

Pastoral Letter for the Sunday for Life - 17th December 2017

Dear sisters and brothers in the Catholic Diocese of Stockholm,

"Among you stands one whom you do not know" (John 1:26). Most people do not know Jesus. Even those of us who call ourselves Christians do not know him sufficiently well and we do not follow him as much as we should. What gives meaning to our whole life, which we have received as a gift from him, is to get to know him and love him better. He is always there in our midst. He is always close to each one of us, indeed closer to us than we are to ourselves. Life is a journey of discovery in order to get to know Jesus, a pilgrimage we make together with him and towards him. Everything in our lives has to do with him. He has something to tell us about everything we meet and experience. He is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

Jesus is our true life. He is the brother, the saviour and the friend of every human being. Every man and woman has already been created in the image of God. In Jesus they will then discover that full reality that we call redemption and that opens for us the way to eternal life. For that reason every human being is invaluable, inviolable and irreplaceable in the eyes of Jesus. Every person has the right to his own life, from the first moment in the mother's womb until the final breath he takes. No one has the right to deny anyone else the grace and gift of life. Unfortunately the unborn child has a very weak position in our society and its system of justice. Therefore we have the holy duty and responsibility of giving a voice to those who have no voice, the silent and invisible people that we neither see nor hear. Human life has a God-given protection value in itself, regardless of its stage of existence. *Among you stands one whom you do not know - and often do not want to know about.* But God sees them, loves them, and wants them to be born and to exist.

This is part of the good news of the gospel, that every human being from its first moment to its last has an eternal, inviolable value. No person should have his dignity violated or be deprived of existence. For that reason abortion and euthanasia can never be justified or defended, as long as one does not want to deny human dignity as such. Throughout the whole of their lives men and women - whoever they are - have the right to be protected from all forms of violation and discrimination. Web hate, bullying and sexual abuse and harassment seem to increase more and more. Each one of us has the duty of counteracting and preventing such behaviour right there in the place where we live and operate.

To our sorrow and horror we have seen that girls and women of all ages and different social backgrounds are being molested in schools and in the workplace. Unfortunately there are many men who in the coarsest way take advantage of their position of power. Great sectors of our social environment have been sexualised to such an extent that people have ceased to react when women have been sexually harassed and their integrity has been subjected to abuse. It is really about time that we react in a forceful way and take effective measures to prevent all of this.

It is tragic to see that xenophobia (*hatred of strangers*) is becoming more and more widespread. We continually need to draw attention to the holy tradition of the Bible and the Church, which obliges us to do all we can to help those who come to us. We must at all costs ensure that we do not exclude any individual or group of people from our love or care. As disciples of Jesus we should see him in our neighbour. Jesus meets us in every person he sends along our way.

Faced with this sombre background we need the testimony and the proclamation of the gospel more than ever. As Catholic Christians in Sweden today we are all called to bear witness to the liberating force of the gospel precisely for those whose human dignity is violated, wounded and trampled underfoot. Only Jesus can heal those who have been hurt so deeply. Only he can forgive those who repent and want to begin a new life. "Among you stands one whom you do not know" (John 1:26). Jesus is always with us, both the good and the wicked, both victims and perpetrators. Only he can heal and transform, reconcile and forgive. In his mercy God gives all of us an opportunity to convert to a new and better life by following Jesus.

Paul gives us a recipe with three important ingredients for how we are to lead our new lives according to the gospel. "Be happy at all times; pray constantly; and for all things give thanks to God" (1 Thess 5:16-18). The happiness that derives from belonging to Jesus is a permanent reality, which drives away the powers of sin and frees us from the iron grip of sadness. Prayer, the continual dialogue and relationship with Jesus, makes us share in his love and gives us an effective antidote to all hatred. Thankfulness dispels bitterness and disappointment, indeed everything that can make life heavy and burdensome. We all have a profound need of these three ingredients - happiness, prayer and thankfulness - especially those of us who have been insulted, bullied and harassed. It is precisely those people who are closest to the heart of Jesus. *Among them stands one whom they do not know, but he knows them.* He is the one who has given them their life here on earth with its inviolable dignity and he wishes to give them a share in his own eternal life.

Let us today on the Sunday for Life, and indeed every day that God in his providence gives us, thank him for the holy gift of life. We pray for all those who are denied the right to be born to live. We pray for those who are offended in their human dignity and for all those who do not see the deep meaning of their lives. May the Lord of life shine forth in all his glory and love, so that all people may live their lives in his joy and peace, here on the earth that he has created and entrusted to us and to our care, and finally in his eternal kingdom where we hope to be able to see him as he is, face to face.

Stockholm, 19.11.2017, World Day for the Poor

Cardinal Anders Arborelius OCD