

Letter from the Primate 28TH JUNE 2009

I recently flew to Sydney to attend the sixtieth birthday celebration of a very dear friend.

Father John Fleming and I studied for the priesthood at much the same time, many long years ago. For some years I served as his honorary assistant curate, while I lectured at university. He was one of those priests who was driven to leave the Anglican Communion as woman's ordination became a reality in Australia, and eventually became a married Roman Catholic priest.

The speaker at this birthday was Bishop Anthony Fisher, the young assistant bishop to Cardinal Pell, and organiser of the recent World Youth Day. In the course of his address he said a remarkable thing. "John, when you eventually leave this world and approach the gates of heaven, a hundred thousand souls of the unborn will come out to welcome you."

What an extraordinary vision!

I well remember the young Father Fleming on the streets of Adelaide when Right to Life was being formed. An earned Doctorate in Bioethics, books and learned articles defending human lives that cannot defend themselves, Australia's representative on UNESCO's Bioethics Committee in Paris, with the Vatican's Academy for Life, witness at government enquiries from Beijing to Darwin, lately founding head of Campion College, Australia's first Catholic Liberal Arts University, (and the provider of a sparkling and deep interlude at one of our meetings of the College of Bishops), John has given a life to the defence of life. He has been reviled for it.

He is also one of four former Anglicans who are my close personal advisers on unity with the Holy See.

Father Fleming's witness is echoed by so many in our Communion. A few weeks ago, our Canadian bishops marched in Ottawa with the Papal Nuncio and the Canadian catholic bishops in defence of life. To defend the unborn is part of the backbone of the Traditional Anglican Communion.

Let us be quite clear about this. To procure the death of an unborn child is a heinous crime against the most defenceless person. It is of its very nature so deeply sinful that it severs the relationship with God. Like the first humans, who turned their backs on the source of goodness and truth, and chose to hide from God, it is a sin that drives a person from the Garden of God. As of old, the gates of Paradise are shut, and we are powerless to open them and let ourselves in. Only the Son of God had that power, and He only succeeded after a titanic and brutal battle with the powers of darkness, in which the Cross was his weapon. In so many parts of today's Church, the awesome reality of sin has been lost. In almost every part of the world, the destruction of unborn life is argued over as if it were a policy debate of government. But it is a matter with consequences in eternity, as well as brutal consequences for our own world, as the once Christian nations depopulate an entire generation.

In new ways, in the artificial creation of embryos for research and pharmaceutical manufacturing, we are extending the frontiers of risk to the unborn. And Christians are losing the battle in our parliaments and bureaucracies in almost every place. And from the Holy Father down to the merest person who dares to stand in defiance, ridicule is heaped on the defenders of life.

Our task is made more difficult by the love we owe to those who are driven to abortion. Jesus clearly told those who stood with stones ready to only begin the execution of the woman before Him if they were without sin. They dropped their stones, one by one, and slunk off. The woman He commanded to "sin no more". So must we drop the stones, and show the love of a Christian people to those who have been driven to do evil by a world that puts a higher value on convenience and appearances and finances than on life. For men whose power forces women to abortion, a deeper alienation from God lies in wait.

In every generation there is an issue that tests the resolve of the Church. In this generation the issue is abortion. Each of us must take our stand, and take the cost. I am sure that Father Fleming would rather approach the gates of Paradise on his own, without the choir of the heavenly unborn to help him. He would wish that the choir did not exist. But exist it does, and its numbers grow day by day. We will each be met by that choir. We should pray for the faith and courage to do those things in this life, so that the call of those heavenly unborn will be that of a friend, as we approach the next.

+ John Hepworth Primate