

DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

# Office of Human Life, Family and Bioethics

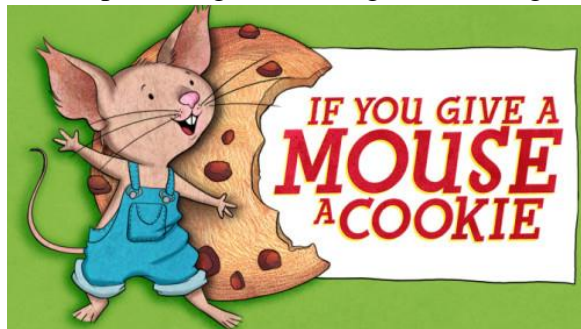
## **If You Give a Mouse a Cookie....**

by Fr John Wachowicz, St Rosalie, Hampton Bays

- *How does a culture reach the point where the birth of a child is seen as undesirable?*
- **If the culture needs a pro-life witness, it is a witness to the redemptive nature of suffering.**
- “For to you has been granted, for the sake of Christ, not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him” (Philippians 1:29).



One of my favorite books as a child was *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. The story is simple: having been given the cookie, the mouse wants milk; having been given the milk, the mouse wants a straw. This continues with similar desires arising and fulfilling until the mouse ends up wanting a cookie again, thus beginning the circle again. It's a simple story, but it works



because we have all experienced the consequences of satisfied desires. Having certain desires satisfied lead to other desires growing, or being stifled; for example, desiring to have that additional, unnecessary slice of pizza not only leads me to be full, but leads me to desire a nap. The interaction of our desires, thoughts, memories, emotions, and patterns of behavior lead to other desires and behaviors arising.

All of this was percolating in my head last week when engaged in conversation with a young man on the subject of ‘birth control.’ His point was simple and consistent: if people actually did what the Church proclaimed regarding contraception and abortion, then there would be many more births every year. He found this shocking, and was shocked that my answer was a resounding ‘yes.’ Ultimately, the disconnect between us had less to do with matters of the mind: this young man was capable of grasping the consistency of the Church’s teachings. When push came to shove, he didn’t see the birth of a child as desirable. Rather, he had succumbed to the rather prevalent contemporary notion that childbirth was at best, a personal decision deserving congratulations but no praise, and at worst, a scourge on the planet.

The question for me, upon further reflection, was how we have arrived here as a society. How does a culture reach the point where the birth of a child is seen as undesirable? A few things spring to mind, but we will focus on one of the more subtle causes. Very often, the pro-life movement is accused of being naive in regard to the hardships posed by pregnancies.

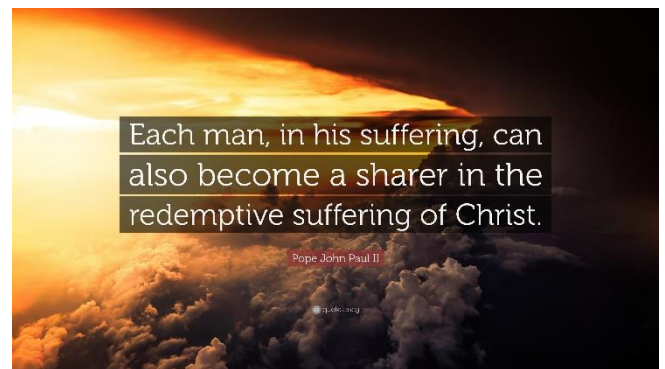
Obviously, for those of us involved in it, we are acutely aware of the difficulties it can bring: strained or broken relationships, future plans changed, and a number of other heartbreaks. Added to this can be the uncertainties of working, finances, and pace of life. Pregnancy itself can be very difficult for the mother physically and emotionally. Then, once all of this has happened and the child is born, there are years which bear innumerable joys among the baby and its family, but also sicknesses and hardships. On top of this, there is the realization that our world presents innumerable difficulties: an economic system which prioritizes capital over labor, widespread ecological disregard, political corruption, new diseases, and the uncertainty of chance can lead some to conclude that bringing a new life into the world would be an act of irresponsibility or cruelty.

The temptation in regard to this objection, I think, is to sugarcoat the situation. **In fact, to be pro-life is not only to affirm the joys and hopes of a new life, but also its sorrows and struggles.** It is impossible to read the New Testament without recognizing that Christ's redemptive work is extended not only to the 'good' parts of life, but also its 'bad' parts. As Pope St. John Paul II explains: **"The sufferings of Christ created the good of the world's redemption. This good in itself is inexhaustible and infinite. No man can add anything to it.** But at the same time, in the mystery of the Church as his Body, **Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering.** Insofar as man becomes a sharer in Christ's sufferings—in any part of the world and at any time in history—to that extent *he in his own way completes* the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world" (*Salvifici Doloris*, 24).

This is a profound and unique truth: on a human level, we search for meaning in events, and are routinely thwarted in this by evil. Since goodness and rationality are two sides of the same coin, it follows that it should be impossible to find any rationale to evil or suffering. However, Christ's redemptive work on the Cross sets the pattern for all human experience. Because of God's work, suffering becomes a means of closer union with Christ, an occasion for growth in virtue and sanctity, and the producer of greater effects in history. Consequently, the great saints of the Church have always recognized suffering as a friend along the path to heaven. From the ancient martyrs to the desert monks, from the political exiles to the lonely missionaries, **the Church has always raised up saints whose lives demonstrate that Christ works most unexpectedly and beautifully through the sufferings of His Bride.**

With this in mind, perhaps it is worth recalling our original question: how did we get to a point where the birth of a baby could seem so threatening? **I would propose that much of it, in light of what we have said, boils down to a great cultural avoidance of any suffering.** As moderns, it is easy to reach for the aspirin instead of cheerfully offering up a headache, or to lash out at someone who is rude to me, or to have to rush to the front of the line instead of waiting my turn, or to turn on the TV for three hours instead of spending time in prayer. **If the culture needs a pro-life witness, it is a witness to the redemptive nature of suffering.**

There are some simple ways to do this. One is with actual fasting from food. Every Lent I am struck with how terrible many Christians are at fasting because they refuse to suffer some discomfort. If I cannot suffer the minor discomfort of occasional hunger, am I being honest in my proclamation of the Gospel message of redemptive suffering? Another, and more public witness, is living the Christian call to joy. **St. Teresa of Ávila famously quipped 'May God deliver me from gloomy saints!'** It is always inspiring, as a priest, to visit a dying person



whose personality exudes peace and joy. We know the difference that prayer and sacraments make in our lives, but it is often our best-kept secret as disciples. **There is no more powerful witness to the Gospel than a suffering Christian with a smile on their face.**

Lastly, we must not lose hope because of poor results or rude opposition. Christ proclaims in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you because of me.” How it is to become discouraged that we are not ‘making progress’ in building a culture of life, or to be amazed that people who do not hesitate to kill a baby would slander their opposition. **What greater progress could we make than to share in Christ’s persecutions for the sake of the little ones?** If the Cross we have been handed is to continue fighting this for our entire lives, then we bear it joyfully and persistently.

Overall, then, this is the witness that we continue to give. If you give a mouse a cookie, he will want a glass of milk. But if you preach redemptive suffering to a culture sinking in nihilism and hedonism, you give them the tools to transform lives and society. If even persecution, sickness, and pain are occasions of joy to the Christian, then how much more the gift of a new life? The culture of death is built by those who would avoid suffering by any means possible. As Catholics, our greatest ally in this battle is our proclamation are the words of St. Paul: **“For to you has been granted, for the sake of Christ, not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him” (Philippians 1:29).**