

**REMARKS BY ARCHBISHOP ALLEN H. VIGNERON
KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS RESPECT LIFE DINNER
BURTON MANOR, LIVONIA
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(As transcribed from digital audio recording at liturgy)

Vivat Iesus!

I want to begin with a word of gratitude, really heartfelt thanks, to Barbara Listing, leader of Right to Life Michigan, and to all her devoted associates and co-workers. To my brother Knights of Columbus, how proud I am that we all belong to an organization that continues to be faithful to the vision of Father McGivney, a vision of solidarity, a vision that says when we stand together we can protect the weak and the vulnerable. I want to say thanks to the civic officials who are present with us tonight, particularly I'm edified at the priests and religious who join us here tonight as a sign of support and care for all of you who are devoted to the pro-life cause. Indeed, my thanks to every one of you who's come here this evening, men and women from I think different faith backgrounds, certainly many of us Catholic, but from various backgrounds and walks of life, because our cause is worthy.

As Barbara said, today in the Church's liturgical calendar is the Solemnity of the Annunciation of our Lord. That event in salvation history which, we speak about at the beginning of the Angelus when we pray, the angel of the Lord declared onto Mary and she conceived by the Holy Spirit. Mary's *fiat*, her yes to the Archangel Gabriel's invitation, is a template for reminding us of the fundamental basis of all our pro-life work. When faced with the choice of saying yes or no, we say yes to life, it's that simple. We protect and defend life from the first moment of conception, no matter how small or supposedly burdensome such a life may be. Not only does our yes to life echo Mary's yes to God when he invited her to serve life, we, like her, speak our yes in the face of those who would all too readily offer reasons, pseudo reasons, to say no to life.

In considering how to respond to God's invitation, Mary had to face the fact that she was unmarried, would likely be ostracized, have to endure social stigma, and would jeopardize her betrothal to Joseph. And still, she said yes. In our day, we are called to help women and men and say yes to life. In doing so, whatever our present circumstances may be, tonight let us listen to the words of the Archangel Gabriel to guide our efforts in defense of life. What does the angel

say to us in order to help us say yes? It's this: Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to say yes to life.

This evening, while we are still absorbing the outcome from the recent struggle to keep abortion funding out of the national health care legislation, and still accessing the implications of what did and did not happen, let us pause, reflect, regroup, and move forward with those words ringing in our ears. Do not be afraid.

Perhaps one way to consider and embrace the angel's wise counsel not to be afraid is to treat our gathering tonight as something like what happens at a sports event when a time out is called or anyone gets a half-time intermission. Like athletes in a time-out or during half-time, we members of the pro-life cause are, I believe, given this moment to regroup, to refocus on our goal, to learn from our first half successes and failures, and then go forward renewed and recommitted to achieve victory in vindicating the right to life.

Since the founding of what we now know as Right to Life of Michigan, we have had our successes, and yes, our setbacks. To name just a few: In 1972, and we can, I think as Michiganians, be profoundly proud of this, in 1972 we voted to reaffirm by an overwhelming majority that abortion should not be allowed in our state. And yet, sad to say, shortly thereafter we found ourselves in the aftermath of the horrendous Roe vs. Wade decision that denied us our voice as a people and took away the right to life of the unborn. We have been blessed since that time also with a significant share of victories – our working to band Medicaid-funded abortions in this state; defeating Proposal B which would have allowed physician-assisted suicide; using the Peoples Override to support the ban on partial-birth abortion; our efforts to have legislation which promotes everything from parental consent to support for adoption. And yes, sadly, admittedly, we've had setbacks and obstacles. The passage of Proposal 2 which allows the destruction of human embryos, the tiniest members of the human family. A United States Supreme Court that still refuses to allow our state, and others, to protect innocent life in the womb. And, most recently, the failure of the passed health care legislation to ban abortion funding within the statute itself.

As I reflect on this most recent example in the events in our nation's Capitol, another sports metaphor comes to mind, a metaphor familiar to any basketball fan this time of year – March Madness – a term that refers to the unpredictable twist, turns, upsets, come-from-behind victories and last-minute defeats during college basketball's championships. Might we not say

that in Washington D.C., we pro-lifers have had our share of March Madness recently? And in an effort to tame that madness, I would like to comment briefly on these recent results.

True national health care, at a minimum, must ensure that we care for the health of all. To speak of health care reform means to improve health care. Any approach to health care that serves as a vehicle to take away the lives of the most defenseless members of the human family would be no reform at all. It's not even health care. I respect that there are many who think that the legislation that is moving toward the president's signature and the accompanying executive order do not allow our tax dollars to be used to pay for abortion. However, here we should aptly borrow a saying from our Midwestern neighbors in Missouri – Show Me. Show me in the statute how this promise will be kept. The executive order signed by the president states: it is necessary to establish an adequate enforcement mechanism to assure that federal funds are not used for abortion services. I agree with this sentiment. Nevertheless, the very fact that an executive order was needed means that the statute itself is defective. I pray that in our misgivings about this matter, we will be proven wrong and that we will see that our pro-life principles are respected.

So what do we do now? That's the question any contender asks during a pause in the struggle, during half-time or a time-out. That, it seems to me, is our question tonight as we regroup, refocus, and reaffirm our commitment to continue to defend life, we ask: What shall we do tomorrow and the next day, and on into the future? Let me begin to frame my answer by saying what we ought not to do, what we cannot let ourselves do. We must not let anger and frustration boil over into words and actions that we would soon regret. Let me be frank. I have heard that some have made threats of violence in the wake of the health care outcome. I, like you, condemn such threats and actions. We must always remember the basic principle, to do evil in order to accomplish good is really to do evil. Breaking one of God's commandments is not the way to advance his Kingdom. Not ever. If in the service of Christ's cause we act in an un-Christian way, we become a highly-effective ally of the very forces we set out to combat. That's not what it means to be pro-life, as I'm sure all of you in this room agree.

What do we do now? We begin again to work for the right to life and we work with the renewed vigor that comes from our purified hope. Yes, we are disappointed, but there is reason to hope and much work to be done. In particular, our focus now turns to the future and to the implementation of the health care legislation, and even when that's in good order, we still have a struggle ahead of us. All of you who are dedicated to enshrining the right of life into the laws of

our nation and state will have to follow the government's implementation of health care reform and work to ensure that the Congress and the administration live up to the claims that have contributed to its passage. In the implementation of the executive order or in any new legislation that will be required to address the statute's deficiencies, all pro-life citizens must be vigilant so that no taxpayer becomes complicit in the taking of an innocent life.

As pastors, my brother bishops and I, with the cooperation of our priests, will continue to speak the truth about the issues involved in assuring that the health care system that is now being established does not further the strength and the grip of the pro-abortion lobby on our society, and does respect the consciences of pro-life citizens. We pastors will support you in your duty to the nation to re-establish in our country the sound order of law in which innocent life is protected from conception until natural death. And all of us must pray. Pray for our elected officials to do the right. We must become partners with all who hold life sacred, whether they hold that conviction because of their religious faith or because of insight that follows from their rightly-ordered wills, all of us together, so that we can bring this voice of truth about life and its rights into the public square.

Not only is it useful for us at this moment to take to stock of where we stand and how to move forward, this hour is also a time to consider anew some of the first principles of the moral law that shape our actions in the defense of life. Our message is simple: we embrace and protect the dignity of every human person, the sanctity of human life from the tiny baby in the womb to the last moment of natural passing into eternal life. This is our cause, and our cause is good and is right.

The arms of love in our society need to keep extending wider and wider. Our country is greatest when the arms of protection extend to include men and women of every age, race, class, and religion. The bleakest moments in our nation's history have been when our laws have cut off members of the human community from the embrace of love and protection. The most progressive cause, the greatest civil rights issue of our day, is to keep extending those arms of protection to those most innocent members of our human family – the unborn.

As the servant of God, Terence Cardinal Cooke wrote, "*Human life is no less sacred or worthy of respect because it is tiny, pre-born, poor, sick, fragile, or handicapped.*" My friend, Cardinal Cooke's successor in New York, Archbishop Dolan, restates all of that with his plain sort of eloquence when he says, "*Everybody is somebody.*" If people ask us why we are

opposed to abortion, the simple answer is that everybody counts. Everybody is somebody. That's a positive, hopeful message, a message that promises joy and happiness to all those who embrace it. It's an idealistic message, a message that resonates with the hopeful young people whose numbers continue to grow at the annual March for Life in Washington. It's a message that invigorates those who pray in front of abortion mills day after day. Our pro-life message continues to resonate in countless pro-life pregnancy centers that reach out to those in need. Our pro-life message inspires countless volunteers who write letters, run for office, and work to pass legislation to protect life. Our pro-life message inspires my brother Knights of Columbus to so wonderfully, steadfastly, support the cause.

On this day in Lent, I think particularly of those who are involved in the Forty Days for Life. I want us to recall the good work that they are doing even now at this hour to advance the right to life and to end abortion. I take heart from their example and I hope you do too. I hope it gives you new hope. Their effort in these days just before Holy Week is a vivid reminder that God is the Lord and giver of life and that he has conquered death. He has sovereign over all human affairs and all peoples, and his plan for our race will eventually triumph. God is working out his purpose and it is inexorable. These days especially remind us that the living God is all powerful. His power so great that he used even death itself, the murder of his son, as the means to destroy death and give victory to life. So, even our setbacks, our disappointments, our heartbreaking disappointments, as long as we offer them to God for the advancement of his purpose in accordance with his will, these become steps on the road to the success of our cause.

Tonight, especially, I want to pay tribute to the work of Right to Life of Michigan and to my brother Knights, such good partners in this work. Tributes for all that's done in promoting, defending, and protecting life. That is to say, I pay tribute to all of you and I urge you again – persevere in taking Our Lady as your model, her “yes” is the model for our yes to life. As the angel said to Mary, “*Do not be afraid.*” My brothers and sisters, do not be afraid. Let us work together so that all in this land will echo Mary's “yes” to life.

Thank you for inviting me to address you.