HUMAN LIFE IS SACRED

By Bishop Edward J. Burns

In the 19th century there was a law in this land that slavery was legal - it was the law, but it was not right. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a law in this land that women could not vote - it was the law, but it was not right. And now in the 21st century, there's a law in this land that abortion is legal – it is the law, but it is not right. Throughout history there have been groups of people crying out for liberty, justice, and freedom. In this country we need to assure that there is liberty and justice for all. In particular, we should continue to work for a sense of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. As we mark the anniversary of the decision in the landmark case Roe v Wade, which legalized abortion in this country, it is important to safeguard the sacredness of life and the belief that life begins at the moment of conception.

Unfortunately, the argument for keeping abortion legal in this country is the same argument that was used for slavery: that certain people are property and that others have the ability to make a decision over their fate. What was once thought to be the safest place for a child - the mother's womb - is no longer the case. The pro-choice activists would have us believe that women have a right to their bodies. While this may be true, they do not have a right to someone else's body.

When Roe v Wade became a part of our nation's history in January 1973, it removed every legal protection from human beings prior to birth. The effects of Roe v Wade is virtually incalculable. Many lives have been destroyed before birth and even during the very process of being born. Countless women have been traumatized by abortion but now spend years struggling to find peace and healing. Men have grieved because they could not "choose" to protect the child they helped bring into existence. And, a society grows callous by toleration and the acceptance of acts that purposefully destroy human life. It seems as though there has been a "chipping away" of the natural truth and beauty of sexual relations, the importance of marriage in our society and the sacredness of life. The struggles we face in society test the Catholic community as we are called to be leaven in this world, transforming the darkness of our society with the brightness of Christ’s truth and God’s divine plan.

The most comprehensive overview of the church’s teaching in regard to the sanctity of life is found in Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter "The Gospel of Life." This document applies the teaching of the Church to many areas of society and provides strong and powerful motivation to Catholics to proclaim the Gospel of life. Another document, "Living the Gospel of Life,” is a statement adopted by the US Catholic bishops in 1998 and applies this teaching to our particular situation in the United States.

The Declaration of Independence, written more than 200 years ago, speaks for the "laws of nature and of nature's God" before making this historic assertion: "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator
with certain unalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Today we see the tensions increasing between these founding principles and political reality. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in a continuing effort to ignore the right to life of unborn children, as well as in efforts to legalize euthanasia and assisted suicide.

The Bishops of the country have said, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a ‘Gospel of Life.’ It invites all persons to a new life lived abundantly in respect for human dignity. We believe that this gospel is not only a complement to American... principles, but also the cure for the spiritual sickness now infecting our society. We cannot simultaneously commit ourselves to human rights and progress while eliminating or marginalizing the weakest among us. Nor can we practice the Gospel of Life only as a private piety. American Catholics must live it vigorously and publicly, as a matter of national leadership and witness, or we will not live it at all.” (Living the Gospel of Life #20)