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# **YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN A TEACHING FROM ST. PAUL HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH *ROE v. WADE***

JOHN CARDINAL O'CONNOR\*

The *central* action of the Mass, that most particularly sacred moment, is what we call the consecration, that moment at which the priest says over a piece of bread, "This is my Body," over a cup of wine, "This is my Blood." We believe intensely, with all of our beings, that this piece of bread becomes the sacred body of the Son of God; this cup of wine becomes His sacred blood. A radical, revolutionary change takes place in that bread and wine, but not only in the bread and wine. Perhaps, this is something that we do not always think about. In some mysterious way, we use the term "mystical," a change takes place in us. While we do not begin to understand it, somehow, in a spiritual way we *become* His Body, His Blood. We become a Christian people; we become His living temple.

Cardinal Ratzinger, the formal, official theologian of the Church, has written a beautiful book entitled *The Origin and Essence of the Church*.<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger writes:

[A] people are taken up and integrated into the Eucharist.

Just as the old Israel once revered the temple as its center and the guarantee of its unity, and by its common celebration of the

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\* This article is derived from a homily given by His Eminence, the Archbishop of New York, at Sunday Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York, on January 19, 1996. The original text of the homily was published in CATHOLIC NEW YORK, January 23, 1997.

<sup>1</sup> JOSEPH RATZINGER, THE ORIGIN AND ESSENCE OF THE CHURCH.

Passover enacted this unity in its own life, in like manner this new meal [the Eucharist] is now the bond uniting a new people of God .... The Body of the Lord, which is the center of the Lord's Supper, is the one new temple that joins Christians together into a much more real unity than a temple made of stone could ever do.

...

[T]he people of the New Covenant [that's us] takes its origin as a people from the Body and Blood of Christ: solely in terms of this center does it have the status of a people.<sup>2</sup>

We find our origin as a people here—as a Church Universal, as the Church of New York, as the Church of this parish—right here in this cathedral at this moment, during this Mass, we become a people in a special way. We take our origin as a people from the Body and Blood of Christ. “[T]he Eucharist, seen as the permanent origin and center of the Church, joins all of the ‘many,’ who are now made a people, to the one Lord and to His one and only Body....”<sup>3</sup>

Many years ago, in an exquisitely beautiful encyclical called *The Mystical Body of Christ*,<sup>4</sup> Pope Pius XII had this to say:

The loving knowledge with which the divine Redeemer has pursued us from the first moment of His Incarnation surpasses all the powers of the human mind; for by means of the beatific vision, which He enjoyed from the time He was received into the womb of the Mother of God, He has for ever and continuously had present to Him all the members of His Mystical Body and embraced them with His saving love.<sup>5</sup>

This is the teaching of the Church about the Mystical Body of Christ, so crucially spoken about by St. Paul in *1 Cor. 6:13-15, 17-20*.

Do you not see that your bodies are members of Christ?<sup>6</sup>

This is very real, what St. Paul is saying. It could change our lives if we recognize this, it could change the way we think, the way we act, the way we speak.

“Whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> POPE PIUS XII, *MYSTICI CORPORIS: ON THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST AND OUR UNION IN IT WITH CHRIST* (National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1943).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *1 Cor. 6:15.*

.... You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within—the Spirit you have received from God. *You are not your own.*<sup>7</sup>

When I am preparing a couple for marriage, this is the point I try to make. “You, Mary, will no longer belong to yourself. Your body will not be your own, your being will not be your own. It will belong to John.”

“John, you will belong totally and entirely to Mary, forming this one new mystical being that we call marriage.” But that is true even of all of us, St. Paul says, in relation to the Body of Christ.

“You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within—the Spirit you have received from God. You are not your own. You have been purchased, and at what a price! So glorify God in your body.”<sup>8</sup>

What has this all to do with our commemoration of *Roe v. Wade*<sup>9</sup> and our concern about the sanctity of human life? It has everything to do with it.

It is very interesting to read the letter of St. Paul to the people of Corinth in its entirety. Some of you are well aware that, morally, Corinth was in shambles at that time. It was a very prosperous city. When people from other areas were going on vacation, they would say, “I am going to become a Corinthian for a week.” In other words, anything goes; all restrictions are off. All manner of perversions, sexual immoralities, and so on, were practiced by the Corinthians. There was only a small body of Christians among them. But St. Paul did not spend a great deal of time talking about the vices, the evils, the immoralities, the perversions. Instead, he said, “You are a sacred people. You belong to God. You don’t belong to a goddess of perversion, a god of violence, a god of war, a god of immorality. You are sacred. You are the temple of the living God. You are members of the Body of Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

Paul wanted to emphasize the sacredness of the Christian community and its identity with the Body of Christ as the reason for respecting life, for respecting themselves, for respecting this body, this temple, and for respecting everybody else. That was

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<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 6:17-20.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 6:19-20.

<sup>9</sup> 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

<sup>10</sup> 1 *Cor.* 6:9-11.

the point he wanted to make. And I think it is a tremendously important point for us to make.

Many here have heard many figures about the numbers of abortions, and now about euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, and all of the efforts to combat these and to restore some reason to legislation; to bring some light into this culture of darkness and death. We have heard this frequently. But perhaps we have not thought enough about the reverse: what it means to be *sacred*, what it means to be members of the Body of Christ and what a tremendous difference this can make.

It is fascinating to read Abraham Lincoln's letters and speeches. He was a great, great man, unquestionably, and a great president. We think of him in terms of freedom for slaves, as the "great emancipator" of the slaves, of the blacks, of the African-Americans—then called negroes. But he wasn't always that way. Earlier in his political career he was rather lukewarm about it all, and, indeed, pretty much content to let sleeping dogs lie, not to rock the boat. Slavery was the way of life. He had great respect for private ownership: people "owned" slaves. Moreover, as he moved and advanced in political life, he came up with the idea that black people would be much, much happier in Liberia. He argued that the best thing we could do would be to transport all of the slaves to Liberia, and in fact, give them a bonus for going. In his early days Abraham Lincoln believed that blacks were inferior, that "they can never be like us," and that they would not be happy free in the United States. This doesn't sound like Lincoln, but that is absolutely the case.

Then, of course, there was political expediency. He had to win votes for election and then for re-election. He had to win the "slave states" as well as the "free states." And then, above all, he wanted to win the war. His first step in favor of slaves, remember, was to offer them their freedom if they would fight on the side of the North; if they would simply run away and join the Union army. Finally, we have that famous concept that Lincoln spelled out: more important than slavery, more important than anything else is the Union. If we have to keep slavery to preserve the Union, then we must preserve it.

But something happened then, that dramatically changed Lincoln's thinking, his speaking, his whole being. It was the

*Dred Scott*<sup>11</sup> decision. Chief Justice Taney, the Chief Justice of the United States, came out with the horrifying decision which not only stated that blacks were not citizens, could not be citizens, could not be covered by the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence, but in essence declared them “*nonpersons*.” It was when Lincoln began to reply to the *Dred Scott* decision that he began to speak with a new sense of moral outrage. In the marvelous book *Lincoln*,<sup>12</sup> by David Herbert Donald, the author writes about Lincoln’s argument with Douglas and others who supported slavery.

Up to this point Lincoln’s appeal had been chiefly to reason and everyday experience, but his address took on a new tone when he turned to the next argument, that ‘the sacred right of self-government’ required restrictions on slavery be removed so the residents of the territories could decide for themselves whether to admit or exclude it. Of course the inhabitants of the territories should make their own laws, Lincoln conceded, and these should not be interfered with any more than ‘the oyster laws of Virginia, or the cranberry laws of Indiana.’ But whether they could permit or exclude slavery depended upon ‘whether a negro is *not* or *is* a man.’<sup>13</sup>

It all devolved on that: whether or not a slave is a human being.

Later Lincoln was to say:

All the powers of earth seem rapidly combining against [the oppressed negro] .... They have him in his prison house; they have searched his person, and left no prying instrument with him. One after another they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him, and now they have him, as it were, bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys, which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every key; the keys in the hands of a hundred different men, and they scattered to a hundred different and distant places; and they stand musing as to what invention, in all the dominions of mind and matter, can be produced to make the impossibility of his escape more complete than it is.<sup>14</sup>

And that is the way it seems to be today with regard to the unborn. Of course we deplore—what person of right mind does not deplore—bombings of abortion clinics, violence against abor-

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<sup>11</sup> *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857).

<sup>12</sup> DAVID HERBERT DONALD, *LINCOLN* (1995).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 175.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 201-02.

tionists or counselors in clinics or wherever. It is absolutely outrageous; it is absolutely sinful; it has no part in Catholic thinking. The end can not justify such means. It is utterly outrageous to argue to the contrary or to blame the millions of reasonable people in the pro-life movement for this kind of fanaticism, this bizarre, deranged behavior. We will not accept that blame.

At the same time, it would appear that every law, every decision that comes down from the courts does to the unborn precisely what Lincoln is talking about here in regard to the slaves: fetters them, imprisons them, throws the key of the lock away, binds them in every conceivable fashion.

And now, as we discussed here last week, we are confronted with the possibility of the legalization of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia in our land. It is all directly attributable, as the legal profession shows us time after time, to that decision in 1973 that we call *Roe v. Wade*, which refused to do precisely what Lincoln was talking about regarding the Dred Scott decision. It refused to give the unborn the rights of personhood. I don't know if everyone realizes it, but the *Roe v. Wade* decision from the Supreme Court of the United States simply refused to touch the question, simply refused to say whether the killing of an unborn child is homicide. Now the same concept is extended by an inexorable chain of reasoning to physician-assisted suicide and the decisions of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in California<sup>15</sup> and the Second Circuit Court of Appeals here in New York.<sup>16</sup>

But I am not at all sure that even a sense of humanity, even a recognition that the unborn, the cancer-ridden, the vulnerable are *persons* will change anything. What will change it? I am not sure that anything will change it except a recognition of the *sacredness* of the human person, not simply the humanity, but that human beings belong to God. As St. Paul says, "You are not your own. You have been purchased, and at what a price! So glorify God in your body."<sup>17</sup> It is not enough to say, "You are a person." It is not enough to say, "You are safe because you are persons." No, human beings will not be safe unless we recognize they are *sacred persons*.

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<sup>15</sup> *Compassion in Dying v. Washington*, 85 F.3d 1440 (9th Cir.), *cert. granted sub nom.*, *Washington v. Glucksberg*, 117 S. Ct. 37 (1996).

<sup>16</sup> *Quill v. Vacco*, 80 F.3d 716 (2d Cir.), *cert. granted*, 117 S. Ct. 36 (1996).

<sup>17</sup> 1 Cor. 6:19-20.

The Sisters of Life spend their lives not simply helping pregnant women, although they do indeed do that. They do not simply try to help women pick up the pieces after an abortion, although they also do that. They spend their lives working and praying to raise a sense of consciousness about the *sacredness* of human life—that in some way we are members of that Body of Christ that appears on the altar when the priest says, “This is my Body; This is my Blood,” We here, reasonable, thinking people, would be chilled at the idea of sweeping the Body and Blood of Christ off that altar or trampling on it, or spitting on it, or, if we could, killing it. But as we asked last week, in a mystical, spiritual way, are we killing God in every baby killed by abortion, in every sacred, weak and vulnerable adult killed by physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia?

Do you not see that your bodies are members of Christ? Whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.... You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within—the spirit you have received from God. You are not your own. You have been purchased, and at what a price!<sup>18</sup>

With the Body and Blood of Christ we have been purchased, so glorify God in your body and in everyone else’s.

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<sup>18</sup> *Id.*



