

Richard Neuhaus on Faithful Citizenship

By Richard John Neuhaus

Richard John Neuhaus, who passed away January 8, 2009 <<http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/?p=1283>>, delivered these comments at the July 2008 convention of the National Right to Life Committee.

Once again this year, the National Right to Life convention is partly a reunion of veterans from battles past and partly a youth rally of those recruited for the battles to come. And that is just what it should be. The pro-life movement that began in the twentieth century laid the foundation for the pro-life movement of the twenty-first century. We have been at this a long time, and we are just getting started. All that has been and all that will be is prelude to, and anticipation of, an indomitable hope. All that has been and all that will be is premised upon the promise of Our Lord's return in glory when, as we read in the Book of Revelation, "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be sorrow nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." And all things will be new.

That is the horizon of hope that, from generation to generation, sustains the great human rights cause of our time and all times—the cause of life. We contend, and we contend relentlessly, for the dignity of the human person, of every human person, created in the image and likeness of God, destined from eternity for eternity—every human person, no matter how weak or how strong, no matter how young or how old, no matter how productive or how burdensome, no matter how welcome or how inconvenient. Nobody is a nobody; nobody is unwanted. All are wanted by God, and therefore to be respected, protected, and cherished by us.

We shall not weary, we shall not rest, until every unborn child is protected in law and welcomed in life. We shall not weary, we shall not rest, until all the elderly who have run life's course are protected against despair and abandonment, protected by the rule of law and the bonds of love. We shall not weary, we shall not rest, until every young woman is given the help she needs to recognize the problem of pregnancy as the gift of life. We shall not weary, we shall not rest, as we stand guard at the entrance gates and the exit gates of life, and at every step along way of life, bearing witness in word and deed to the dignity of the human person—of every human person.

Against the encroaching shadows of the culture of death, against forces commanding immense power and wealth, against the perverse doctrine that a woman's dignity depends upon her right to destroy her child, against what St. Paul calls the principalities and powers of the present time, this convention renews our resolve that we shall not weary, we shall not rest, until the culture of life is reflected in the rule of law and lived in the law of love.

It has been a long journey, and there are still miles and miles to go. Some say it started with the notorious Roe v. Wade decision of 1973 when, by what Justice Byron White called an act of raw judicial power, the Supreme Court wiped from the books of all fifty states every law protecting the unborn child. But it goes back long before that. Some say it started with the agitation for "liberalized abortion law" in the 1960s when the novel doctrine was proposed that a woman cannot be fulfilled unless she has the right to destroy her child. But it goes back long before that.

It goes back to the movements for eugenics and racial and ideological cleansing of the last century.

Whether led by enlightened liberals, such as Margaret Sanger, or brutal totalitarians, whose names live in infamy, the doctrine and the practice was that some people stood in the way of progress and were therefore non-persons, living, as it was said, “lives unworthy of life.” But it goes back even before that. It goes back to the institution of slavery in which human beings were declared to be chattel property to be bought and sold and used and discarded at the whim of their masters. It goes way on back.

As Pope John Paul the Great wrote in his historic message *Evangelium Vitae* (the Gospel of Life) the culture of death goes all the way back to that fateful afternoon when Cain struck down his brother Abel, and the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” And Cain answered, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” And the Lord said to Cain, “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground.” The voice of the blood of brothers and sisters beyond numbering cry out from the slave ships and battlegrounds and concentration camps and torture chambers of the past and the present. The voice of the blood of the innocents cries out from the abortuaries and sophisticated biotech laboratories of this beloved country today. Contending for the culture of life has been a very long journey, and there are still miles and miles to go.

The culture of death is an idea before it is a deed. I expect many of us here, perhaps most of us here, can remember when we were first encountered by the idea. For me, it was in the 1960s when I was pastor of a very poor, very black, inner city parish in Brooklyn, New York. I had read that week an article by Ashley Montagu of Princeton University on what he called “A Life Worth Living.” He listed the qualifications for a life worth living: good health, a stable family, economic security, educational opportunity, the prospect of a satisfying career to realize the fullness of one’s potential. These were among the measures of what was called “a life worth living.”

And I remember vividly, as though it were yesterday, looking out the next Sunday morning at the congregation of St. John the Evangelist and seeing all those older faces creased by hardship endured and injustice afflicted, and yet radiating hope undimmed and love unconquered. And I saw that day the younger faces of children deprived of most, if not all, of those qualifications on Prof. Montagu’s list. And it struck me then, like a bolt of lightning, a bolt of lightning that illuminated our moral and cultural moment, that Prof. Montagu and those of like mind believed that the people of St. John the Evangelist—people whom I knew and had come to love as people of faith and kindness and endurance and, by the grace of God, hope unvanquished—it struck me then that, by the criteria of the privileged and enlightened, none of these my people had a life worth living. In that moment, I knew that a great evil was afoot. The culture of death is an idea before it is a deed.

In that moment, I knew that I had been recruited to the cause of the culture of life. To be recruited to the cause of the culture of life is to be recruited for the duration; and there is no end in sight, except to the eyes of faith.

Perhaps you, too, can specify such a moment when you knew you were recruited. At that moment you could have said, “Yes, it’s terrible that in this country alone 4,000 innocent children are killed every day, but then so many terrible things are happening in the world. Am I my infant brother’s keeper? Am I my infant sister’s keeper?” You could have said that, but you didn’t. You could have said, “Yes, the nation that I love is betraying its founding principles—that every human being is endowed by God with inalienable rights, including, and most foundationally, the right to life. But,” you could have said, “the Supreme Court has spoken and its word is the law of the land. What can I do about it?” You could have said that, but you didn’t. That horror, that betrayal, would not let you go. You knew, you knew there and then, that you were recruited to contend for the culture of life, and that you were recruited for the duration.

The contention between the culture of life and the culture of death is not a battle of our own choosing. We are not the ones who imposed upon the nation the lethal logic that human beings have no rights we are bound to respect if they are too small, too weak, too dependent, too burdensome. That lethal logic, backed by the force of law, was imposed by an arrogant elite that for almost forty years has been telling us to get over it, to get used to it.

But “We the People,” who are the political sovereign in this constitutional democracy, have not gotten over it, we have not gotten used to it, and we will never, we will never ever, agree that the culture of death is the unchangeable law of the land.

“We the People” have not and will not ratify the lethal logic of *Roe v. Wade*. That notorious decision of 1973 is the most consequential moral and political event of the last half century of our nation’s history. It has produced a dramatic realignment of moral and political forces, led by evangelicals and Catholics together, and joined by citizens beyond numbering who know that how we respond to this horror defines who we are as individuals and as a people. Our opponents, once so confident, are now on the defensive. Having lost the argument with the American people, they desperately cling to the dictates of the courts. No longer able to present themselves as the wave of the future, they watch in dismay as a younger generation recoils in horror from the bloodletting of an abortion industry so arrogantly imposed by judges beyond the rule of law.

We do not know, we do not need to know, how the battle for the dignity of the human person will be resolved. God knows, and that is enough. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta and saints beyond numbering have taught us, our task is not to be successful but to be faithful. Yet in that faithfulness is the lively hope of success. We are the stronger because we are unburdened by delusions. We know that in a sinful world, far short of the promised Kingdom of God, there will always be great evils. The principalities and powers will continue to rage, but they will not prevail.

In the midst of the encroaching darkness of the culture of death, we have heard the voice of him who said, “In the world you will have trouble. But fear not, I have overcome the world.” Because he has overcome, we shall overcome. We do not know when; we do not know how. God knows, and that is enough. We know the justice of our cause, we trust in the faithfulness of his promise, and therefore we shall not weary, we shall not rest.

Whether, in this great contest between the culture of life and the culture of death, we were recruited many years ago or whether we were recruited only yesterday, we have been recruited for the duration. We go from this convention refreshed in our resolve to fight the good fight. We go from this convention trusting in the words of the prophet Isaiah that “they who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

The journey has been long, and there are miles and miles to go. But from this convention the word is carried to every neighborhood, every house of worship, every congressional office, every state house, every precinct of this our beloved country—from this convention the word is carried that, until every human being created in the image and likeness of God—no matter how small or how weak, no matter how old or how burdensome—until every human being created in the image and likeness of God is protected in law and cared for in life, we shall not weary, we shall not rest. And, in this the great human rights struggle of our time and all times, we shall overcome.