

# Pistis & Polis: faith and the city

## The Feast of Holy Innocents & Our National Sins

A sermon offered at All Saints Church on December 28, 2014

*“A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

**T**oday we mark the Feast of the Holy Innocents. Like Christmas, this feast does not ordinarily fall on a Sunday so it tends to escape our notice each year. Since the end of the fourth century, December 28 has been the fixed date for this commemoration. It has nothing to do, of course, with the chronology of the events of Christ’s life; rather it has to do with the relationship of these children to the Christ child. The expectation, the glorious celebration of Christmas Eve, the wonder of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, the Feast of the Incarnation, now quickly takes a dramatic turn. This is the day from which we wish to turn away. This is not a feast we look forward to keeping, but the Church from very early times has asked us to look.

Of course, we don’t know the day or the year of the death of the children that we call the Holy Innocents. All we know is that the infants were slaughtered within two years following the appearance of the star to the Wise Men. The Church venerates these children as martyrs; they died because of Christ; they are the first buds of the Church killed by the frost of persecution; St. Augustine in one of his sermons goes so far as to say that they died not only for or because of Christ, but in his stead.

The Greek Liturgy asserts that Herod killed 14,000 boys, the Syrians speak of 64,000, many medieval authors mystically convert the number 144,000 from the book of Revelation. Modern writers reduce the number considerably, since Bethlehem was a rather small town, as few as six to as many as twenty. This cruel deed of Herod is not mentioned by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, although he relates quite a number of atrocities committed by Herod during the last years of his reign, including the murders of several of his wives and sons. You may be familiar with the true story that Herod ordered twenty five Jewish priests locked in the hippodrome to be murdered upon his death – just to guarantee that the nation would go into mourning. It may be that the number of these children was so small that this crime appeared insignificant amongst the other misdeeds of Herod. We can hardly imagine a world so barbaric that a political ruler could, on a whim, simply dispose of human life.

Or can we?

In connection with these the Evangelist quotes the words of the Prophet Jeremiah 31:15 speaking of the lamentation of Rachel. Rama is the location of the tomb of Rachel, whom, you will remember is the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, making her the representative of all the ancestresses of Israel. On his death bed, Jacob recounted to Joseph that Rachel experience hard labor with her final son Benjamin, so hard in fact that she died after giving birth. “...when I came from Paddan-Aram, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).”

Rachel was buried on the way to Bethlehem, somewhere north of there off the road near a village called Rama. Centuries later at the same place the remnants of the nation were gathered to be led into captivity into Babylon in 586 BC. Metaphorically, Rachel, as Jerusalem falls, weeps from her tomb for the sons of Israel. Now, in the time of Jesus she weeps again for the male children of Bethlehem. The ruin of her people, led away to Babylon, was a type of the ruin which menaces her children now. The Messiah is to be murdered and is compelled to flee from the midst of His own nation to Egypt to escape from the sword of Herod. Thus, the lamentation of Rachel after the fall of Jerusalem receives its fullest completion at the sight of the downfall of her people, ushered in by the slaughter of her children and the banishment of the Messiah. It is very difficult to imagine living in a country where the civil magistrate had this kind of power. The power to kill the innocent with impunity.

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Every year I tell my students in the seminar I teach that there are three great national sins that face their generation. First, what do I mean by national sin? A national sin is to be distinguished from your personal life. Each of us is a son of Adam, born in sin, and each of us has personally offended the Almighty. We understand that Jesus died for our sins. We pray the prayer of confession each week. We take comfort in individualizing the absolution that is pronounced to us by the priest.

But we also participate in a body politic, a corporate existence in which we act together. Just as in the OT where we find the people of God sinning as a people, promoting

abominations vastly greater in scale than that of individuals, sins that become embedded into the structure of society. These included sins like idol worship and the construction of what the Bible calls “the high places.” The oppression of the poor registers high in the Old Testament catalog of sins and there are many others. This is the kind of sin that Daniel refers to when he prays:

*To us, O LORD, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against you. 9 To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him 10 and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by walking in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets. 11 All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. And the curse and oath that are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him.*

So I tell my students that there are three great sins in America today. I didn't get this out of a book; and maybe your list would be different than mine. But here they are: 1) the national sin of abortion, which was legalized when I was 11 years old in 1973; (more about this in a minute, but first I'll mention the other two).

Number 2) national debt; it is unthinkable that people personally acquire overwhelming amounts of debt. This often happens, sometimes by design, sometimes by a turn of circumstances. But I am referring to something different. On a national scale, it is an immoral thing that the whole country is drowning in debt that is at once intentional as it is avoidable. We are told that the nation's deficit is now approaching \$18T, but the truth be told the figure of unfunded entitlements is somewhere north \$200T. That means that our representatives have made promises to whole classes of people for entitlements that cannot be paid. These entitlement promises encumber our posterity without their consent or participation. Someday, the sky above is going to fall in the form of political upheaval or economic calamity – or both. Nevertheless, our grandchildren and great grandchildren will inherit a country that is economically wrecked. I know you can't imagine what that looks like, any more than the ancients believed that Babylon or Nineveh, or Solomon's empire for that matter, could fall. They did; we can.

And the third national sin is 3) gender confusion. History is full of examples from Sodom to Rome to the French Revolution that homosexuality evidences the twilight of civilization. I haven't time to develop this, but these three sins, dominate the entire West – not just America – and they have one thing in common: they all militate against life. Abortion is the taking of a life; national debt chokes the life out of capital formation and economic activity that is essential to the development and use of life-sustaining resources; and gender confusion is the complete

narcissism of self love that is by definition sterile and anti-life.

A month ago our bishop sent a letter to all of the ministers in the diocese in which he asked that on the feast of Holy Innocents we make the connection between the barbarism of Herod and the modern day holocaust we call abortion. The gospel text is one from which we naturally wish to avert our gaze. The social scourge of abortion is the same.

If we're not involved with it, we don't really want to hear about. If we have been affected by it directly or indirectly, we don't want to hear about it. But we need to. So here are some facts:

First, I was 11 years old when Roe vs. Wade was decided by the Supreme Court. I vaguely remember the world when it was illegal. Let us not miss the import of this. This means that all of our children have grown up in a world where this practice has been legal. Do not underestimate the pedagogical effect of this. Law has a way “teaching;” it is “torah” in this regard. Unless we intentionally teach otherwise, our society tells our children that this legal, and therefore, permissible, and therefore....NORMAL. A moral wrong is converted into a civil right.

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## *Roe vs. Wade converted a moral wrong into a civil right.*

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Second, most do not understand that *Roe vs. Wade* permits abortion through the late stages of pregnancy. The best that states can do is to put some restrictions on the lateness. Here are some statistics:

- Number of abortions per year: 1.21 million (2005) Number of abortions per day: approximately 3,315
- Who's having abortions (age)?
- 50% of women obtaining abortions in the U.S. are younger than 25: women aged 20-24 obtain 33% of all abortions; teenagers obtain 17%; and girls under 15 account for 1.2%
- Who's having abortions (race)?
- While white women obtain 60% of all abortions, their abortion rate is well below that of minority women. Black women are more than 3 times as likely as white women to

have an abortion, and Hispanic women are roughly 2 times as likely.

Who's having abortions (marital status)?

- 66% of all abortions are performed on never-married women; married women account for 18% of all abortions; and divorced women obtain 9.4%.

Who's having abortions (income)?

- Women with family incomes less than \$15,000 obtain 29% of all abortions; women with family incomes between \$15,000 and \$29,999 obtain 20%; women with family incomes between \$30,000 and \$59,999 obtain 38%; and women with family incomes over \$60,000 obtain 14%.

Why are women having abortions?

- 1% of all abortions occur because of rape or incest; 6% of abortions occur because of potential health problems with either the mother or the child; and 93% of all abortions occur for social reasons (that is, the child is unwanted or inconvenient).

Since 1973 more than 50M children in the US have been aborted, 23,000 each year in the Commonwealth of Va each year. You should know that the Church's theologians and councils have universally condemned abortion up until our own day.

The Didache (1c), says, *"thou shalt not procure abortion, nor commit infanticide; The Way of Death is filled with people who are...murderers of children and abortionists of God's creatures."*

The Epistle of Barnabas (2c): *"You shall not kill either the fetus by abortion or the new born."*

The Apocalypse of Peter (2c), reads like Dante's Inferno: *"and these were the accursed who conceived and caused abortion."*

Tertullian (ad 220): *"For us [Christians] we may not destroy even the fetus in the womb, while as yet the human being derives blood from other parts of the body for its sustenance. To hinder a birth is merely a speedier man-killing; nor does it matter when you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to birth. That is a man which is going to be one: you have the fruit already in the seed."*

John Calvin on the 6th commandment: *"the unborn, though*

*enclosed in the womb of his mother, is already a human being, and it is an almost monstrous crime to rob it of life which it has not yet begun to enjoy. If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, because a man's house is his most secure place of refuge, it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy the unborn in the womb before it has come to light."*

We could multiply the examples from every century of the Church's existence. Those in the denominations such as the Presbyterian, the Episcopal, the United Church of Christ - whatever - are powerfully out of step with teaching of the historic Christian Church, and they are in grave sin.

So what should we take away from this? Here are some things we should be:

- 1) We should be passionately "pro-life": This means that we not only advocate for the protection of life in womb, but we advocate for the poor who disproportionately resort to abortion as a way to escape poverty;
- 2) We should be pro-adoption; taking children into our homes as God provides should be part of our long-term;
- 3) We should support those, like the Blue Ridge Pregnancy Center who minister to men and women affected by abortion;
- 4) We should lovingly and carefully engage our neighbors; There are political impediments that must be removed before the holocaust ends. But this will not happen until hearts and minds are changed.

Finally we should remember the greatest affirmation of life came to us from a young woman who was not married, who found herself in a crisis pregnancy. Her name was Mary, and she gave birth to the Son of God.

Every life is precious. Amen.

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