

Homily notes of Bishop Brendan Leahy, Bishop of Limerick

Mass celebrating "Choose Life: We Cherish them Both"

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**It is a continuing call from the Gospel's logic of love, the love that is mutual"
- Bishop Leahy**

Earlier this morning we've heard inspiring testimonies. Now at Mass, we come to pray, to hear God's word and offer God our resolve to do our part in choosing life and cherishing both mothers and babies.

Gathering as an assembly of God's people, we are reminded of a basic reality when we're reflecting on cherishing both mothers and babies, namely, that the spiritual DNA of life is that we journey together. None of us exists for him/herself alone. Indeed, we exist to love one another. From the very first pages of the Bible, in the story of Adam and Eve, we are given this beautifully simple and profound message: everyone has been created as a gift for us, and we are a gift for others. Jesus knew this well and lived it out. In his Farewell address, he summarised his whole life's teaching in the New Commandment: "Love one another, as I have loved you".

The Unique Relationship during Pregnancy of Mother and Child

The unique relationship that comes into play between a mother and a child conceived within her, is a special place where this logic of love, of being a gift for one another comes to the fore. In the Old Testament we read of how God's own relationship with us and ours with God is mirrored in this intimate bond of mother and child.

The child is not an extension of its mother. He or she is another human being. In this new situation, each is the nearest neighbour to the other. So the mother is a gift for her child and he/she is a gift for its mother. We could say it's the unborn child's incapacity to return in visible quantifiable ways the love that is lavished on him or her that is the greatest gift he or she already offers to the world. The unborn child is a pure gift of itself to be loved simply from the very fact of its existence. A friend of mine described for me the sense of wonder at having another human being growing within her, someone who was different than her while also being part of her. "The baby's first detectable move", she said, was "particularly memorable

because this new little creature was drawing us more and more into the miracle that was happening in our lives.” The philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas reminds us that we become ourselves in the light of our responsibility for others. The “other” in the case the unborn child provides the mother (and all of us) with the possibility of responsibility.

The mother is the child’s first home. In the fullness of time, as the Second Reading reminds us, Jesus found his first home in the womb of Mary. It was from there he began his mission of making all of humanity children of God. In the account of the Visitation in today’s Gospel, we are presented with the scene of another unborn child, John the Baptist, leaping in joy in Elizabeth’s womb at the greeting of the as yet unborn child Jesus in Mary’s womb.

Many women here today will attest that pregnancy involves wonder. But it also involves suffering and sacrifice for the mother. In some pregnancies crises arise that involve both the mother and the child in her womb. When hard cases occur, they underline the truth that we are dealing with two persons and that what matters is that in the logic of love, all must be done to protect the life both of the mother whose life is at risk and of the innocent unborn child.

In Ireland, the right to life of the unborn is greatly valued. In recent years attention has been directed towards the complexity of the situations that can arise for mothers in delicate circumstances of pregnancy. Right from the earliest times, the Church has been clear about the duty to protect life. Around 200 AD, Tertullian, for instance, wrote that it is not permitted to destroy “even the foetus in the womb”. But is this duty to the detriment of the mother’s life?

It is important to clarify a point that has been well worked out in Catholic teaching. And this teaching did not come from today or yesterday. It has been around a long time. The medical treatment of mothers whose lives are in danger is permissible even if this results in the unintended death of the child in the womb. When there's a risk to a pregnant woman's life, operations, treatments, and medications that have as their direct purpose the cure of her condition are permitted. Abortion is something very different. It is an act which is directly aimed at ending the life of the unborn child.

When things go wrong in pregnancy and childbirth for whatever reason, there may be no adequate answer at the human level. We remember today those who have been through heart-breaking situations in pregnancy. Let’s remind ourselves at this Mass that God is not a tyrant. If he has given the commandment not to kill, and this applies also to abortion, it is because he will not abandon us even in difficult situations. The God who is Love knows what is best for us. The God who has created us has given us the means to help carry out his commandments. He has put love into our heart and into this love he has poured his own love that comes from above. I would appeal to women who are contemplating abortion at this time to wait for a

moment, ask God for direction; ask others for help. Cura, the Church's crisis pregnancy agency is available to any woman facing a dilemma at this time. The burden shared will not seem anything as heavy as you thought it was at first. I was struck recently by a comment made to me by parents of a severely disabled child – we wouldn't swap him for fifty thousand children. God had come to the aid of those parents. God is always present in situations of crisis and difficulty also in complex pregnancies.

Irish Society Today faced with a Choice and a Possibility

Irish society is today faced with a serious choice. It is very possible that an abortion regime will be introduced into this country, thereby for the first time overturning in law the fundamental principle of the inviolability of innocent human life.

For the sake of the common good, Catholics need to propose their view on this topic. We do so not to impose some obscure teaching of our own but rather to respectfully offer what we consider a reasoned position echoed by many with other religious or indeed non-religious convictions, convictions based on human reason. It is one of the positive and heartening aspects of the past fifty years in the Catholic Church that it finds itself in a new way alongside people of other religious, social and cultural convictions in promoting a more socially just world, a more peaceful world, a more ecologically-conscious world. One of the areas where this brotherly and sisterly co-responsibility is emerging most clearly is in the area of the protection of life.

It is inspiring to see vibrant, articulate women and men able to put forward their case on this fundamental issue in society. In some cases, as I said, those promoting life claim no religious affiliation but say simply that since their days of studying science in school, or simply looking at the evidence provided by ultra-sound scans of early unborn children, they have become convinced of the pro-life perspective. What is emerging increasingly is a modern voice that is pro-life. And today I would like to acknowledge the significant contribution of many young people to the promotion of life. We see them here today in great numbers with us.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Ireland, instead of introducing an abortion regime, became the place where the Western world's confusion about the right to life of the unborn could begin its journey to a renewed discovery of the wonder of life? There have been such strides in ecology in the Western world; wouldn't it be wonderful if Ireland could be the country that led the way in human ecology? What is this human ecology? It is a lifestyle that respects all of our environment, preserving the patrimony of creation and working to make our world safe for human beings. A priority in such a human ecology must be respecting the right to life of the unborn as well as the right of pregnant women to the best of medical treatment and care in safeguarding their life while at the same time preserving the life of the baby as far as practicable.

We have the potential. By the UN-agreed definitions and standards for measuring maternal safety in pregnancy, Ireland consistently ranks among the safest countries in the world for women in pregnancy. While there will always be exceptionally tragic situations in pregnancy, it is possible for the word to go out from our country that abortion is never the solution to problems in pregnancy.

For Ireland to lead the way in this aspect of human ecology, we need both to affirm our conviction that abortion is never the solution while at the same time re-launching Ireland's care of mothers and babies. We can be grateful for the work in this area carried out day by day by doctors, nurses, midwives and other health personnel. If the Church has been to the fore in providing health-care, then today too we want to commit ourselves to a culture of care and best practice in the cherishing of mothers and babies.

Are there women who feel their life is at risk due to suicidal thoughts and feelings? Let's ensure their safety, providing the appropriate psychiatric and psychological intervention, medication, nursing and social support. Professionals warn against acting on the assumption that suicidal thoughts and feelings originate from a single cause or may be resolved by a single act. The majority of Irish psychiatrists have been telling us that abortion is not a medical treatment for suicidal thoughts or feelings in a pregnant woman. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that a leading professor of psychiatry has said that contained in the recent proposed legislation entitled *Protection of Life during Pregnancy Bill 2013* are "multiple flaws and diverse flaws...The first and most obvious is that there is no evidence that abortion is an intervention that reduces suicide." And in their preliminary response to the Bill, the Catholic Bishops of Ireland point out that "the Bill as outlined represents a dramatic and morally unacceptable change to Irish law and is unnecessary to ensure that women receive the life-saving treatment they need during pregnancy". In their response the Bishops also say that at this crucial time it is essential that all who share beliefs such as the inviolability of the right to life of both a mother and her unborn child in all circumstances, and the belief that the deliberate decision to deprive an innocent human being of life is always morally wrong, make their beliefs clear to their legislators. I know that some politicians have already made it clear they have difficulty with this legislation. It is right that legislators would pause before voting. Is it really necessary to provide for abortion in circumstances where evidence overwhelmingly indicates it is unnecessary and unjustified? Are we crossing a Rubicon?

Are there women in pregnancy who need clarity about the range of medical care appropriate to their specific medical condition? Let's ensure that an effective and accessible system of providing information is available to them.

Are there women in pregnancy who seek clarity that if they so wish they can receive medical treatment where their life is at risk even though an appropriate treatment may result unavoidably in the death of the baby? Let's encourage the

appropriate bodies of medical expertise to draw up the guidelines providing for such a procedure.

Are there women who seek assurance that their opinion will be sought and taken into account as far as practicable where treatments would likely unavoidably result in the death of the baby? Let this be included in the provision of specific guidelines for particular medical conditions or combination of conditions that would be drawn up within the medical profession by the relevant bodies of medical expertise.

Yes, all of this needs to be done. But none of these steps involves abortion. The *A, B, and C v Ireland* judgement of the European Court of Human Rights says Ireland is entitled to have laws protecting the right to life of the unborn. In enshrining the principle underlying current best practice in relation to women in pregnancy and their babies, it is clear that the essential medical treatment needed by women in pregnancy to preserve their lives is given to them, even where the death of the baby may unavoidably result, but there is also a duty of care to do whatever is practicable to preserve the life of the baby as far as practicable.

Medical treatment is not the same thing as unlawful abortion. The issue of intention comes in. To intend to directly terminate a pregnancy as an end in itself is different from intending to carry out medical treatment of a woman whose life is in danger even if this results in the unavoidable death of the unborn child. The issue of intention has always been considered important in law. The new legislation acknowledges the importance of intention though it needs to be said that the direct taking of the life of an unborn child cannot be justified on the grounds of intention in the case of a mother's threatened suicide which ought to be treated by other means. As many psychiatrists have pointed out abortion is not a treatment for suicidal ideation. Under current law, no doctor has ever been in trouble for providing an intervention where they were acting with intent to preserve the life of the mother.

Respectfully Proclaiming the Gospel of Life

Here among us today there are women who have had abortions. We know there are women and men here who have assisted their friends as they considered abortion or had one. They are very much in our thoughts right now. During the current debate they are most likely now reliving what happened in the past. Some will tell the story of how, in the light of their experience, they became people who proclaim the Gospel of life. Yet for others the discussions around this topic can be painful. It may be that someone listening to me is still perplexed about what has gone on in her life. She (and also others who have been involved) might still bear the burden in confusion, pain and silence, not seeing any way ahead from where they have been. Let's promise her and them we are with them with our care, prayer and support. At this Mass, we can all of us turn again to Christian faith that tells us that

there is no experience in life that has not been touched in some way by God's presence.

The Spirit has been poured into our hearts enabling us to turn to God as a loving, merciful Father. The First Reading today reminds us of God's tenderness. The inspired words of Scripture invite us to "cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Pet 5:7). We can hand over everything that troubles us to God who, in his infinite mercy and love, can draw good out of everything and make all things new. God loves each person immensely. We are never outside his loving glance. As the psalm tells us so powerfully, God is always with us. Even when we feel cut off from Christ, Jesus is there precisely at that point to help us always start again to believe, to love, to hope. As St. Paul tells: Nothing can come between us and the love of Christ. Nothing: "neither death nor life ... nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:38)

I appreciate there are those listening to me or reading these words who hold very different views, including those who believe the protection of women in pregnancy means the law needs to allow abortion and those who see abortion as a dimension of equality for women. We hear your concern for mothers, your analysis of complex situations, your desire for abortion services in Ireland. Underlying our differences are values that we all share. It is important for us all to dialogue on the basis of these shared values. The first value we have in common is that women in pregnancy should have all the essential medical treatment needed to safeguard their lives, and the second is the respect for equality. We bring to the dialogue a Gospel of Life we believe is fair and reasonable, and safeguards both the lives of women in pregnancy and their unborn children.

We want to respectfully proclaim that message to you. We appeal to you to recognise that abortion legislation concedes a basic principle of law – that innocent human life may not be taken. There is a lesson to be learned from the experience of other countries that started down the path of abortion legislation with what they thought were 'restrictive' laws. Around 97% of the nearly 200,000 abortions in England and Wales in 2011 were on mental health grounds. Such a statistic was in no way envisaged when abortion was first introduced there.

Our sincerely-held conviction and passion for life arises because the stakes are high. What might appear as a limited step, restricted abortion, is far from limited in potential. And not simply in terms of the "floodgate" phenomenon but also in terms of the practice of medicine by the obstetricians and psychiatrists, the nursing and other supporting professional staff in hospitals, social services and other agencies

where questions of the right of conscience not to be involved in the provision of abortion services may arise.

Conclusion

It is time to conclude. In doing so, I need to return to a basic point. The cherishing of mothers and babies is a noble cause. It is not limited to the impact of this or that political move. It is a continuing call from the Gospel's logic of love, the love that is mutual. In the springtime around us these days we see the warmth of the sun transforming nature. Everything is coming to life and beginning to blossom. It is the sun that makes life blossom. Likewise, it is love in the human heart and in society that brings about the triumph of life. From this prayer vigil, may a great current of Christian love spread out from among us into our society as our specific contribution to cherishing mothers and babies. To give true love to one another means to help one another be fully realised in the gift that each of us is for one another.

Here at Knock, let's resolve to be like Mary who, as we read in today's account of the Visitation, took the initiative in going out in love towards a mother and her unborn baby. She did so bearing Love incarnate within her. And Elizabeth greeted her with words we can make our own: "Blessed are you who believe". Yes, blessed are you who believe that life is inviolable, that love casts out all fear, that love is stronger than death.

Amen