

# Conceived in the Womb: How Orthodox Faith Understands the Unborn Child

---

*Offered by Bishop Demetrios of Mokissos*

*A Presentation for the OCAMPR Professional Conference  
November 2, 2012*

It is a blessing to be here at the Holy Resurrection Cathedral at the invitation of the Orthodox Christian Association of Medicine, Psychology, and Religion at this professional conference. To all the participants of this conference, and the membership of OCAMPR, I applaud the multi-disciplinary approach to what are difficult pastoral circumstances facing the faithful in our contemporary world, especially in the current socio-cultural and political context in which we live. All the presentations of this conference will undoubtedly draw on the professional experience and knowledge of those invited to lead our discussions, and as Orthodox Christians the “religious” aspect will infuse their medical, psychological and spiritual perspectives on the theme: “The Child Conceived: Considering Infertility, Miscarriage, and Early Child Loss.”

The subject I have been asked to address is not explicitly mentioned in the conference title, but is one that is closely related in many ways

(perhaps especially to some instances of “early child loss”): “How Orthodox Faith Understands the Unborn Child.” It cannot go unnoticed that the wording here would lead most Americans to have their minds drawn to the socio-political debates regarding abortion and what some would call “reproductive rights,” especially since so many on the right side (politically, anyway) of the debate refer to the rights of the unborn to life. So much of the conference in the next days will focus on those concerned with having children but perhaps struggling with obstacles to pregnancy (infertility); or to those grieving the premature end of pregnancy (miscarriage—though a better word really needs to be found for this) or the death of a *born* child (early child loss). What is not addressed directly in the conference program is the tragic and horrific decision to end a child’s life (in volitional abortion, whatever the motivation) and the means of coping with such a decision. That subject I will touch upon this evening since it obviously involves an understanding of what we have deemed the “unborn” child.

Beyond the participants in the remainder of the OCAMPR conference, I am conscious as well that this evening’s presentation has been opened to the general public. As a bishop of the Church, my task is not

only to focus on specific questions posed to me, such as how the Orthodox Christian faith understands the unborn child, but I am also responsible to answer questions not posed, but rather presupposed: to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News, the answer to the ultimate questions about life in this world and our human purpose. Indeed, so much of our understanding of what we have deemed the unborn child is informed by our reception of the Good News of Christ's redemption and saving of the world. When Christians neglect, forget or distort this Gospel, our understanding of the child within the womb can also easily become distorted, but I do not want to get ahead of myself. In any event, to those who are Orthodox Christians, I hope to challenge your thinking on the matters I address this evening so as to encourage a "change of mind" (*metanoia*) since repentance—which means to change the mind—is always the constant need of all those in Christ, and sometimes we benefit from looking at old problems from a new angle. To those who are not members of the Orthodox Church, I thank you for your interest and pray that what I offer will challenge you to think about your own faith while gaining an appreciation for that of the Orthodox Christian tradition.

I would like to begin, however, by challenging the premises in the title of my own presentation. First, we cannot presume to have a true conception of the mystery of conception. We cannot conceive the majesty of the creation of human life that begins at conception and we must first surrender any notion that we can master the mystery of life.

We live in an age where our culture has determined that we must seize the initiative to comprehend (a word that from its Latin roots means to grasp, to seize, and therefore to control) the world, rather than standing under God in the heavens, marveling, rejoicing, thanking and giving glory for the world and life God has bestowed upon us. We stand under the stars of heaven and rather than give thanks, we seek to comprehend cosmological origins and the destiny of the universe from the “big bang” to the “big crunch” or “big freeze” some billions of years from now; such speculations do have an impact also here and now in our comprehension of the physical world where our control of the atom and its constituent parts has led to fantastic technological achievement, not to mention apprehensions concerning its destructive power. Or we look inward, dissecting and analyzing our own physical being, down to the smallest protein chains and our DNA to see how we can seize the control of our

physical and mental existence, to engineer and change it, somehow in the interest of making life better whatever the unintended consequences might be. Indeed, our comprehension of the process of the formation of new human life has largely been motivated by the perceived need to control it, hence the concepts of “birth control” and conception control. Rene Descartes, so famous for his rather inaccurate assertion, *cogito ergo sum* (“I think therefore I am”), also stated that our scientific comprehension would make us “*maîtres et possesseurs de la nature*” (“masters and possessors of nature”) as we not only objectify creation as something separate from our own being, but seek to impose our own will upon it—a far cry from the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

In principle, Orthodox Christianity has never been opposed to learning, science and the proper stewardship of creation for the benefit of human life. Yet there is a great difference between the attitude toward knowledge of that true father of Byzantine theology, Saint Maximos the Confessor, and the quest for comprehension of our own day. Maximos, and the Byzantine tradition following him, focused on a vision (theoria) of the *logos*—the reason or principle—of creation, noting that our

understanding of the principles or reasons of created things is an indispensable aspect of our service in Christ as those called to be stewards for and mediators in Christ of the grand multiplicity of creation to the glory of our Creator of “all things visible and invisible.” Each creation of God, from the earth, the stars, the trees, to the tiniest creatures and elements, have their principle or reason in relation to *the Logos*, the Word of God who is Christ Jesus “through whom all things were made.” Maximus works with the concepts of knowledge (*gnosis*) and vision (*theoria*) and not, strictly speaking, comprehension (*katalavein*) in terms of grasping and control. Knowledge and wisdom allow creation to become the matrix (the supporting structure, but a word that originally meant “womb”) for our life in God and, in the expression of Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, the “currency” of our relationship with God: offering back in thanksgiving what was first given (“Thine own of thine own we offer to You...” as we exclaim at the Eucharist). However, we no longer generally view science and the exploration of the principles and reason of the world as an element of our Christian vocation since such principles and reasons have become divided from our reflection about, with, and in Jesus as we each formulate our own personal response to his question, “Who do you say that I am?” In other

words, we have turned our vocation and calling to have dominion over the earth on behalf of our God and a means of serving our God into a self-serving quest to dominate our environment for our own benefit, largely without thought to the *reason* for God's creation or its role in our expression of love for the one who first loved us.

Next, I want to affirm something important, purposefully provocative, but still important in the context of our contemporary society. As an Orthodox Christian I am absolutely and unequivocally pro-life, and this applies to all stages of what we might call the life-cycle, from the pre-born to the eldest persons no matter their condition, personal convictions, or what they may have been convicted of by our legal system. The Orthodox Christian tradition does not objectify the human person, nor does it "psychologize" the call to love, to love God and our neighbor. Love is not an emotion or a feeling, but a mode of being, a manner of relating. We must not objectify the subject of our love, for this only turns someone into some "thing." Therefore our love of the other is not determined by "what" they are or have been, however we might be tempted to label them (embryo, fetus, rapist, or murderer for example), but rather who they *will be* in the Kingdom present but yet to come. Ours is an eschatological

vision, and therefore rooted in the future with our Lord and God. It is not simply founded in the past and present, on what can be seen and analytically comprehended: grasped with the senses, processed by the mind, and controlled.

Yet—and here is the provocation, for a Christian being pro-life is no surprise—I am absolutely and unequivocally pro-choice. My choice is for life. However, when I use the phrase pro-choice, I do so only to point out that in our socio-political debates (or “culture wars” as the media and others would label it) those who claim the title “pro-choice” usually really mean they are pro-abortion rights. That is not how I use it, for indeed, as a Christian the legal status of homicide in any case is not my primary concern. My primary concern would be that human beings choose life, and this life is identified with Jesus Christ our Lord who is the life and the resurrection of the world. Primary is our relationship in and with God; legal matters are strictly secondary if not tertiary or even of lesser importance. My concern is to preach Christ crucified and risen from the dead and to proclaim this good news, to pastor and guide persons of faith on the way, the straight and narrow path to the Kingdom and tend to them when they stray—no matter how far. Yet love cannot be imposed, and

virtue – which is what I pray each person will exhibit – cannot be legislated since virtue presupposes freedom.

What the powers of this age determine legal or illegal cannot take priority over this. This does not, however, mean they are unimportant. It only means that as our Lord grants us the ability to choose between the good and evil, this element of personal freedom is important, but it is also important to understand that with freedom comes responsibility, even for the “least of the brethren.” If changing laws assists the Church in her mission and commission from the Lord, so be it and thank God we are able – at least in this nation – to influence social policy of government. But governmental policy is no substitute for the ordinances of the Holy One. So indeed, Orthodox should stand up, even march to bring attention to their views on social policy, but with the intention on changing minds (repentance) and not, primarily, laws. Virtuous minds will pass virtuous statutes.

Third, still challenging my own title, I generally do not use the word “unborn.” It just seems to me the opposite of what we hope for when a child is conceived and grows in the womb (the original meaning of both embryo and fetus: both words refer to that which is produced and grows,

but neither really answers the question as to what is produced or grows: a *human* embryo, a *human* fetus). Semantics are sometimes important. I may tie my shoe and then it becomes untied; how does someone become unborn once born? And how would someone not ever born become unborn? My preference for “pre-born” seems more accurate to me to describe a human being in the womb, just as infant (literally from the Latin *infans* meaning unable to speak ) or adolescence (literally the process of maturation or growing bigger) refer to other stages of human life.

And so I enter directly into the heart of my subject, for the Orthodox tradition understands the preborn child to be a human being, plain and simple. After all, “child” itself derives from the Gothic word meaning womb and properly designated the offspring of a human mother. So if we are speaking of a child in the womb, it is obvious we refer to a human being in the womb. Likewise, a human embryo or a human fetus remains always *human*. Yet the reason we must articulate the Orthodox understanding of a child in the womb is due to the fact that many persons in our age dispute the humanity of that being. So they come to redefine words such as fetus and embryo, omitting the *type* of embryo or fetus (could it be somehow a “non-human” embryo or fetus, perhaps that of

another animal species?). The semantics here underscore the determination to ignore the humanity of this being in the womb precisely to excuse the termination of its life if such a path is chosen. Thus, the argument is put forward that the human-ness of this being in the womb becomes human at some point other than its existence as an embryo or fetus.

Despite the widely recognized arbitrariness of *Roe v. Wade* and other legal, medical, cultural or political arguments in seeking to define human life as beginning at some defined point in time following fertilization and/or conception (however the latter may be defined today by the medical establishment), the Orthodox conception of that “conceived in the womb” is that it is human life. Logically, there is simply no other moment that we can pinpoint as the “beginning” of human life apart from fertilization (or syngamy), when the gametes of the male and female fuse. At what other point can we, with certainty, state that human life has begun? At no other point; for we can always move backward from the time of live birth just a tiny fraction of a second from any point on the spectrum and still find human life except for the moment just prior to fertilization, to the fusion of the sperm cell and egg (oocyte). Does human

life begin outside the womb when the fetus is delivered and the umbilical cord is severed? What would this being joined to the mother be during the actual severing of the cord? Just prior to the severing? Not human? Perhaps we might prefer to name as human a baby who is fully exterior to the mother regardless of the umbilical cord's status, but what of a child who is only half-way, or three-quarters, or ninety-nine one-hundredths emerged? Some politicians and some of our neighbors would suggest that this being could be exterminated at any of these points, by the way, as long as an abortion is intended by the choice of the mother.

In some cultures, the moment of "quickenings" is considered the beginning of human life, when a mother feels the child move in her womb. But what about the moment just before this? What if a mother, unaware of her pregnancy, mistakes that movement for indigestion? Is that child not alive? Some would prefer to define the beginning as the appearance of certain structures of the body or of the nervous system (the neural streak), for example, but as these develop in a *process*, and continue to grow and mature even following birth, what point in the process is to be acceptable as definitively the start of human life? Is one cell sufficient? Two or ten or more? The same argument could be offered for any other point in the

continuum from fertilization to birth or even beyond birth. Any particular point in between fertilization and birth is simply arbitrary – scientifically, politically, logically.

Others, sensitive to traditional Christian teaching, have tried like modern Solomons (metaphorically) to “split the baby” and talk about the potential of human life between fertilization and conception (usually defined as uterine implantation), or have sought to distinguish between the formation of the somatic element and “en-soul-ment” when the embryonic tissues come to have an individual human soul. These persons forget the ancient Christian doctrine that the soul and body come into being at the will of the Creator simultaneously, a doctrine affirmed in a variety of contexts such as the refutation of Platonic thought associated with the ancient writers Origen and Evagrius of Pontus (where immaterial souls pre-exist the material body), and all this unrelated to abortion rights (something our Christian ancestors would have found horrific). The only time we can properly speak of organic matter having the potential of human life is when we are speaking about the sperm cell or the egg, since either alone does not constitute human life. On their own, neither develops into anything else.

In any case, at the moment of fertilization there is a genetically unique being, and the scientific establishment does not dispute this – there is only dispute as to whether or not this being can be properly designated “human.” Of course, the only reason that such a designation matters is a modern conception about conception since in ancient times such a conception about conception was inconceivable. The procreative process was not comprehended as it is today. Of course, the ancients knew that there was a developmental process in pregnancy, and therefore a process from “unformed” (meaning incomplete) to “formed.” The ancients were also well aware of the ability to terminate pregnancy by various means. The Hippocratic oath, ascribed to the famous physician who lived some five centuries before Christ, clearly prohibits physicians from providing potions to induce abortion, and perhaps this is why, in light of so many physicians performing abortions today many laypersons mispronounce the name of the oath as “The Hypocritical.” Still, the only reason we debate the designation of the zygote as human life is our desire to be able to terminate this being at some point without guilt of homicide. If the extermination of this being was completely out of the question and

inconceivable, we would not be arguing or debating our conceptions about conception.

Indeed, in that ancient Christian writing of the first century of the Christian era known as the *Didache*, or as we find in the writings of Saint Basil the Great (of Caesarea) in the fourth century, the child in the womb, quote “formed or unformed,” is human and created in the image and likeness of God. No exceptions are cited. Abortions were accordingly designated murder. No exceptions are offered (and obviously rape and incest and danger to the life of the mother were realities in ancient times, perhaps even more common). The Christians were not unique in this view, as the example of the Hippocratic Oath indicates. Yet the Christians had a particular perspective on human life which, together with the Jewish tradition, set them apart from their pagan neighbors.

This unique perspective was, of course, faith in God the Creator of all things visible and invisible, seen and not seen. All creation was attributed to the free will of God who creates *ex nihilo* (“from nothing”). As the Preacher writes in the Hebrew Scriptures in Ecclesiastes, chapter 11, verse 5: “As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works

of God who makes everything.” Here, the conception and development of the preborn child is clearly the work of God, not simply a mechanistic biological process. Indeed, the Prophet Jeremiah attests to the *intentional* act of God in the creation of every person: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5).

And this is really the heart of the Christian teaching about those human beings who live in the womb and are not yet born: the beginning of every human life determined in the will of God, is an act of God, for we are “the work of His hands.” We may prefer to speak about human reproduction, but this is truly a misconception, for the uniqueness of each human being from the moment of fertilization is not a reproduction of anyone. Indeed, the very use of a form of the word “production” makes it sound like an impersonal mechanistic process, a characterization that I and the ancient Christian tradition rejects. If we use the word “procreation,” at least there is the sense of the creation of human life – not as an “emanation” of life from life, not as a simple unconscious survival strategy for Richard Dawkin’s conception of the “selfish gene,” a process we can comprehend and therefore control. Rather, procreation should remind us that despite

the genetic contribution of the male and female human beings in the process, the creative control is that of God the Creator.

Now there is a problem with such a perspective of human life as beginning at fertilization for those who share the cultural inheritance of what is known as “Western civilization.” We are tempted, even those of us who claim a different intellectual and theological tradition, to accept the connection between cognitive activity and human existence: I think therefore I am. The non-thinking, the non-conscious or the non-cognitive are not, by such a definition, really existent and therefore non-human. Such a life is really no life at all, and thus someone like Terri Schiavo can be starved to death—she wasn’t really a human life at all since her brain function and cognitive abilities were so severely impaired. All the more reason to de-humanize the human embryo prior to the development of the nervous system and brain. Of course, Orthodox Christians would not be so quick to conceive of human life in strictly psychological or sentient terms, identifying human life with cognitive ability to any degree. We do not exist because we think, we exist because we are given life by the Creator who loves us. We are loved, to quote Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, therefore we are.

Likewise, defining the beginning of human life with fertilization is problematic in another way. We know that fertilization does not necessarily mark the beginning of the human individual: identical twins—two individuals—can emerge from the same zygote, so fertilization may indeed be the beginning of two human lives. Yet it is the beginning of human life nonetheless, the number of human individuals notwithstanding, and the extermination of the zygote would amount to the termination of human life or lives.

Of course, problematic too in defining the beginning of human life with fertilization is the case of Jesus of Nazareth whom Christians from the beginning believed to be born of a virgin: “Born before all time of a Father without mother, and born in time of a mother without father.” While often offered as an example that human life begins with conception—for his conception is without doubt, though the manner of his conception is now widely questioned even by some claiming to be Christians—this instance cannot be claimed to argue human life begins with fertilization since Orthodox believe there was no fertilization in this unique case; at least there was no fertilization in the typical process of procreation known for every other human person: it is properly mysterious and miraculous, a

marvel not comprehensible. Yet this is because Jesus, being the unique Son of God the Father, was not conceived according to the fallen process of every other fallen human being. His conception was *freely* willed unlike that of you and me (we had no say in the matter!). Being the true Law-giver, Christ Jesus was not subject to the law of nature that determines—following the primordial fall and the ancestral sin—the manner by which every other human being comes into the world. Indeed, the ancient fathers of the Church—Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Maximos the Confessor for example—all suggest that the *form* of the creation of new human life is—like all human existence—touched by the corruption of our nature, the mortality of our nature. In some sense, unknown because it never occurred, there would have been a non-fallen, incorruptible manner by which human beings created in the image and likeness of God would have “multiplied and filled the earth.”

Now this points to what we may perhaps refer to as the negative side of understanding human life as beginning from the moment of fertilization, and this negative is the reality of death and mortality. By no means does this mean the process of procreation is bad or evil, for it is the means *designated* and, in some sense, willed by God once human beings fell by

their erroneous choice. The very process is marred by corruption and death, a condition chosen by humanity or at least the consequence of human choice. Both children and mothers are at mortal risk during pregnancy and childbirth, and many do not survive. Anomalies in genetic coding, hormonal or other environmental factors result in atypical physical conditions at birth for some children. And this marred process tied to death is fully mortal, even from the beginning of human life. If the reality of death demands the reproduction of the species, personal existence is largely irrelevant in this perspective, for persons do not survive. Survival of human life, the maturation process of the human person, also demands death: cells of our body are constantly dying as a necessary component to human development from the first moments following conception. Senescence (aging) is directly related to sexual reproduction in all mortal animal species (and all are mortal). In a paradoxical and even tragic manner, the process of dying is now a requirement of the survival of the human species. Persons must die so others may be born and live. Without the process of dying, the person could not mature and live. It is a vicious cycle from which mortal human beings cannot escape of their own accord.

Scientifically, we know – or at the least strongly suspect – that a great number of fertilized eggs, zygotes, never have the opportunity to complete the process of human development. Eggs are fertilized at a much greater frequency than thought in previous generations, and many if not most become non-viable for a variety of reasons. In many cases, women may be completely unaware of this, while in some they may be conscious of the tragic cessation of pregnancy in that most unfortunately named event of miscarriage (while “spontaneous abortion” is little better). This is definitely a problem: not for Christian teaching about the beginning of human life, but for human existence itself. Death is a reality of our existence in this world, but this itself gets to the heart of the Christian proclamation of the Gospel: that the dominion of death is in no way final or definitive for our existence: the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, God become human in all things save sin, overcomes through the third-day resurrection the very power of death. Death is trampled down by death. It is by our union with and in Christ that all human beings have the capability to participate in life everlasting, and this must – because of the love of God and His will that governs all life – include those who die in the womb as

well as those who die outside of it at any age. Death has no dominion over those who have joined themselves to Christ, who have put on Christ.

So what of those who never have the opportunity to consciously join themselves to Christ, to put him on in the act of faith? Are they condemned to non-existence, to damnation or annihilation? Are they confined to a limbo, an existence on the edge of heaven or hell?

This is not the tradition of the ancient Church, and such a view would not seem to the Orthodox tradition to be reconcilable to faith in a just, good and loving God. The technical response from my tradition would be that the mistake in such a view would be to psychologize life itself, defining life on the basis of consciousness (“I think therefore I am”) and individual qualities (good, bad, faithful, unbelieving). Such a view ultimately seems to prioritize the soul over the body in a Platonic fashion, as if it were really the soul that mattered while the matter of the body can be relegated to an inferior status—even as our scientific worldview has generally drawn the closest connection (if not an absolute identification) between mental processes, cognition, and the physical human brain. Yet it can also be readily shown that consciousness does not really define human life for most human beings since we generally consider those who are

comatose to be unconscious but still very much alive. They remain human. Why should this, logically, be any different at any point on the spectrum of human life? Do we suggest that the comatose have no relationship with God? Are the cognitively disabled less than human? Can we state something less for a less than fully formed human being in the womb? Would that not be an arbitrary determination?

We must be cautious to uphold basic Christian doctrines in light of these questions. First, the human being is a psychosomatic unity; neither a soul nor a body alone, without the other, is a human being. Second, we should not too readily confine our spiritual relationship with God to consciousness as we typically understand that term. We must respect that there may be something unconscious, sub-conscious, “unseen” and mysterious, unconceived and incomprehensible when it comes to the human being’s relationship with her or his Creator and Lord. We must allow for both the numinous and the mysterious. Third, we “look for the resurrection of the dead” as all Christian traditions confessed at least until recently. If Christ is not risen from the dead our faith is in vain, and if he does not raise us from the dead our faith in him is unjustified and useless. If there is no life after death, if death holds dominion over us, there is no

purpose to life at all—at least not one worth pursuing. Yet if the resurrection of human beings is a reality hoped for, anticipated and even sought (the actual meaning of the Creed’s statement that we “look [*prosdoko*] for the resurrection of the dead” as some translations phrase it), thoughts about the “destiny” of fertilized eggs (zygotes) or preborn children who do not live until birth and life outside the womb should produce no intellectual anxiety (which is something different than the real emotional anxiety and grief this may cause—theologically there is no serious issue while pastorally there are few more challenging and serious issues because death is the enemy of life and is always existentially painful and tragic).

I would like to note that my position is one that might appear to conflict with other Orthodox writers on this matter, but I think this would be an oversimplification. First, by identifying the beginning of human life with the moment of fertilization I do recognize that there is a more complicated developmental process as I alluded to with the mention of the case of human twins. I do not argue that the Orthodox position on the matter of embryonic development is a matter of consensus: it is not a matter of scientific consensus either, and it is certainly not yet fully

comprehended or comprehensible. I believe this is, actually, one area where our comprehension will be and is by design always lacking. I do not believe the process of procreation is simply a matter left to our control, anymore than is the movement of the stars and the ordering of the universe. Nonetheless, some Orthodox would suggest that human life proper would begin at the singularity of the zygote, with uterine implantation since following this point “twinning” is no longer possible. Yet we may be able to distinguish between the beginning of human life and the onset of unique human personhood. After all, in a fallen existence, human nature in general precedes human personhood – this is the essence of sexual reproduction of the species. However, this latter notion is, as I have suggested, an open question.

Second, addressing the conception of the child in the womb, I do not directly address related questions now posed by our technologically proficient culture such as cloning, IVF, and so forth, the understanding of the human embryo outside the womb. I think such matters are spiritually dangerous, for they do suggest that procreation is simply a matter of human will, and such an attitude is contrary to our faith in our Creator to order our life in a beneficent manner. By defining the beginning of human

life at the moment of fertilization, I believe that there are numerous moral and ethical questions that must be posed, whether the zygote is within the body of the mother or exterior in a medical laboratory. Yet it remains that our comprehension of the procreative and developmental process has provided the temptation to seize the mystery of life for ourselves and thereby treat it as something less than sacred and sanctified. Let me present a more vivid example of such spiritual danger to illustrate the erroneous attitude and ethos I mean to describe.

During a documentary about a possible end to human life on this planet, a young woman was asked by the narrator what she would do if she knew the world would come to an end one year from that day. Her answer, one of several that the narrator sought, brought a smile to her face as if she said something profound—and profound it was. She said she would want to have a baby so she would have the maternal experience prior to dying.

We often speak of a contemporary “culture of death” in our society, and for many reasons such a characterization may be true. Yet perhaps at the conscious level this is not really our culture’s foundation. It would seem to me that it is rather a “culture of me.” I often see parents

apparently seeking to gain meaning for their own lives *through* their children rather than imparting the meaning of life *to* their children. We seek in futile ways to secure our lives and our right to it—however we define our life—by removing the threat of the “other” whoever that may be: the preborn, the criminal, the enemy. Our love of our life precludes our love of the other, for love has become identified with feelings and emotion and a temporary happiness that is never sustained for long. We love being in love, and love has lost its true meaning as the state of self-less-ness; the Greek word *agape* may well derive from the combination of the privative alpha and *ego*, literally meaning “not me.” Unless love is in service to the other for *their own sake*, it has become self-serving, a self-love, the root of all sin. This poor young woman of the documentary vocalized this ethos exactly: “I would love to have a baby.”

Unless we recognize that our life is not our own, but is the gift of the ultimate and first “Other,” our uncreated Creator, God and Lord, we will be unable to love. Without love, any consideration, conception or understanding of the child in the womb becomes moot. Without love, we are simply ungrateful beings, and as Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) notes, in the final analysis atheism is the ultimate state of ingratitude.

Yet in love-authentic and sincere and grateful—we can only recognize the gift of life as the “Sacred Gift of Life” as Father John Breck named one of his excellent reflections on bioethics. Therefore, it is the mission of the Church not simply to argue and debate legalities, legislations, scientific definitions and ethics, necessary as this may be at times. We also should not fight for legal rights which really do not come from God, who bestows gifts and righteousness. Rather, the priority is to allow the love of Him who first loved us to flow through us to each and every human being so that the gift of life everlasting, procured for us in the death of Christ Jesus on the Cross and his triumphant resurrection from the dead for which this cathedral is named, will replace the need for and the futility of comprehension—of grasping, seizing and controlling—and come to envision and experience life in its authenticity, grace and abundance through our thanksgiving to God; to understand, or rather stand under His majesty and marvel with gratitude. This is the gift of *faith* in Christ Jesus our Savior, the life of the world. To Him be the glory unto the ages of ages. Amen.