

Homily at the Funeral of Bernard N. Nathanson, M.D.

St. Patrick's Cathedral
February 28, 2011
The Rev. Gerald E. Murray, J.C.D.

Your Excellency, Timothy M. Dolan, Archbishop of New York, how pleasing it is to us all that you are offering this requiem Mass for the soul of Dr. Bernard Nathanson in the Cathedral where he was baptized, confirmed and received his First Holy Communion in December of 1996. Your telephone call from Rome to Dr. Nathanson just weeks before his death was a source of strength and encouragement to him in his final suffering.

Reverend Fathers, especially Fr. C. John McCloskey, who prepared Dr. Nathanson for baptism and was his spiritual mentor; Dear Religious Sisters, in particular the Sisters of Life, who loved Dr. Nathanson so much; both you and Dr. Nathanson are the children in Christ of that stalwart defender of life who is your common spiritual father, John Cardinal O'Connor.

Dear Christine, Dr. Nathanson's devoted wife; Dear Joseph his son, and all the members of Dr. Nathanson's family, and all those who assisted him in his illness. We are joined today at this funeral Mass by a great cloud of witnesses to commend to God's mercy this faithful and courageous servant of the Lord, Dr. Bernard Nathanson. Our congregation this morning is made up of so many who knew and admired the man we entrust today to our loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Here also present are those who knew him from afar by virtue of his untiring efforts to promote respect for life through his writings, his speeches and especially through his two powerful films, *The Silent Scream* and *The Eclipse of Reason*.

Here present in spirit are also those two priests, great friends of Dr. Nathanson, to whom he dedicated his book, *The Hand of God*: Fr. Paul Marx, O.S.B. and Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, true heroes of the movement to end legalized abortion in our country and throughout the world.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims this hope filled message in our first reading today: "Those whom the LORD has ransomed will return and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy; they will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee" (Is 35:10)

The everlasting joy of Heaven is our hope. We long for the joy and gladness promised to those whom the Lord has ransomed. Dr. Nathanson for years longed for that joy and gladness. He found it in Christ.

In his book, Dr. Nathanson wrote of his medical school professor and fellow Jewish convert to Catholicism, Karl Stern: "...he possessed a secret I had been searching for all my life – the secret of the peace of Christ" (p. 46) After years of deep involvement in what he called "the satanic world of abortion" (p. 58), Dr. Nathanson came to believe in Christ. He lived with Christ crucified and resurrected for the last 14 years of his life on earth. He experienced great peace upon becoming a Christian.

St. Paul exhorts us today in our second reading: "[L]et the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body." (Col 3:15) Dr. Nathanson heard and answered that call. He knew great peace in the Catholic Church after years of much trouble and despair. We pray today that he enter into the fullness of that peace in the land of the living.

I am not exaggerating when I say that Dr. Bernard Nathanson is a towering figure in the history of the United States because he was an unflinching witness on behalf of those millions who have been killed, or are threatened to be killed, by abortion. He was a witness who spoke out against what he himself had helped to bring about, namely the legalization of abortion in our country, along with his fellow founders of NARAL, the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws.

He broke with this evil movement, and repented of his sins. His epiphany came when he saw ultrasound images of the developing human being in the womb. He wrote: "Ultrasound opened up a new world. For the first time we could really see the human fetus, measure it, observe it, watch it, and indeed bond with it and love it. I began to do that." (p. 125) He continued "Having looked at the ultrasound, I could no longer go on as before" (p. 128)

Dr. Nathanson followed the truth where it led him. He wrote: "After my exposure to ultrasound, I began to rethink the prenatal phase of life. ... When I began to study fetology, it dawned on me, finally, that the prenatal nine months are just another band in the spectrum of life. ... To disrupt or abort a life at this point is intolerable – it is a crime. I don't make any bones about using that word: Abortion is a crime." (p. 130)

Msgr. William Smith is another great hero of the pro-life movement whose passing we still mourn. He never tired of repeating this axiom: "Social engineering is always preceded by verbal engineering." Dr. Nathanson and Msgr. Smith were champions in the never-ending struggle here below to prevent the ideological corruption of language. That is a Godly struggle. May we take up where they have left off.

Dr. Nathanson reminds me of another great witness against evil and in favor of the truth in the twentieth century, Whittaker Chambers. I read somewhere that Betty Friedan thought the same thing, but I am sure for different reasons.

Chambers renounced his membership in the Communist party and spoke out against those who were part of a conspiracy to harm our nation through espionage for the Soviet Union. He confessed to being a Soviet spy. He was vilified. He suffered. He stood firm. He spoke the truth.

The introduction to his book *Witness* is a "*Foreword in the Form of a Letter to My Children.*" This quotation from the foreword captures Dr. Nathanson's courageous witness on behalf of innocent human beings menaced by abortion: "A man is not primarily a witness *against* something. That is only incidental to the fact that he is a witness for something. A witness, in the sense that I am using the word, is a man whose life and faith are so completely one that when the challenge comes to step out and testify for his faith, he does so, disregarding all risks, accepting all consequences." (p. 5)

Dr. Bernard Nathanson was a fearless advocate of the self-evident truth that it is a grave injustice to kill people before they are born. The unjust decisions of the United States Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* mandating legalized abortion in our country cry out for the counter-witness of those who will not abide this injustice. Heroism is called for. True heroism is never easy and is only possible through God's grace. We acknowledge today our gratitude to a true hero who would not abide such grave injustice in our land. In doing so, we too recognize the Hand of God in the life of Dr. Nathanson.

Chambers wrote of himself in that foreword to his book: "But a man may also be an involuntary witness. I do not know any way to explain why God's grace touches a man who seems unworthy of it. But neither do I know any other way to explain how a man like myself – tarnished by life, unprepossessing, not brave – could prevail so far against the powers of the world arrayed almost solidly against him, to destroy him and defeat his truth. In this sense, I am an involuntary witness to God's grace and to the fortifying power of faith." (p. 6)

Only God knows whether Dr. Nathanson was a voluntary or involuntary witness against abortion and for life. But it is clear that he was truly courageous. He rejected what he knew to be evil, and then spoke out. In his humility he, like Chambers, recognized that God's grace is made ever more manifest when He chooses unexpected apostles.

Chambers tells a haunting story in his book which gives us, I think, an insight into Dr. Nathanson's rejection of abortion. He writes: "The daughter of a former German diplomat in Moscow was trying to explain to me why her father, who, as

an enlightened modern man had been extremely pro-Communist, had become an implacable anti-Communist. But she loved her father and the irrationality of his defection embarrassed her. 'He was immensely pro-Soviet,' she said, 'and then –you will laugh at me – but you must not laugh at my father – and then–one night – in Moscow he heard screams. That's all. Simply one night he heard screams.'

"A child of Reason and the 20th century, she knew that there is a logic of the mind. She did not know that the soul has a logic that may be more compelling than the mind's. She did not know at all that she had swept away the logic of the mind, the logic of history, the logic of politics, the myth of the 20th century, with five annihilating words: one night he heard screams."(pp. 13-14)

The scream Dr. Nathanson heard was a silent scream. A silent scream uttered by an unseen victim; that is, until the ultrasound machine brought the truth of abortion into plain view for this medical doctor who had expended great effort to make this horror legal and widespread in America. That doctor thereafter boldly decided to make the reality of human life in the womb visible for the whole world to see. Dr. Nathanson wrote in his book: "By 1984, however, I had begun to ask myself more questions about abortion: What actually goes on in an abortion? ... so in 1984 I said to a friend of mine, who was doing fifteen or maybe twenty abortions a day, 'Look, do me a favor, Jay. Next Saturday, when you are doing all these abortions, put an ultrasound device on the mother and tape it for me.' He did, and when he looked at the tapes with me in an editing studio, he was so affected that he never did another abortion. I, though I had not done an abortion in five years, was shaken to the very roots of my soul by what I saw." (pp. 140-141)

Anyone who has seen *The Silent Scream* is shaken. Seeing the truth about abortion overthrows the lies and deceptions of the abortion lobby. An important way that we can honor the memory of Dr. Bernard Nathanson is to continue his work of making the truth known to anyone who is willing to listen to our message, and then to discover what pregnancy really is by looking at ultrasound images of a pre-born human being.

The psalmist tells us: "Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you." (Ps 55:22) For the past two years it was my privilege to bring the consolation of the sacraments to Dr. Nathanson at his home. His devout reception of the Holy Eucharist revealed to me a man truly in love with Jesus Christ. The Lord indeed was sustaining his son who had cast his heavy burden of past evils on the Lord. "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:15-16) says the Lord in today's Gospel. The rest, the peace of soul that Christ gives begins in this life and passes through the Cross and then into eternity. All the while God guides and strengthens us, if only we let him.

Whittaker Chambers ended his *Letter to My Children* in this way: "My children, when you were little, we used sometimes to go for walks in our pine woods. In the open fields, you would run along by yourselves. But you used instinctively to give me your hands as we entered those woods, where it was darker, lonelier, and in the stillness our voices sounded loud and frightening. In this book I am again giving you my hands. I am leading you, not through cool pine woods, but up and up a narrow defile between bare and steep rocks from which in shadow things uncoil and slither away. It will be dark. But, in the end, if I have led you aright, you will make out three crosses, from two of which hang thieves. I will have brought you to Golgotha – the place of skulls. This is the meaning of the journey. Before you understand, I may not be there, my hands may have slipped away from yours. It will not matter. For when you understand what you see, you will no longer be children. You will know that life is pain, that each of us hangs upon the cross of himself. And when you know that this is true of every man, woman and child on earth, you will be wise. *Your Father.*"

Our life indeed is meant to be lived in intimate union with the crucified Lord. Golgotha, Calvary is indeed the place where we learn to be wise. The pain we experience, if united to Christ's pain, is then understood to be a blessing that opens our hearts to the only Love that can take away that pain. That Love is Christ, and the gift of eternal life wipes away all pain and suffering. To live and to die in hopeful expectation of that redemption is God's great gift to us fallen creatures here below. That gift was joyfully received by Dr. Nathanson in this very Cathedral 14 years ago.

Today we pray that the fullness of joy, which is the blessed vision of God seen face to face, be given to his son and our brother, Bernard Nathanson.

Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine. Et lux perpetua luceat ei. Amen.