

The Feast of the Holy Innocents & the Reproductive Health Act

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 (Who is Truth personified), 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.

“For when kings’ wrath is stirred by fear for their crowns, it is a great and inextinguishable wrath.”¹ And as Herod “mocked by the Magi spent his fury on the children”² in the massacre of the Holy Innocents, we see history repeat itself today in a world where abortion is viewed as a so-called “right,” a crown of sorts. Whether any woman’s abortion is a means or an end to power, the mere diminishing of legal access to abortion warrants fury and rage for the Herods of this Age—a fury spent on the children—even when those limits are based on medically reasonable grounds. They will go to any lengths to guarantee the unrestricted legal sanction to shed the blood of *one’s own* flesh and blood.

In recent years, there have been numerous pro-life victories at the local, state and federal levels. For example, polling indicates a growing trend among the American people in favor of pro-life

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea* (London: John Henry Parker, Oxford, 1841), 82.

² *Ibid.*

laws. Indeed, several states have enacted legislation that restricts abortion in meaningful ways. The most prominent in the news are Mississippi's "Gestational Age Act" which bans abortions after fifteen weeks and Texas' "Heartbeat Act" which prohibits abortion after a fetal heartbeat can be detected (at about six weeks); but there are many more indications that the sanctity of human life and the facts of medical science are winning hearts and minds—because truth is powerful. In fact, in a few short months, we expect to hear what may be a landmark decision by the Supreme Court in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* which challenged the Mississippi law and potentially could overturn *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. This would protect millions of children and their mothers from the grave harm of abortion. So yes, progress in protecting unborn human life is positively undeniable.

But these victories represent grave threats to the faux crown of abortion rights and the politicians whose power comes through their support of unfettered access to abortion. Unsurprisingly then, these masterful politicians have felt *threatened*. And like Herod, to protect their selfish political interests, their response has been to fight back by authorizing more death. In New York State, in 2019, we saw passage of the "Reproductive Health Act." This radical law removed all restrictions on abortion up to birth; allowed non-physicians to perform abortions and loosened other safety measures to protect the health of the mother; allowed for withholding medical treatment for babies who survive failed abortions (amounting to the legalization of infanticide); and decriminalized acts of violence committed against an unborn child. In order to secure their own political interests, elected officials in our state voted in favor of a law that radically expanded abortion rights that not only kills unborn children, but which also places their mothers at risk.

And it didn't stop there. This year, New York's new governor outlined an aggressive plan to reinforce this deplorable law. Under this agenda, state agencies will promote abortion propaganda and a new "Patient Bill of Rights," telehealth access to medical abortions will be expanded, and on-line information unfavorable to abortion could be censored. At the same time, there was a narrowly unsuccessful attempt to codify abortion access at the federal level in the "Women's Health Protection Act"—a *national* Reproductive Health Act, if you will. Meanwhile, the bipartisan, longstanding Hyde Amendment (which prevents taxpayer dollars from covering abortions in the U.S.) and strong conscience protections for healthcare workers are being dismantled while a "human infrastructure" bill will finance programs unfavorable to the dignity of women's real reproductive health needs as well as protections of the unborn.

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, and children, on marriage and the family, and on society as a whole. And, as with Herod, this has all come about because some have felt threatened by the "Truth."

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 unborn 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.
- No law or action to protect the unborn should be viewed as a threat. After all, each of us is here only because our right to live was not violated.
- Past mistakes can be healed.

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.

So this year, let us make an extra effort to proclaim the Gift of Life in our prayers, our work, and the example we are to others. It may seem discouraging at times but “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.

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