to share its resources, information and catechesis with our non-Catholic friends and leaders within the African American ecumenical community. As Catholics, we are to be reminded that what we believe through the teachings of our Church is not only for us as Catholics. It is also beneficial to other Christians and non-Christians alike, because

it is the mandate of the gospel message of Jesus Christ to “go out to all the world and proclaim the Good News.”

In Part IV of *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II reminded us that, although evangelization is the grace and vocation of the Church, it is also the personal responsibility of every Christian. Each of us has a role to play, according to our station in life and the talents God has given us, in supporting the efforts of our brothers and sisters in the African American community who are working to reinforce the traditional African American values of strong Christian families, community, and the dignity of every human life.

At its core, the Gospel of Life “is the proclamation of a living God who is close to us, who calls us to profound communion with himself and awakens in us the certain hope of eternal life. ... It is the proclamation that Jesus has a unique relationship with every person, which enables us to see in every human face the face of Christ” (no. 81). This is the hope, this is the truth that alone can conquer the fear and despair that drive women to seek abortion. Through clear catechesis, expanded pastoral efforts, vigorous engagement in our parishes and in the public square, through love and prayer, we can end the scourge of abortion. The Culture of Death will be defeated in the African American community and throughout our nation when we—as individuals and as Church—proclaim and witness with our lives to God’s love, the sacredness of human life, and the meaning of human sexuality and marriage. Let us embrace this task with the urgency and the enthusiasm it demands!

Bishop Martin D. Holley is an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., chairman of the USCCB Subcommittee on African American Affairs, and a member of the USCCB Committee on Pro-Life Activities.

Resources

Print

Did You Know? 12-page advertising supplement by Human Life Alliance in which leaders of the African American community discuss the tragedy of abortion and its effect on Black families. Available from Human Life Alliance at www.humanlife.org or calling 651-484-1040.

The Question: What is the leading cause of death in the African American community? Brochure. Available from Dayton Black Americans for Life, www.daytonlife.org/products.html.

The Answer. Brochure available from Dayton Black Americans for Life, www.daytonlife.org/products.html.

Poster

“Abortion is the leading cause of death in the African American Community” (11” x 17” bar graph with high impact color). Available from Dayton Right to Life www.daytonlife.org/products.html.

DVDs

“A Doctor Explains the Abortion Procedure” – Dr. Noreen Johnson, an African American Ob-Gyn and former abortionist explains how abortions are performed. Available from American Portrait Films at www.amport.com/store/procedure.html.

“Protecting Black Life” (episode 213 of *Facing Life Head-On* TV program) features interviews with Dr. Alveda King, Rev. Arnold Culbreath and Shannon Nixson discussing the impact of abortion on African American culture. Available online at www.protectingblacklife.org (an outreach of Life Issues Institute) and is available for purchase at www.facinglife.tv.

“Reproductive Racism” (episode 210 of *Facing Life Head-On* TV program) explores Planned Parenthood’s impact on abortion in the African American community. An excerpt of this video can be viewed online at www.protectingblacklife.org and is available for purchase at www.facinglife.tv.

Internet

www.usccb.org/saac (USCCB Secretariat for African American Catholics)

www.blackcatholicsforlife.org (National Black Catholic Apostolate for Life)

www.learninc.org (Life Education and Resource Network, L.E.A.R.N); over 20 pro-life articles geared to the African American community are posted at learninc.org/page/articles.php

www.nationalblackprolifeunion.com (clearinghouse for sharing information among Black pro-life groups)

www.protectingblacklife.org (division of Life Issues Institute)

www.studentsforlife.org/index.php/planned-parenthood-and-racism (links to books and articles about Planned Parenthood’s racist founder and impact on the African American community)