

Bishop Jaime Soto  
Homily for Mass on the Observance of the Anniversary of Roe v. Wade  
Jan. 22, 2009

*A day of penance for violations of the dignity of the human person and prayer for the full restoration of the right to life*

During the past few weeks the liturgy has presented for our meditation excerpts from the Letter to the Hebrews. In today's first reading, the text speaks to us of the priesthood of Jesus. He is the high priest of the New Covenant. The role of the priest was to be mediator and to offer the rites of sacrifice to God. The author of Hebrews speaks of the eternal nature of the priesthood of Jesus. He offered himself once for all, once for all of us, once for all time. This is because He who offered Himself for our sake now sits in the sanctuary of heaven where he continues to intercede for us. His sacrificial love endures forever. The priesthood of Jesus is not only eternal. It is also personal. Jesus the priest offers Himself for each of us. He also called each of us personally to enter the same sanctuary through his sacrificial priesthood. By our baptism we are immersed into His priestly ministry and have become a priestly people.

Yesterday we honored the holy memory of the martyr St. Agnes. She and all the martyrs are a reminder to us of the dignity of our priestly calling and of the personal character by which we share in the saving sacrifice of Jesus. Be mindful of the intimate connection between our Christian discipleship and martyrdom. To be a martyr is to be a witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Like Jesus, together with St. Agnes and all the martyrs we live for others so that others might live in Christ. With Jesus, we offer ourselves so that we might be redeemed from our sins and the sins of the world. In Jesus, our humble, impoverished efforts take on a sacramental quality, not because of our own merits but because "Jesus is always able to save those who approach God through him."

Martyrdom is also the truest testimony to Christian freedom. Because we live in the freedom that Christ won for us, we are free to give ourselves in love. We are free to live the truth in love. The disciple of Jesus is baptized into the priesthood of Jesus and becomes a member of the priestly people who share in the one sacrifice of Christ. This does not mean that we must die a martyr's death. It does mean we all must live with a martyr's desire to love the truth and serve the truth with one's own life. The root meaning of the word "martyr" is witness. By our share in the servant priesthood of Jesus we are called to be witnesses to his gospel truth of life and love.

As the first reading told us today, Jesus “has obtained so much more excellent a ministry as he is mediator of a better covenant.” We can speak of a “better” covenant because of the purity and generosity of His sacrifice on the cross. He who sacrificed himself for our sake on the cross also continues to live to make intercession for us and to make intercession through us by our sharing in his redeeming work.

This is important for us to reflect on during our observance of this sad anniversary of the Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized the sin of abortion in America. It has burdened our society with sin. It continues to extinguish the innocent lives of the unborn as well as scar the lives of countless women.

We share the exuberance of a nation that has once again overcome much polarizing animosity and division to successfully inaugurate the first African-American president. In a world where the peaceful transition of government is a rarity and where racism still haunts many societies, including our own, this is a milestone that should be savored by all. It is a testimony to this society’s ability to turn away from the errors of the past and craft a future of new, hopeful possibilities.

But our exuberance should not blind us to the arduous task of restoring America’s allegiance to liberty and justice for all. True liberty for all is only found in respecting and protecting life for the most vulnerable among us, particularly the unborn. We cannot deny them their liberty to live. Justice for all is never achieved when choosing one’s life against another but only when we choose to live for one another, with particular regard for those who are weak and vulnerable. True liberty and justice are part of that better Covenant forged in the crucible of the cross. We are being forged as witnesses of that new covenant when we continue to live the truth and love the truth that was poured forth from the wounded side of Christ.

This new administration has begun its work with a resounding message of hope for a weary and worried nation. But this message of hope is betrayed by a blind adherence to the politics of fear and desperation that perpetuate the plague of abortion. There is nothing hopeful in that. No noble notion of freedom could tolerate a choice motivated by fear. No reasonable sense of the right of one to choose could dignify the disregard of another’s right to live.

We must continue to stand with Christ, the High Priest. This puts us as witnesses at the foot of his cross. The disciple’s place is found watching and praying in front of

abortion centers. Our Christian witness should place us at pro-life centers or at maternity homes where desperate women seek out a hand of comfort and a word of guidance. We can stand with Christ at the doors of legislators. We will also find the cross standing with all those whose dignity is often denied, demeaned, or forgotten: the homeless, the incarcerated, the immigrant. Our continued efforts to share in the sacrifice of Christ may seem to us and to others as muted or minimal but then we would have forgotten that “Jesus is always able to save those who approach God through him.” He saves us. By our sharing in this sacrificial, servant priesthood he will continue to save others. For that reason, we come now to this altar and we approach with confidence the God of our gladness and joy.