

## **“PROFILES IN COURAGE”: WITNESSING TO THE TRUTH IN LOVE**

My morning routine is set in stone. Coffee first, bible to follow. Pondering the daily scriptures **necessitates freshly ground** and brewed **coffee**. I also use that time to check the daily Vatican *Bollettino*, which lately has arrived after its usual “Roman Noon” (5:00 a.m. CST) deadline—someone is dropping the ball! On January 21, a decree from the Congregation for the Causes of Saints included several unfamiliar names, while just one stood out—Dr. **Jérôme Lejeune**, (1926-1994) noted physician and geneticist. With the official declaration of his “life of heroic virtue” the now **Venerable Jérôme Lejeune** becomes eligible for beatification, should a miracle be attributed to his intercession. In 1958, it was Lejeune who deduced that **Down syndrome** (trisomy 21) was caused by an additional chromosome on the twenty-first pair. He **dedicated** the remainder of his life to researching treatments to improve these children’s lives.

On the occasion of accepting an award from the **American Society of Human Genetics** in San Francisco in 1969, Lejeune delivered a lecture, catching his audience off guard. He noted that, “if early detection of a chromosomal condition could be achieved...a decision could be taken whether such a pregnancy would be allowed to go to term or would be interrupted by an induced abortion.” He went on to ask rhetorically, “What do we know about the time at which a new human being comes into existence?” He presented a **hypothetical** in which a new research facility would be created— “The National Institute of Death.” Among its proposed “duties”: (1) **decree** on undesirable genes or chromosomes; (2) **deliver** unhappy parents from unwanted pregnancies; (3) **discard** embryos not fitting standard requirements; (4) **dispose** of newborns not reaching minimal specifications of normalcy; (5) **destroy, delete or decry** any human condition voted against by the above-mentioned board of advisors of the National Institute of Death. Talk about a “Mic drop” moment!

Imagine the **silence that descended** upon the auditorium as he spoke so facetiously (and alliteratively!) to his colleagues. He concluded his lecture, “For millennia, medicine has striven to fight for life and health against disease and death. Any reversal of this order would entirely change medicine itself...our duty has always been not to inflict the sentence, but to try to commute the pain. In any foreseeable genetical trial I do not know enough to judge, but I feel enough to advocate.” Lejeune knew he would be **shunned**, yet he proceeded out of **conviction**. He both foresaw where pre-natal screening was heading and acknowledged the difficulties involved with respect to genetic conditions. “People say, ‘The price of genetic diseases is high. If these individuals could be eliminated early on, the savings would be enormous!’ It cannot be denied that the price of these diseases is high—in suffering for the individual and in burdens for society. Not to mention what parents suffer! But we can **assign a value** to that price: It is precisely what a society must pay to **remain fully human**.”

It recalls the speech that Mother Teresa gave at the **National Prayer Breakfast** in 1994, in the presence of 3000 people at the Washington Hilton, among them President Clinton and the First Lady. Former Reagan speechwriter **Peggy Noonan** was present and said that an uncomfortable shifting in the seats was occurring as the diminutive nun spoke about parenthood and babies. People could see where it was leading. Mother Teresa spoke from the heart: “But I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because Jesus said, ‘If you receive a little child, you receive me.’ So every abortion is the denial of receiving Jesus, the neglect of receiving Jesus.” A cool silence descended upon the room, but only momentarily. Soon, from one corner of the room erupted applause, and it was soon followed by a **standing ovation** lasting for five minutes.

Lejeune received a very different response, reportedly writing to his wife, “Today, I **lost my Nobel Prize.**” Last week’s Vatican decree demonstrates that worldly honor—even a Nobel Prize—pales in comparison to the imperishable crown of victory awaiting those who are faithful to the Lord. Lejeune’s lecture pre-dated *Roe v. Wade* (1973) by four years. France legalized abortion in 1975. Yet, his hypothetical situation was truly **prophetic**. Look at how much came true. Such courage is **precisely the example** that priests and bishops should emulate. When I read his story, I ask God for the grace to speak forthrightly on these topics, without counting the cost. Still, I falter in the face of such amazing **profiles of courage**. Speaking truth to power sounds “anti-authoritarian” but when obedient to a higher truth, to God’s truth, it is charity. Few priests set out to divide; we aim to unify. But the question becomes, “What is the purpose of unity if the bar for ‘unity’ is so low that we clergy dare not even speak about abortion?”

The kerfuffle among some in the U.S. hierarchy last week is a good example. In his **capacity** as **President** of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Archbishop Gomez wrote a powerful yet respectful, statement to newly sworn-in President Joseph Biden. He pledged to work together where possible, while reaffirming the bishops’ conviction that the **continued injustice** of abortion remains the “preeminent priority.” **Not all** the bishops appreciated the **timing or tone** of the statement; one was especially vocal in his opposition. While many priests have sensed the tensions within our hierarchy, now it’s clear to all. Frankly, that’s not all bad. **Feigned unity** only undermines the unique role that each bishop plays as the chief teacher in his own diocese. We need principled courage.

- **Lent** begins Ash Wednesday, February 17. **Now is the time** to think about **how** you wish to observe the season devoutly this year. Plan your strategy now— consider what God may be calling you to give up. **Do not fear** challenging yourself. You’ll be better for it.
- No, it is not your imagination. We have been gaining **two and a half minutes** of daylight per day. It may not seem like much, but it quickly adds up. I’ve noticed that it is no longer dark when exiting the sacristy following afternoon confessions.
- Speaking of light— come to Mass on Tuesday, February 2 at 7:30 a.m. to celebrate Candlemas, the Feast of the **Presentation of the Lord**, one of the Church’s most ancient. Candles will be blessed and you may take a set home for use on special occasions.
- Archdiocesan priests are participating in a comprehensive inventory to assist us in our ministry. One assessment is based upon our answers to a computer survey. My feedback suggests I (1) have difficulty with tasks requiring high precision; (2) may neglect **details** crucial to project success and (3) tend to have a **low tolerance for detail** work. Now, I could **list plenty** of my own **faults**, but...I humbly suggest they check their algorithms on that score.
- While driving to my brother’s cabin in northern Wisconsin for a brief getaway, I noticed a full parking lot at a roadside establishment. “Wow, lots of people out on a Sunday afternoon,” I thought. “Is the **Packer game** on the radio,” came the voice from the passenger seat? Packer game? Ouch—I have paid zero attention to the NFL and was schooled on sports by my own mother!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector