

When you become a pastor of a big flock like Most Pure Heart of Mary, the first thing you realize is that the golden days of being an associate priest are long gone. All of a sudden you have this monumental task to feed, protect and guide a flock that God has entrusted to you that is 1,700 families strong from all walks of life, ages and differing political affiliations. To say the least, it is no easy task but with it comes some enormous blessings and some great challenges. As a pastor lives with his flock, he also gets a good sense when his flock is anxious, just like Jesus' parents were in that Gospel today. That is certainly the case in this moment in history.

The first thing we need to do when we encounter great anxiety and emotions is to just pause, take a breath and reflect. The sun still came up today and we still are the best parish in Topeka! As we gather in this church today, thankfully there are no news headlines to look at or impassioned social media posts. Instead, it's just God's people wanting to be with God and God wanting to be with His people in this place we get to call home.

The constant news cycle and social media climate we live in now makes everything more intense though. I learned many years ago that the exact thing news outlets and social media want to do is *to get you worked up and anxious*. The more worked up and anxious you are, the more you watch and are engaged. And the more you watch and are engaged, the more money they make from advertisers.

But here in this place, God deeply desire you to have peace. The very first word of Jesus to the Apostles after the horrors of Good Friday was Peace. Peace be with you. As your pastor, I can't think of any better first words than that. Peace be with you.

Obviously something very big happened in our country this week and you can't ignore that. Over the past 50 years, very few issues have divided our country more intensely than that of abortion. It has dominated every election cycle we've had, divided families and communities. And in the midst of all of that, *the sheer number of little lives legally ended right as they were beginning* is almost incomprehensible. Somewhere around 60 million of them. Every American, if they haven't been directly been affected by it then they know someone who has, making it an *incredibly sensitive and deeply personal* topic.

Along the way a lot of people have worked hard and sacrificed a lot hoping for the day that every human life, even at the earliest of stages, has a chance to have those rights our country holds so dear: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

One of my proudest moments as a priest was simply being a link in a chain to help a baby find a loving family. One day a couple had come to me struggling with that heavy cross of infertility. I referred them to an adoption agency that I had heard of and it wasn't long before they were

parents to a beautiful newborn girl. The child's mother had been a drug addict and so this innocent little girl was born with an addiction. But in the end, it worked out beautifully for everyone. A loving couple got to have a child. A innocent child got to be raised in a loving home. And the birth mother, struggling with a lot already, didn't have to worry about trying to care for a child. And somehow in the great mystery of it all, I got to be a small part of how all of that happened.

Watching all of this all unfold this past week made me think about the earliest days of my conversion. As I began to discover the faith, one of the most eye-opening things to discover was that Christians didn't stop writing with the Bible. It seems silly but once you realize it, it's amazing to discover that for 2,000 years now we've written all kinds of things. Everything from St. Augustine's powerful conversion story, St. John of the Cross's incredible poetry, St Thomas Aquinas' deep theological works, and St. Therese's diary that has impacted millions of live.

What fascinated me the most though was discovering what the oldest Christian writing was outside of the New Testament. It is called the Didache, or the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, and it was written about the year 100. It gives this incredible window into what the Church was like right there at the beginning. One of the things it does is go into great detail on how a Christian should live, what it calls the Way of Life. When I read it for the first time, I remember being shocked that it mentioned abortion in there in this document written 1,900 years ago. The Roman culture, which was not known for its holiness, was doing abortions very freely but the Christians stood out because they didn't. What reading that small line taught me was that from the very beginning of our faith, Christians have *always* stood out from the rest of the world because of the love they have for each other and for the respect they have for every human life, even human life in the earliest of stages.

This next week I'll be celebrating a birthday. It's a big one because it's the last one before I hit the dreaded 40s. 39 laps around the sun and now the gray hairs are coming in quick. The events of this past week and my upcoming birthday made me look back through the baby book my mother had put together. As I looked through it, there were all my school pictures. Everything from those awkward teenage years to those adorable years in grade school. But in there was also my sonogram picture exactly three months before I was born and on the next page was my photo from that very day I was born. I've got to say that neither of them are flattering. I came out of the womb at a whopping 9lbs and 7ozs. I'm pretty sure my head as just as big as my body, so pray for my mother! But looking at all those pictures, it was a great reflection of the progression of my life from those hidden years in our mother's womb to the awkward teenage years.

Coincidentally this past week I also got back my results from a genetic test I had taken. The results said that I am apparently 40% British/Irish and 34% German. My first thought was: That's why I like beer so much! It's not my fault. It's genetics! But secondly, it reminded me that genetics do matter. From the moment of conception, the whole blueprint of our lives is determined and upon it we get to built a life that is shaped by our upbringing and the choices we make. And even hidden within our DNA are little glimpses of our past.

The end result of this past week, is that the topic of abortion will *continue* to be debated and discussed. An era has ended for our country, but the battle to protect every human life will continue. Christians thus have this enormous responsibility to be witnesses of life by respecting every human, which means even those we disagree with and those we can't see hidden in a womb. We also witness to life by caring for those in need, the sick, the poor, and those women who do feel stuck with a pregnancy. It's then that maybe we can then be a link that really does help someone. And no doubt we've got to do what we can to make sure there aren't another 60 million little lives ended because we all know that we are so much better than that as a country.

And so where do we go from here? Maybe that's where the beauty of our feast day comes in today. Most of the world is just celebrating the 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time today, but we get to be different and celebrate the Immaculate Heart of Mary since we are named Most Pure Heart of Mary. What we each have in common is that we each spent those first months of our lives incredibly close to our mother's hearts, literally inches away. The beating of our mother's heart was the first sound we heard. For nine months that beating heart became the rhythm of *our* life and the *very* source of our very life. I don't think we appreciate the hearts of mothers enough for all that they've done for us. What's so beautiful about *our parish* is that here we get to celebrate the heart of our Blessed Mother. We get to let *her heart* be the rhythm of *our life* and allow it to nourish *us*.

Mary is the most influential woman of human history, and time and time again, when humanity tends to be falling apart, it is Mary that comes to us and points us back to her Son. Today we can't help but ask, as a parish dedicated to the her Most Pure Heart, to help *us*, her unworthy sons and daughters, heal this broken world we live.

I read somewhere that the modern image of a heart that we are so familiar with comes from the image you get when you put two human hearts together. Maybe that's the perfect image for what we are aiming for as a parish. We want our hearts to be so close to Mary's that they are united, beating together as one in purity with love for her Son.

Today we ask Mary to help us in all things and to especially have a heart like hers. A heart that truly loves Life.