

**NOTE:**

[This is a longer text of my remarks for the 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary time concerning the November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006 elections, written in the format or style of a homily. This is also the full-text version that appears in the parish bulletin for that weekend. The homily delivered during Mass is significantly shorter than this given the time constraints, though the essential points remain the same. The pulpit announcements for the weekend Masses also communicated this information. If a Sunday homily could go 30 minutes, this is what I would have said.]

*Fr. Nathan Reesman, Election Homily, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006, St. Mary's Visitation Parish*

As I'm sure most of you already know based on the nauseating abundance of political ads on TV, the radio, the newspapers, etc, we find ourselves nearing the end of a campaign season in Wisconsin. Thus far, it has proven to be just as ugly as elections tend to be, and the temptation to resort to outright, disgusted apathy is a great one indeed.

But, this is an important year in Wisconsin electoral politics- important issues and decisions are at stake this Tuesday. And rather than being apathetic about the democratic process as it currently exists in this country, we, as Catholics, should be terribly interested in what is on the ballot right now.

For a couple of reasons, I feel compelled to speak to some of the issues involved in this campaign directly, and to be more blunt than I often am. For one, I've worked in Madison, in Washington, I've survived college at UW Madison, and I've learned over those years and experiences that most of the rhetoric in elections and campaigns is quite simply a distortion of reality. Some of it is simply false, which makes it very hard to try and keep the issues straight or to make good voting decisions. Secondly, in recent weeks, as if the politicians hadn't made things bad enough, even certain local leaders in the Church of Milwaukee have created the impression that Catholics should somehow be conflicted or torn or divided about certain issues in this current campaign, even though the Bishops in Wisconsin have unequivocally stated otherwise.

So, consider this an attempt to offer some clarity on my part, at the risk of violating tax exemption laws, and at the risk of disagreeing with several of you here. Politicians never want to offend or disrupt or be politically incorrect. But, we are not politicians, and neither was our Lord. Sometimes the Gospel does offend; sometimes our Lord did offend. Sometimes we offend.

In the Gospel for this Sunday we hear that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and that we are to love our neighbors as much as we love our very selves. It is a great Gospel message, and an extraordinarily challenging, and even an offensive one. What it does is link together the virtue of love with the gift of truth and reason- our hearts to our heads. And it links the love of God inseparably with love of neighbor. To be a Christian is to love, and we cannot be loving unless our love is reasonable and truthful and fundamentally concerned about our neighbor. That's a very tough calling.

In the campaign this fall, we are dealing with authentic love misunderstood in lots of instances. I'd like to raise three areas for consideration by way of illustration. They also happen to be the same areas or issues that the parish has been focusing on all through October in bulletin articles, with on-line postings on our parish website, presentations, and homilies. And they are all issues on which the Catholic Church, either locally or universally, has taken a position. And we have done so because the demands of love, truth, and reason- the demands of the Gospel, have required us to do so.

Now the Church does not tell people how to vote, but what she does do is attempt to explain in the best of terms, how our baptismal call to authentic love, truth, and reason should lead us to view various issues that arise in the world. And those views of ours compel us to vote in particular ways. On some issues, it is quite possible for people of love, truth, and reason- for people who love God with all of their hearts and minds and love their neighbors, to

disagree. There are often all sorts of ways to solve complex problems- and the Church understands that, and our voting patterns often reflect that.

But on some issues some clarity is in order. For example, and I won't spend a lot of time on this because I preached about it a month or so ago, there is the issue of embryonic stem cell research. This issue has taken a prominent place in the campaign to choose the next governor of the State of Wisconsin. We have been told by some political ads that if we do not allow unbridled research on embryonic stem cells, that we are depriving suffering people of needed cures. As if to suggest that your vote, or my vote, in favor of a candidate who has opposed embryonic stem cell research is somehow lacking in love of neighbor, and is irrational.

The fact is, no one has ever been cured by any use of embryonic stem cells (as opposed to the use of adult stem cells). And even if anyone had been cured, it would not be cause for rejoicing because their cure comes at the price of someone else's life. We do not manufacture people, we do not use them for spare parts. We do not destroy embryos to "save" people. In Germany in World War II, people were used for experimentation and spare parts in some perverse attempt to create a perfect race of human beings, free of every impurity, impediment, and imperfection, and they did it by destroying the weakest in their midst, and they did it against their will. I see very little difference between that situation and this current one.

I'm all in favor of curing diseases, and so is the Church, and so are reasonable people. But reasonable people also understand that everyone of us here was, at one point, a collection of stem cells. Our Lord Jesus Christ was, at one point in the womb of the Mother of God, a collection of stem cells. And if they had done to us, or to our Lord, as stem cells, what they are doing or proposing to do in a UW Madison laboratory, then we would not have survived. Everyone of us here is a survivor, having made it out alive of what has become the most deadly place to be in this country- the womb. I am very tired of having that kind of reality labeled as progress, and I am tired of being told that I don't care about sick people because I refuse to let them be cured by using means that destroy someone else.

So, as reasonable people, not just as Catholics, we explain that such means to find cures are not permitted, and by doing so, we encourage scientists to come up with other ways to find cures that do not destroy life. And I am confident that they will find them, but only if we explain that certain boundaries cannot be crossed. Therefore, it would be very unfortunate if any reasonable person, supported any political candidate that endorsed practices that threaten life.

Now, many of you are I'm sure quick to note that even if one candidate or another is in favor of protecting life in the womb, often times that same candidate is in favor of other policies that violate human dignity on other levels and in other areas. And I agree. That sad dilemma is that there is no party or candidate in Wisconsin or in this country, that falls totally within the realm of authentic love, truth, and reason. So, as such, we often find ourselves weighing which issues are more negotiable than others. Let me return to that in a moment because it's an important objection. But I will say this: everyone deserves a chance to be born- that is one issue that is non-negotiable. Most of the rest of our policy debates are up for grabs.

While it may be true that *candidates and parties* do not neatly fit into the categories of authentic love, truth, and reason, sometimes certain issues come a lot closer to a good fit. And in Wisconsin this year we have the chance to weigh-in as voters on two of them. They are other items on the ballot- referendum-type items. And the Bishops of Wisconsin have taken positions on both of them.

One item is an advisory referendum on the use of the death penalty in Wisconsin. Currently, we do not have the death penalty in Wisconsin, and it has been proposed that we employ this practice as a punishment in instances of certain types of crime with convincing evidence or proof of who committed the crime.

So we ask ourselves the question: is it in accord with love, truth, and reason to use the death penalty as a way to deal with the unfortunate reality of crime? The answer from the Catholic Church is actually "yes" it is. In some parts of the world, in some eras in history, the death penalty made perfect sense. It was the only way, in some instances, that a culture had to protect its innocent from violent offenders who could not be dealt with in any other way to ensure the safety of the weakest and the vulnerable. And so the Church has said, and continues to say, that

if there is no other way to keep violent criminals from harming the innocent, then a state may use the death penalty as a last resort.

This situation does not exist in Wisconsin. We have a judicial system and we have a prison system and we have the means to keep violent criminals in jail for all of their life without having to kill them to protect anyone. On top of that, we also have a very violent society, a bloody society, and a society that does not know the difference between vengeance and justice. We have a society in which there is a lot of killing already, including that of the unborn.

For that reason, the Bishops of Wisconsin have taken the position of truth, love, and reason, which is that the death penalty is not needed here in this State to deter crime or to protect the innocent from harm. And if we are interested in building a culture of life, then allowing the death penalty here would only be a dramatic step backwards. Rather than forcing victims' families to confront the needed realities of reconciliation and forgiveness, the death penalty instead allows them to hang-on for the moment of revenge when they watch someone who killed their loved one be killed instead. That is not justice- it is vengeance. And vengeance is an attitude that actually kills the living, the survivors, with a slow and painful death.

The second ballot item of profound importance is the marriage amendment. Voters are being asked to amend the Wisconsin constitution so that the term of "marriage" is always protected in legal and legislative use in such a way that it can only apply to the union of a man and a woman. And it goes on to say, in its second clause, that we also will not be allowed to invent any other clever terminology that will create some marriage equivalent between two men and two women so that they can think of their union as a marriage even if we don't really use that word to describe it.

I am going to say a couple of things about this. The first involves what the appropriate response is to this amendment, and the second is a word about how we as Christians are to blame for the fact that this is even an issue in the first place. I ask that you consider my response in its entirety before judging it.

Everyone has a right to love and to be loved. And there exists from God a right under normal circumstances, to enter into married union. But there is no right, no right at all, to make up a new definition of marriage. Only God, who created us, can decide what marriage is or is not, and he has spoken about it in Scripture, both in the New Testament and in the Old. He has given the authority to his Church on earth to rule on matters relating to marriage, and he has given everyone of us the ability to reason and to discover his design for creation. He decides what marriage is, and he has decided at the beginning of time that only a man and a woman can be married. Any other variation on that is physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and socially impossible no matter how much you try and dress it up. And to call something other than marriage a marriage is to grant it a status that it does not deserve because it suggests that it is somehow a legitimate expression of God's creative plan. It also suggests it is an acceptable way to live in this society, when, in fact, it raises a whole host of problems that we have only barely begun to explore. So, only God, who knows what he is doing, can decide what marriage is, and we deviate from that at our peril.

Unfortunately, we live in a country where some judges and some lawyers think, and there really is no other way to say this, that they are gods. And they are redefining marriage, over the heads of legislators because they somehow think that to confine marriage to men and women only is discriminatory. That is false. And the Bishops of Wisconsin have concluded that in order to ensure that judges in this state do not have the freedom to play god, as they have in several other states, an amendment is necessary that explains what marriage is.

True, there are lots of other situations and issues in the world today that undermine authentic married love and endanger family life. And when there is legislation proposed that works to protect family life in any way or form, the Bishops will support it. And this is one instance.

For the record, it should be stated that this amendment in no way denies benefits or care to anyone in so called same-sex unions that may currently exist. Nothing in the way that it is written takes away anyone's current right to basic human needs. And the bishops are well aware of that.

To the objection that has been raised by some that a Catholic should not support this because it denies health care benefits, I reply that that's also false. And I would also add that, one, the only danger to benefits comes from lawyers and judges using this amendment as a way to bend and interpret future or existing laws in such a way that it *might* endanger benefits. And they are the reason, activists judges, that we have this amendment in the first place.

And secondly, it is an absolute injustice that in this country we tie medical benefits to job or to marital status. They should be available to anyone in any circumstance regardless of who they are. And to argue that voting against this amendment is necessary to protect basic benefits and rights is to maintain the unjust system of apportioning medical benefits that we currently have. I spoke to one bishop about this very point, and he said that we vote to protect the family, and we also work to sponsor laws that extend health coverage to everyone, regardless of station in life, or status, or marriage. The two goals are not opposed. In short, there is no conflict in Church teaching about the marriage amendment on the ballot.

Now, having said all that I just said about many, many things, I have yet to say what may be the toughest thing to hear. And that is this: if we are looking around for someone to blame about why it is that we have to debate stem cells, why it is that we should have to debate about the death penalty, why it is that there should be even the smallest question about what marriage is, the real people to blame, in my opinion, are the Christians. You and me.

Because all of these debates are the result of our failure to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love God with our heart, soul, and mind, and to transform the world around us with that love. America was founded, like it or not, as a Christian country. And if we are here in this predicament today, it's because we've failed to live out the gospel, and to present it to the rest of the world as a reasonable proposition, and to maintain in America the Christian fabric that our very system of government requires to function effectively.

On stem cells and abortion: if all of us had been better at creating a society where women would be respected rather than used, where children who are not wanted could be cared for, where sickness and suffering were viewed with value, then certain people would not have to turn to cutting open embryos for the sake of scientific advancement, health, or profit. We should've been the ones teaching about why this is a problem all along so that science wouldn't even think of doing something so unspeakably evil.

On the death penalty: if we had been better at creating a world where conditions of poverty and desperation did not lead people to act out in violent ways, if we were better at treating mental illness at its roots rather than letting it develop in ways that can lead to murderers, if we had created a culture of life rather than that of vengeance, or a prison system that was interested in rehabilitation rather than simple containment, perhaps, perhaps, we would not have to debate this. We would simply understand that we don't need the death penalty in a Christian society of modern security measures.

If, all along, we had been willing to walk with people who suffer with homosexuality, and to acknowledge the terrible burden they have to carry rather than making fun of them (and by the way that does not mean telling them it is acceptable); if we had created a culture of respect for sexuality rather than one of lust and debauchery; if we had a society where chastity was valued in every relationship, if we had created a society where health benefits were not linked to someone's marital status, perhaps, we would not have to debate what is simply common sense—that marriage is between a man and a woman.

And, if we had been better about living out the gospel in our every day lives, then there is no doubt in my mind that by now we could've created a Catholic political party in this country that fielded candidates in our elections who stand with the Church across the board rather than having a party system that makes it almost impossible for Catholics to vote for one candidate without feeling conflicted.

But, we live in a fallen world don't we. And we all drop the ball. Thank God for his mercy, his grace, and his Gospel message to try and keep us on the right path. Thank God that he allows us to bring transformation to the world we live in. Voting is one little step along the way, and I urge you to vote this Tuesday- turnout is crucial in this election. It is a duty because it is a means, even if an imperfect one, to effect social change. Please do vote because on every one of these issues, it will be a close election.

But more fundamentally, I urge you all to be fighters in the culture war in which we find ourselves. St. John the Baptist died to defend the marriage bond. The Holy Innocents died as infants, martyred by a man who had made himself the judge of who was allowed to live and die. And our Lord himself, died as a criminal- executed by the state. God's life was taken by the death penalty in ancient Rome. If we are to have a culture of love, truth, and reason, then all of us have to stand up and be martyrs for love, truth, and reason. That is precisely what is at stake this Tuesday. That is what it means to take a stand for the gospel. And that is what it means to love the Lord our God with both our hearts as well as our heads, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.