



The Feast of the Holy Innocents and the Politics of Reproductive Health

by Lisa A. Honkanen, M.D.



King Herod was a master politician. In his quest for absolute power, however, he was consumed with fear, going so far as to execute his own family members who might jeopardize his kingship and control. When he felt *threatened* by the birth of the Christ Child, he sought to kill Him, too. But the Magi, whom he had cunningly commissioned to visit and report back with the newborn Messiah's location, were warned by an angel not to return with this information. Furious at the failure of his plan and feeling ever the more threatened, Herod commanded the slaughter of all male children in Bethlehem who were under two years of age, expecting that the Baby Jesus would be among them. These young boys, martyred so that Christ might be spared from the hands of Herod, are known as the Holy Innocents, and their collective massacre is commemorated each year on December 28, which is known as the Feast of the Holy Innocents.

The blood shed by the Holy Innocents gave witness to Herod's simple hatred for Christ, a loathing borne of fear and pride, a life with no place for God in it. Herod feared a world with God (literally) in it—because he would not be at the center. And so, many young lives were ended mercilessly and unjustly at the power of his human command. But Herod's blind fury and his merciless soldiers could not circumvent God's plan. Herod would not be able to destroy Him Who would redeem humanity and offer a path to salvation for all, including Herod himself.

In this third millennium, the blood of innocent children, unjustly marked for death, continues to be shed under a similar rationale. Too many young women (and those around them) are

conditioned to believe that motherhood will deprive them of freedom and opportunity, and that their actions carry no responsibility as long as they are in charge. Too many young men (and those around them) learn that fatherhood is for convenient situations only, and that an inopportune consequence (pregnancy) of libertine behavior is merely a nuisance easily remedied. Even parents *desiring* children are persuaded that the possibility of an imperfect child is better managed with a death sentence.

We see the fear of losing what one wants, being encumbered by the unplanned, and believing that one has dominion over everything imagined to belong to oneself are prominent factors driving many abortion decisions. On a personal level, they are basically the same emotions which deluded King Herod and led to the massacre of the Holy Innocents.

On a societal level, perhaps the injustice is more egregious. This past year has illustrated like never before that unfettered abortion access—the state-sanctioned, systematized shedding of innocent blood—is not merely a euphemistic “personal decision between a woman and her doctor,” but rather a structural, oppressive dogma of current-day political and cultural influences. Election campaign platforms blatantly touted a so-called “right to abortion”. Pro-life information was intentionally distorted and censored. Public policies supporting abortion access and proposed legislation to enshrine abortion rights took prominence in the public square despite valiant efforts to protect the most vulnerable human life in the womb.

The watershed moment occurred on June 24, 2022, when the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, overturning almost fifty years of essentially unrestricted access to abortion across the United States. Up to this point, anytime, anywhere, and for any reason, a preborn human life was at risk for willful termination sanctioned by our political, social and legal structures. Even Pope Francis described abortion as comparable to hiring a “hitman.” With the decision in *Dobbs*, the flawed reasoning behind *Roe v. Wade* was finally reversed, and protections for the pre-born could now be decided at the state level by the people. There was hope!

Indeed, that hope did bring some positive results, significantly restricting abortions and even shutting down abortion facilities in a number of states. At least in some places, abortion was seen for what it truly is: *not* a reproductive health service, but rather an assault on the natural result of a *healthy*, functioning reproductive system—a tragic intervention that immediately *ends at least one human life* each time it is performed and that *slowly destroys everyone else* involved.

In New York State, as if the Reproductive Health Act of 2019 were not enough, political leaders aimed to enshrine abortion in the state constitution and make New York an abortion tourism destination. Taxpayer dollars were directed to expand abortion capacity, fund those trips, pay for those abortions, and protect abortion providers; telemedicine chemical abortions were

championed; health plans were required to cover abortion services with no co-pays or deductibles; and a “study” of pregnancy resource centers was commissioned with the ulterior motive being to cripple these life-affirming centers with overbearing reporting requirements. These measures far outweighed the assistance offered to women who choose life. In the words of Pope Francis, “When we trust too much in ourselves and not in God’s grace, then the Evil One finds the door open.” Once again in history, worldly fears—losing political cachet, balancing budgets, admitting life is not ours to take—more deeply entrenched a culture of death.

But the Source of Life is more powerful than all of this. St. Quodvultdeus, the Bishop of Carthage whose mentor and teacher was the great St. Augustine, preached in a homily:

Why so fearful, Herod at the news of the newborn King? He comes not to cast you out but to conquer Satan. ... The babes unwittingly die for Christ. ... He makes them, though mute, fit witnesses to himself. But you are ignorant of all this, and you rage in your fear. You persecute the infants and serve Christ without realizing it.

The Holy Innocents died for the Child Jesus, so that He could die for us and give us Eternal Life. When we live a life with God in it we can find reason to die to ourselves embracing the mission to defend the holy innocents of this era. In this, we, too, can be witnesses to Christ, and can find the path to our salvation. Their silent screams will not be in vain. Life will be victorious.

The story of King Herod’s murder of the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem some two-thousand years ago is remembered and retold each year at this time, and still causes anger and outrage at its wanton cruelty. Yet, the number of children who died in that massacre pales in comparison with the sixty million-plus babies who have been aborted legally in America since 1973. In the nearly half-century since abortion was legalized, we have seen its catastrophic effects not just on the children who have died, but on men, women, children, marriage, the family, and on society as a whole. And, as with Herod, this has all come about because of fear and pride.

Our Lord told us: “Let not your hearts be troubled.” [Jn 14:1] Lest we lose heart, we should look to the Holy Family for guidance and courage. Each year, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Holy Family on the Sunday following Christmas, always close to the Feast of the Holy Innocents. When Herod issued his infamous decree, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt with the Christ Child. They left their “comfort zone.” Their love for Him was greater than the sacrifice they made by leaving their country, relations, work, home and everything they had known and loved, in order to protect this most precious Child: He Who is the “light [that] shines in the darkness” that the darkness cannot overcome. [Jn 1:5]

We, too, are called to make the sacrifice to leave behind our “comfort zone” and to defend the sacredness of every human life from its first moment of fertilization to its natural end. We must fight to enact and to uphold laws which support this most important truth. We must work to bring others from the darkness into the light of this truth and declare steadfastly that:

- No preborn child should ever be considered a threat. We have support services and adoption to help mothers and fathers protect life, even when it is difficult. If you are in need of help, please call: 631-476-LOVE (5683).
- No law or action to protect those not yet born should be viewed as a threat. After all, each of us is here only because our right to live was not violated.
- No mistake is beyond God’s forgiveness even if the wounds are deep. Project Rachel can help you find healing after an abortion loss. Please call: 516-766-2538 or 888-456-HOPE (4673).

Defending the gift of life must be appealing, and not threatening. In this, we should be mindful of our source of strength: God Himself. This is His work and we undertake it with joy. Proclaim the truth with confidence, holy optimism, and authentic mercy.

Let us renew our effort to proclaim the Gospel of Life in our prayers, our work, and the example we are to others. Let us banish any vestige of Herod in our own hearts and habits. It may seem discouraging at times but as Our Lord cautioned us: “Let not your hearts be troubled!” Pray, fast, and fortify yourself with the Sacraments, most especially the Holy Eucharist. For the Holy Innocents remind us of the importance of nearness to Jesus in all we do—indeed they gave their lives so we might have His Presence to give us strength in these battles!

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