

Pastoral letter for the Sunday of Life 2023

Dear brothers and sisters of the Catholic Diocese of Stockholm!

Advent is a time of longing and waiting. We look forward to the coming of Jesus, who is the Lord of life, indeed, the very "Way, the Truth and the Life" for us who believe in him. John the Baptist prepares the way for him, so that his truth will light up our way through life. Advent is a time for a deeper conversion to Jesus. We also need the Virgin Mary's help to come closer to Jesus and follow him with greater devotion. When we today celebrate the Sunday of Life, we do so that we might have more gratitude for the gift of life and more reverence for the sanctity of life. Mary can help us in this so that our conversion to life itself, which is God's great gift, becomes more concrete. We can never thank God - and our parents - enough for the gift of life.

In the Church of Abbey of the Sacred Heart, a statue of the pregnant Virgin Mary bears witness to her wonder at the great grace she has received: to give birth to the only begotten Son of the Father. During Advent, we can join Mary in her joy and hope at the coming of Jesus into our world. She carries the foetus that will become the Saviour of the world. She wants to protect each foetus so that it will be received with love and be born into our world. Together with Mary, we pray that her Son will have mercy on each foetus and give its mother the courage to let this child see the light of day. We pray for all mothers-to-be: that they may share the Virgin Mary's joy and wonder at the new life budding within them. We pray for those mothers who are in difficulty and need the help of their fellow human beings in order to give birth to their child. We all have an obligation to help these mothers. As Catholic Christians, we believe that the right to life applies to everyone from the first tender moment in the mother's womb. Therefore, we must do everything we can to help those women who are in difficulty, so that the child they are carrying can be welcomed into life.

In Uppsala Cathedral, just outside the choir that was dedicated to her in the Middle Ages, there is a contemporary depiction of Mary. Here we see a seemingly ordinary woman looking around anxiously. This is what Mary might have looked like when she couldn't find her 12-year-old son in the Temple of Jerusalem. A modern mother often feels anxious when her child starts to grow up and faces a harsh reality. Often the child's basic security is eroded. Early in life, the child is confronted with violence, with pornography, or bullying. Every child has the right to remain a child and to be bathed in love and care. We ask for the Virgin Mary's intercession for all children growing up, not least, in what we usually refer to as the "vulnerable neighbourhoods" of our country. We hear with horror of shooting incidents between children. Children in our parishes are also affected. We must work more consciously to give the children growing up in our society enough time to remain children. As Catholic Christians who believe in the inviolable sanctity of life, we must do more to help those parents who have difficulties in providing a loving and safe environment for their children. We also believe in God's mercy and forgiveness for the children guilty of murder and rape. We must never consider anyone to be a hopeless case. Jesus is the Saviour of all. Everyone must have an opportunity to receive his grace, forgiveness and mercy. We must all be converted to a deeper love for Jesus, who came to heal the sick and transform sinners into saints. Our reverence for the gift of life obliges us to reach out to those who have taken another person's life. God's mercy knows no bounds. Fortunately, He is also the only one who has the right to judge any of us. It can be terrible to be judged by people. Every human being is created in the image of God and must be respected. One of the most beautiful medieval images of the Virgin Mary is the Madonna of Öja on the island of Gotland. Here we see the grieving Mother of God, her heart pierced by a sword as she stands at the cross of her Son. Countless people who are suffering and grieving can identify with the mother watching her child bleed to death. How many mothers mourn their children killed in wars and conflicts across our world. We suffer with them. We pray for them. In the suffering

Virgin Mary, God's compassion for suffering humanity takes on a human face. In the crucified Jesus, the Father himself comes to meet us, to transform our selfishness and sin into compassion and care for every suffering human being. In passing from this life, we all need to experience the special love and care of both God and our fellow human beings. St Francis speaks of death as Sister Death, who tenderly wants to bring us to the other side. St Joseph is the patron saint of the dying. The dying have the right to receive all the care and pain relief they need. They all need to experience human closeness and care and, not least, spiritual help for their final journey. When any of this is missing - and unfortunately it is quite often in our time - voices are immediately raised demanding that life be simply extinguished. As Catholic Christians, we believe that every person has the right to natural death, but then we must work more actively to make it as good as possible for the dying. In our time, we see that loneliness has become a social problem. This is most evident at the time of death when many people are completely alone. Together with all people of good will, we can work together to give people as good and gentle a death as possible. We pray with the Virgin Mary, who saw her own Son die, that all those who are dying will receive God's grace and help to die with dignity at the end of a good life. During Advent, we need both St John the Baptist who calls us to repentance and the Virgin Mary who helps us to surrender to Jesus Christ. The Sunday of Life reminds us of the priceless gift of life, the life that begins here in time and is meant to last forever in God's glory. So important is our little life to God.

With my prayers and blessings, +Anders Arborelius ocd