This Wednesday, January 22\textsuperscript{nd} marks the 41\textsuperscript{st} anniversary of the Supreme Court’s ruling Roe v. Wade. It is a long tradition at St. Thomas that on the weekend prior to the anniversary of this ruling, a guest speaker, often a lay-person involved with the Pro-Life movement is invited by our Outreach and Justice Respect Life Committee to give a reflection on the topic of respect for the life of the unborn. This year the committee invited me, as priest and pastor, to preach on this topic, which I gladly accepted. In preparing today’s homily I was informed that in past years some parents felt the speaker was too graphic or the topic too disturbing for young children. My presentation is not graphic at all - I focus on why we as Catholic Christians are called to protect and defend the life of unborn children. However, if any parent feels this topic is too sensitive, you may take your children to the gym now (if they haven’t already gone to the children’s liturgy of the word session). A host greeter will invite you back when my homily is concluded. (Pause for those who wish to leave)

I have also been told that preaching on the topic of abortion and respect for life needlessly brings up painful memories for those who have had a past experience of abortion. I believe Pope Francis wants the Church and her ministers to reach out to such persons, not in judgment or condemnation, but in mercy and compassion - to embrace you and invite you to that journey of healing and reconciliation that is available through post-abortion ministries. Information is available on our Diocesan website or confidentially through me. It is true that Pope Francis recently has stated that the Church has been too obsessed with the topic of abortion and sexuality and that it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time, which I agree. None-the-less, during his 15 years as archbishop of Buenos Aires and his 10 months as Pope Francis, Jorge Borgoglio has consistently defended the dignity of human life from the moment of conception to natural death. What I think Pope Francis means is that there needs to be a balance.....at some churches abortion and sex is the only topic you ever hear preached, and at other churches the Gospel of Life is never preached! It is my hope that at St. Thomas neither of these extremes is true!!
Respect for unborn human life has been a constant teaching of the Catholic Church from the very beginning. The issue of abortion and respect for life is not a new concern just in our times, or since the Roe v. Wade ruling 41 years ago. The earliest Christians relied not only on sacred scripture, but also the Didache – the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, in rejecting abortion. St. Augustine in the 5th century and St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century further developed the Church’s teaching that human life begins at the moment of conception. Modern science has not changed the Church’s constant teaching against abortion, but has underscored how important and reasonable it is, by confirming that the life of each individual of the human species begins with the earliest embryo. In the face of what Pope Francis has called the “throw away culture” of our times, in his address to the members of the diplomatic corps on January 13th, known as his “state of the world” address said that: “it is frightful even to think there are children, victims of abortion, who will never see the light of day”.

Our Old Testament reading for today’s Mass from Isaiah certainly lends itself to preach a reality that should deepen our respect for and defense of human life from the moment of conception. Listen to these words of Isaiah from today’s reading...”Now the Lord has spoken who FORMED me FROM the womb to be his servant.” In the Book of Jeremiah, the Lord even speaks more profoundly when he tells the prophet that “BEFORE I formed you IN the womb I KNEW you; I APPOINTED you.”

Just think!..... From the very moment of conception, God encrypts in each person a divine purpose for that person’s life here on earth. Therefore, from the moment of conception life has inherent dignity regardless of how that life will unfold. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin said it best when he described the Church’s teaching on life as a “seamless garment” – that we respect the human person’s life from the moment of conception, and every moment thereafter, until natural death. God’s definition of what person’s life has worth is quite different from our own definition which often sees the unborn, the physically or mentally challenged, the elderly, the sick, those is a coma, those condemned to capital punishment, as somehow not having any worth and therefore it’s justifiable to end their life.
Some argue that human life begins after a certain point in the embryo’s development and that the embryo isn’t really a person until that certain point. But to me, that doesn’t make any sense. For from the moment of conception until our last breath, we are always developing physically and cognitively – whether we are inside the womb or outside. From the tiniest cell at the very beginning to the fully physically developed and intellectual person we are today, we have always been a person in the process of becoming. And you wouldn’t be who you are today if you didn’t have a moment of conception!

Another way of thinking about how life from conception to natural death is an ongoing process can be summed up in the words of the prolific and famous artist Michelangelo. As he sculpted, Michelangelo claimed that he was uncovering a figure that already existed in the block of marble. He was not chiseling it or molding it according to his own set plan, but setting it free to be whatever God intended it to be.

Each and every one of us was brought into being for a reason. The vocation everyone sees is the obvious part of that reason. But hidden within is a deeper purpose that is not always known to us. We cannot choose it. We cannot plan for it. It is encrypted into our life by God. We are here in this place, at this time and with these people for a reason.

The sin of abortion terminates the already existing human person, frustrating God’s plan of that person becoming who and what God intended. It is mind boggling and sad to imagine that the person God created to discover the cure for cancer or AIDS, the person that God created to bring about diplomatic solutions for world peace, the person God created to enhance and bring joy to our lives by their gifts and talents – that those persons never got to fulfill their God given purpose because their lives were terminated before they were born. The 55 socks hanging on the clothesline at the back of the church represent the 55 million babies that have been aborted in this country since Roe v. Wade.

As we mark the anniversary this week of Roe v. Wade, I invite and encourage you to join me and our Life Committee in several opportunities to deepen your commitment to the Gospel of Life.
First, you are invited to stop for a moment following Mass today in the prayer space set up in the gathering and pray for the unborn, women in crisis pregnancies, and for an end to abortion.

In the privacy of your home or office, you can join our nation’s bishops in a Nine Days for Life prayer pilgrimage beginning January 18\textsuperscript{th} through 26\textsuperscript{th}. Access it at www.9daysforlife.com. Each day there is a brief intercessory prayer and reflection as well as a suggested act of reparation.

On the anniversary of Roe v. Wade this Wednesday, the Mass of “Giving Thanks to God for the Gift of Human Life” will be celebrated in our chapel at 6:30AM and 8:30AM. There will also be Eucharistic Adoration in the chapel from 9:00AM to 5:00PM on Wednesday. Sign-up for a half hour time slot before the Blessed Sacrament on the poster outside the chapel door, or just come and pray when you can.

And today in the narthex and gathering area, our Respect Life Committee has “precious feet” pins available for a donation to benefit Waterleaf Women’s Center.

And so we mourn the over 55 million lives that never got the chance to discover God’s plan for them. We pray that these souls, known only to God, will be named among God’s chosen ones.

We pray that women and men who have regretted their decision to abort the life of an unborn child will experience the forgiveness of God and be filled with a peace that only God can give. We pray that parents in difficult situations considering abortion as the only alternative may receive the emotional and physical support they need to choose life and at the very least consider putting their child up for adoption. There are so many couples unable to conceive who would give an adopted child the opportunity to discover God’s plan for them. We pray for those attending the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C. this week, that their witness and our prayers will touch hardened hearts. We pray for an end to abortion.

And we pray for ourselves.....that we discover the encrypted meaning God intends for each of our lives, and we thank God and our parents for the gift of our very life!