

THE PROCLAMATION OF LIFE IN A MISSIONARY PERSPECTIVE

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Honored Guests, Dear Friends of Catholic Voices, thank you for coming here and for inviting me to consider with you how the mystery of human life can be proclaimed in the Church's missionary activity today.

Preaching the Kingdom, the Promise of Life.

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life, for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” (1Jn 1:1-3).

The first letter of John summarizes the whole experience of the revelation of Jesus Christ—the good news that life has been given back to us, through the Incarnation of the Word that is God's life in his Son, Jesus. The whole of life has been definitively transformed, from the first moment

in which it is shared in by the Son, welcomed in God as human and destined for communion with the Father of life. Jesus was born of Woman. Jesus died and rose for us, taking our life into Heaven as a first fruit of all creation, as the “first-born” of many brothers and sisters. And who are His brothers and sisters? They are all those who hear the word of God and put it into practice. And when do they put it into practice? When they proclaim that the Kingdom of God is at hand and do the work of Jesus—which itself is the work of God—for the benefit of all, making them “neighbors,” making up for failings, healing wounds, casting out demons, urging all to open themselves in faith to God's own love, which surpasses any understanding of Him that we have ever had before. The entire New Testament is the heartfelt and grateful story of how God’s life has entered our own. It is meant to lead us to believe in the promise God has made in Jesus—to believe, full of joy, that our life has been joined with the very life of God—beyond sin, beyond evil, beyond death. In Jesus, the life of God is shared and given. This, the meaning of life itself, is revealed in its origin and in its charted course—it is to be shared and given. Creating new life, cherishing it in the womb, nourishing it, keeping it safe, bringing it to maturity, forging its bonds, sharing its wealth, bearing its burdens, trusting it to the Lord—truly this is how to share life, how to give it, as it waits for the seed of the Gospel to make it bear fruit. This faith and these works bring God's blessing to shine on our lives. The message of Christ is, in the

end, simply an invitation to follow the examples of the Gospel. Remember the ending of the parable of the Good Samaritan: “Go and do likewise.” (Lk. 10:25-37). The true friends of Jesus are those who follow His commandments. (Jn 15:14). And what are these commandments? The Gospels report about fifty, but the one Jesus emphasizes, His “new commandment” is “Love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn 13:34) Speaking about God’s works, witnessing to His actions, brings God’s life closer to man. It awakens and sustains faith in all its truth and beauty. The Good Shepherd, the “ideal” Shepherd (See Jn. 10:11) who seeks out the lost whose lives are threatened, this Good Shepherd inspires and strengthens our mission. What is this mission about, if not to reopen for all a life-pathway to Life? Here is how we repeat for ourselves and for everyone else the experience that leads to faith—we hear, see and touch what already we have seen of the Word of Life, what we have heard and meditated on, what we have touched with our hands.

This Christian witness must rediscover the way of the heart. Words and works must recall for us the words and deeds of the Lord. But it is not enough to repeat them, or even to put them into practice—they must express the strength of His own tenderness, the intensity of His passionate love. There must be no misunderstanding on this point. We do not preach a list of health recommendations; we are not feel-good specialists. Neither do we promote a humanism for the “elect” or a fundamentalism for the

“pure.” The Church is not an elite, it is not a sect. We are close to the human condition—we all face it, and it is difficult—but we bring God’s radical closeness to it when we have for it “the same attitude” that we have toward Christ Jesus (Phil 2: 5). Otherwise, Christianity can turn into a philosophical “vain doctrine,” which distracts from the love of God, and yields to a temptation toward “human power” that competes for dominance in the world. If that happens, the Gospel of Jesus is lost, the fire of the Spirit is quenched.

*The icon of the God of life in the One who was crucified
and rose from the dead.*

One of the most famous representations of the Resurrection, well known and greatly admired by the English, was painted by the Tuscan artist Piero della Francesca in 1460, and was judged by Aldous Huxley as “the greatest picture in the world.” The scene is constructed in a geometric fashion, as if the artist wanted to fix an event so absolute that it constitutes a timeless moment, an event in history that is at the same time outside history. It is the paradox of the Resurrection, an event that is fully a part of our history and, at the same time, totally projected beyond our history. It is the mystery itself of the Incarnation of the Son, in which the life of God is completely immersed with ours, so that ours can become completely a part of His. In Piero’s fresco, Jesus is portrayed in a different perspective from the rest of the composition. He appears to be sculpted like a Greek

statue, hieratic but at the same time full of human energy, at the very moment of His resurrection, with His knee extended and His left foot placed firmly on the parapet of His sarcophagus. The shroud that covered him has been transformed into a toga. The garment is rose-tinted, not white like a shroud, but neither stained with the blood of His passion. It is a garment of resurrection, suggesting color restored to a body that is transfigured by the light of a new life. The Lord holds a banner on which a cross appears, now representing victory. The wound in His side is clearly visible—He who is risen is really the One who was crucified. He ransoms our life from death, because He has truly endured the death of our life. Nature, in the background, has not yet recovered from its surprise at this new creation, but in the trees life is beginning to bloom again, and is showing itself in the light that comes up behind the mountains. The figures in front of the tomb—the soldiers who have fallen asleep—know nothing yet about the event that is piercing history and is destined to change it.

Our task—we who have heard the Gospel of the Risen One and who recognize its signs in our flesh and our spirit—is first to keep rousing humanity that is numbed by the burdens of life and resigned to the specter of death, to tell them about what happened while they slept bereft of hope; and then to make it possible for new generations to penetrate the mystery of life that we have shared and that has given us new life.

The Grace of this mystery is not for powerful and perfect individuals. It does not engage in selection of the fittest, it does not abandon children who fail to measure up, it does not sacrifice the elderly when their weakness and ills are no longer profitable. The mystery of God's life does not do the work of death. Rather, it looks after all our ills, so as not to allow them any victory over the despair that they counsel, or any sacrifice of the love that stays faithful to the sacredness of life. In the human condition, whatever is not accepted and loved, but instead is expelled and cursed, remains unransomed—for everyone. The good news of the Gospel, which is the life of Jesus, does not avoid history, does not consider it an accident that, sooner or later, will be repaired. The wounds of Jesus have entered Paradise. This is what Christians have been preaching and proclaiming for two thousand years: history that has been adopted and saved. St. Gregory Nazianzen, "The Theologian," says it well, in the famous motto taken from his Letter to the priest Cledonius: "*Quod non est assumptum non est redemptum.*" (PG 37, 181). This is why the cross and the poor are the places where we see most clearly the presence of God in history—the proclamation of salvation for all. In the way Jesus dies, giving His life out of love, the pagan centurion recognized divine Sonship (*cf.* Mk 14:39); in caring for the neglected bodies of the poor, the believer can perceive the saving presence of Jesus and be sure of hearing His merciful

word of welcome at the end of time (*cf.* Mt. 25). *The challenges and provocations of the present age.*

Our civilization is strongly tempted by how easily it has become possible to describe as a “curse” the painful parts of life that need significant dedication and love to be redeemed from despair. Almost stealthily, we are being forced to denigrate and eliminate these moments. Arguments are concocted to “persuade,” often “intimidate,” us to weaken our willingness to share in the weakness of life.

Being faithful to love “for better or for worse” is a formulation that characterizes the alliance between man and woman in Holy Matrimony. But it can also be said that it was—or rather, is—also the symbolic summation of the covenant for life that identifies relationships as human. What humanity in relationships, we ask, what social bonds, what form of truly human community can survive if we begin to accept that love and friendship can be relieved of their commitment to be faithful “for better or for worse”? Or if we think, more or less explicitly, that we are entitled to “get rid of” what annoys us? Unfortunately, with support from a perverted ideology of the genetic, functional, or even esthetic, optimization of human life, we have the means that can be used to “take care of” (in reality by totally eliminating) lives deemed *a priori* not worth living. Life that is not worth living is thus starting to be judged only according to the humaneness with which death results. The reaction to this situation must nevertheless

not lead to a search for omnipotence in the other direction. A wise understanding of our mortality and our love for the spiritual dignity of every person leads us to protect— from conception till the last farewell—every vulnerable and hurting life from now-pervasive biological manipulation and technological bullying. We must protect with all our might the humanity of birth, life, and even death. We must not yield to obsession with the myth of endless biological survival that today gives rise to powerful superstitions, to which technology seems often to lend support. There is, in fact, profit-motivated speculation flowing from the desire for a failure-proof organic life that offers to eliminate every human vulnerability, and even to produce human, or post-human, life that is biologically renewable and endlessly reprogrammable. This prospect is of course unrealistic and unsupportable scientifically, but the ideology on which it is based has not failed to produce, even now, its harmful effects. In fact, it distances us from our appropriate concern for the ultimate meaning of our hope for a life consistent with the unique spiritual element of our nature, and it leads us to focus us rather on the indeterminate consumption of energy necessary for simple biological survival, with effects on future generations that can already be seen.

The Magisterium of the Church has expressed itself very clearly about the need for ethical and transcendent—not naturalistic or technical—discernment of the personal quality of human life, calling for

acceptance, integration, care and accompaniment on our journey of initiation into the life of communion with God, in all the stages of life, in all forms of relationships, in all the adventures of knowledge, in all the transformations of our common home. *Everything is oriented toward care for life, which is given as a gift, without any division, to the individual and to the human community.* That indifference to the life of the individual and of the community that doesn't care about the spread of abortion and of eugenic selection is the same indifference that doesn't care about the death of children who suffer hunger, persecution and rejection. You, as Friends of Catholic Voices, have no choice: you must express yourselves firmly, with dignity, and give active witness in opposition to merely statistically based choices that determine which lives are worth living.

The task of Christians in the world today.

A proclamation of life that wants to be truly missionary, and able to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom, cannot be other than the proclamation of a real life, loved and saved. We do not propose ideas, not even ideas that are beautiful and perfect. We tell a story, that of Jesus and that of every person whose life he touched and loved. Even if telling this story is difficult, complex, complicated, unclear, uncertain. Christians today, as they proclaim the mystery of life, are called on to preserve its complexity. Too many people today, whether for convenience or to increase their own power, or because of superficiality, or to patronize those

judged unsophisticated, present simplifications or summations that do not respect human life in all its complexity. I believe that in respecting the complexity of life we can effectively regain our understanding of certain themes that characterize Western debate about human life today. The meaning of the “mystery” of life, drawn from the “mystery” of the incarnate, dead and risen Son, must also become part of the patient tenacity we must show as we face the enigma—both fascinating and demanding—of human life. Life will not allow itself to be simplified with slogans and formulas. Unawareness of life’s complexity, whether deliberate or innocent, opens the door to a throw-away culture that eliminates those who don’t fit into a predetermined mold. We must guard the complexity of human life from every naive theory of naturalistic reductionism. Physics, chemistry, biology, are certainly relevant to the reality of the life in which we live and have our being, but they are not the “nature” that defines the unappealable normative criterion of what we must be or do as human beings who share a “human” nature. “Nature”, by itself, is incapable of explaining the amazing spiritual experience—freedom, intelligence, will, love, creativity, meaning—that marks the unrepeatable and everlasting history of every person. The complexity of human life determines the human meaning of the individual components of our existence. Real life cannot be reduced to a putting together of those more simple elements of life itself on the theory that it is they that make possible uniquely human

activity. Those elements, as such, do not give rise to anything, and they explain nothing about the life we are living. While they are necessary for human life, they do not explain it, other than to show that life is dependent on differences.

We must safeguard the complexity of life in the face of societal uniformity that eliminates our concrete physicality and recognizes only personal relationships and societal ties (for example, the extreme forms of gender theory proposed by one exponent, Judith Butler). It is bizarre that the second half of the twentieth century, which was strongly characterized by the rediscovery of the body and sexual liberation, produced a world in which the body has been abolished! In fact, today's tendency to conceive of human life—and the person—as an assembly or re-assembly of sensory devices, separated from meaning and corresponding only to a completely irrelevant mental construct, curiously repeats the Platonic myth of a world where life and the body have no value of their own. Now, ideas are what have value. We risk reducing ontology to ideology, reality to ideas. We are told that only then will we have the perfect world we desire. It may not be wrong to critique the totalitarian ideology of metaphysics, but in doing so are we being handed over to the totalitarian ideology of science? The danger of this retreat to ideas is clearly set out by Pope Francis in his reflections on the Christian message in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. “*There also exists a constant tension between ideas and realities.*

Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There must be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities. It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric. ...realities are greater than ideas. This calls for rejecting the various means of masking reality: angelic forms of purity, dictatorships of relativism, empty rhetoric, objectives more ideal than real, brands of ahistorical fundamentalism, ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom.... reality is greater than ideas. This principle has to do with incarnation of the Word and its being put into practice...The principle of reality, of a Word already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew, is essential to evangelization.” (Evangelii Gaudium 231-233).

Passionate proclamation and not mere apologia.

The rejection of child-bearing that characterizes our societies today constitutes a blanket rejection of what is human. To reject creating new life, to behave like “god” in history, means depriving oneself of the future, resigning oneself to what of the past that has already been seen, denying oneself a vision of hope, closing oneself off to a mercy that does not depend on us and that appears as Grace. Generation replicates in us the Grace that generates - and regenerates in us – the humanity of God. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, wrote a magnificent nativity play, *Bariona*, in 1940 while he was imprisoned in the concentration camp of

Trier. Sartre imagined a Jewish village near Bethlehem oppressed by the Romans, where the inhabitants decide not to have any more children, so as to not condemn them to a future of unavoidable slavery. The hardening of hearts and selfishness generated by this choice becomes suffocating, until, in the face of opposition from community leaders, a child is born, and Bariona is forced to admit that: “In this stable a morning begins. To this stable, day has come. But outside it’s still night. Night in the street and in our hearts. A starless night, deep and stormy like the high seas. You see how I’m tossed about like a barrel in the waves, but the stable is inside me, luminous and deep. Like Noah’s Ark it sails through the night, sheltering within itself the morning of the world, the world’s dawn.” This vision is basically what the Council Fathers asked for more than fifty years ago in the Apostolic Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* that begins with these words: “*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.*” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1)

For this reason, we inaugurated, just a few days ago, at the John Paul II Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences, of which I am Grand Chancellor, the “Gaudium et Spes” Chair, which will study the true spirit of this document and its relationship to crucial marriage and family questions.

Approaching the conclusion of my presentation, I must thank the organizers of this evening’s event for their wise and timely choice of its title, which speaks of the “Proclamation” of life rather than the more customary “Defense.” Today, the Church cannot and should not limit itself to the simple defense of values and principles, however correct and appropriate that may be. We are called to proclaim, that is, to shout out—loud and clear—the mystery of life, which is how God dwells in history—to help every woman and every man who lives on this planet recognize the presence of the Spirit, who is Lord and who—proclaim it!—gives life. The transition from defense to proclamation implies a significant change of approach for the community of believers. First of all, as Pope Francis often says, speaking of the “outreach Church,” we must be out and about, not shut up inside, to live in the lives of men and women, and not think that the sacristy is the best place to proclaim the Gospel. We must bring Christianity back to the important currents of life, heedless of calls for caution. A wise and fruitful reexamination of the questions that are decisive for humanity necessarily needs everyone’s help. For example,

Pope Francis decided to appoint as Members of the Academy for Life not only Catholics but also Orthodox, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Taoists, even non-believers. If we welcome differences only for their problematic and divisive aspects, without welcoming the richness they offer, we relegate ourselves to a kind of sterility. Only difference—beginning with the difference between man and woman—is fruitful and generative. Let me close with a challenge. I believe that the proclamation of life and its beauty is one of the areas where it is still possible to speak about God in today's world, a world that, because it no longer needs to refer to Him when explaining many phenomena, has forced Him to the margins of history. One person who reflected deeply on this subject was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great pastor of the German Confessing Church, who was executed in Flossenbürg concentration camp, accused of association with a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Here is a quote from his *Letters and Papers from Prison*: “God is not a stopgap. We must recognize God not only where we reach the limits of our possibilities. God wants to be recognized in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. God is the center of life and he doesn't just “turn up” when we have unresolved questions. From the center of life certain questions are seen to be wholly irrelevant, and so are the answers commonly given to them—I am thinking for example of the

judgment pronounced on the friends of Job. In Christ there are no Christian problems...Jesus claims for himself and for the Kingdom of God the whole of human life in all its manifestations. Jesus does not call to a new religion, but to life.”

The proclamation of life is thus revealed as an ecclesial exercise of mercy and not of condemnation for our lives. It reaches the center of life—of every life—as a promise of life that overturns every death sentence imposed by the courts of history. The world’s law frees no criminals and often condemns the innocent. The proclamation of Grace, which announces the justice of God's love, frees us from despair and gives us new life. It is for life that we are committed to give witness, in all our thoughts and actions, leaving nothing out. And the God of life travels with us on our journey. Thank you.