

October 5, 2003
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes

Genesis 2:18-24
Hebrews 2:9-11
Mark 10:2-16

We deserve better than indifference to the deep things of human life.

The gospel's picture of Jesus surrounded by children is so familiar to us that we may not realize how extraordinary it really is. In ancient Near Eastern cultures, children belonged to the world of women, not that of men. In the Bible, along with women and resident aliens, children generally represent vulnerability. This is due in no small measure to the fact that most children at that time in history died before the age of two. And in order to have just two children live to maturity, you had to have over six children. This was true right up until the middle of the 19th century. And it is still true in many third-world countries. Hence, children had no legal status as did the women of the times, and children and women were grouped together as vulnerable and weak.

Thus, Jesus is depicted as welcoming these little children, not only because they are endearing, but also because they are vulnerable and in need of the protection of others. Then, as so often happens, Jesus turns our perceptions inside out. The child, dependent on others for nurturing and protection, is set before us as an example of how we are to stand before God - open and trusting, powerless and in need. In other words, we, and all human kind, deserve better than a

view of life that sees the weak and the vulnerable, women and children, as disposable and without rights. This the Church reminds us on this Respect Life Sunday. All life, from conception through old age, is precious in its vulnerability.

The same is true for the old and the sick, the weak and forgotten - they all deserve better. Darkness, sin and death deceive them into believing that they are without dignity, useless and weak. Forgotten by most of the world, the old and the sick are subjected to the loneliness of despair, to fear and desperation. They deserve better. They deserve the truth that God, who created them in his own image and likeness, has endowed them with infinite value and lasting dignity. And because of Jesus the Christ, their suffering has value and impact on the world.

The same is true for the young men and women who have fallen in love. They deserve better. The world tells them to fulfill their own needs and care only for their own pleasure. They are encouraged to avoid commitment if it's inconvenient, to medicate their bodies against pregnancy and not let a problem pregnancy get in the way. They deserve better. They deserve to know that they are called to a noble vocation: to a covenant in which a man and a woman set up a lifelong bond with each other, a covenant which draws its force and strength and dignity from

creation. They deserve the truth that they are called to be co-creators by the Author of Life.

The women who have just become pregnant, and the men who are expecting their first child - in all their vulnerability - they deserve better. The culture of death tempts them to treat their unborn child as a dispensable commodity, a passing inconvenience. They deserve better. They deserve the truth that they are the guardians of the most precious of gifts. And married people who struggle with their relationship and stumble and separate and divorce - they deserve better in their vulnerability and pain. The passage in our gospel depicting the divorced as adulterers has its origin in the 1st Christian century, and is a "hard saying." The context is one that involves Roman Christians newly converted to the following of Christ. Many of these men rejected their wives if they also did not convert to what was called "the way," as they named the Christian faith at the time. Women thus abandoned became either beggars or prostitutes. The Christian community, through Saint Mark as spokesperson or scribe, rejects this inhumanity and does so in the name of Jesus. The gospel is pleading for a humane and sensitive handling of broken marriages. They deserve better.

When the world sees the small and the weak, the forgotten and the fragile as disposable, we deserve the truth that each human person is a child of God in whatever circumstance they find themselves - and in the least of all we can find and love Christ, our savior.

On this Respect Life Sunday, our Catholic tradition puts before us the weak and the vulnerable of every age and state of life and calls us to a greater sensitivity and caring and respect. The holy food we share here is marked by its fragileness and

vulnerability - it has no choice but to become what we ask of it - the bearer of the glorified Lord Jesus, nourishing us for everlasting life. May we be transformed into that great Sacrament for the world we touch.

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to the deep things of human life.**