

Honouring Life

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Dedicated to the memory of John Muggeridge.*

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Professor Peter Singer, a Professor of—what did you expect?—“ethics” at Princeton University, claims that there are two characteristics, rationality and self-consciousness, that must co-exist to make one a “person.”

Now since animals, like whales and dolphins, dogs and cats, etc., are both rational and self-conscious, they should be held to be “persons,” according to Prof. Singer, and their lives legally protected; but since the unborn, and the recently-born, and people with cognitive impairments like Alzheimer’s disease, are not self-conscious or fully rational, they are not “persons” and their lives can be aborted or euthanized without legal restriction or moral compunction.

What do you think of that?

Professors have been known sometimes to say batty things; that is half the charm of the absent-minded Professor. But Dr. Peter Singer is an influential bio-ethicist; he holds an endowed Chair at Princeton University; and his views are heard with respect in the high councils of the medical profession and of Government.

My former employer, Western University, has not yet seen fit to confer an honorary degree on Dr. Singer, but given that Western gave Canada’s most notorious abortionist, Dr. Henry Morgentaler, an honorary degree last June, perhaps it is only a matter of time. Or perhaps it is bootless to ascribe logic or consistency of purpose to such a pitiful spectacle as what the postmodern University, like Western, has become.

The cruelty and absurdity of what Professor Singer advocates would have been self-evident to our fathers and grandparents, most of whom did not have the dubious privilege of a University education. But today Peter Singer’s comments are taken seriously. Why is that?

In part, it is because we live in a credulous age. In part because, as the Terry Schiavo case demonstrated, there are individuals and organizations

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who want to bring an end to lives of people who they consider a public burden. In part, it is because we have turned our backs on the Judeo-Christian principles upon which Western civilization was founded.

Tonight, I want to speak to you about one of those principles, the concept of "Honour." And what, you may ask, has honour to do with the pro-life movement? Well, a great deal, as I hope to demonstrate.

I confess that when I began to research my subject, my heart sank; I discovered that the University Library, which boasts well over a million titles, has precisely three dealing with honour. The London Public Library has one. That piqued my curiosity more. Why is so little said or written about honour? Is honour even relevant today? What does it mean? Those are some specific questions I should like to consider.

The most famous answer to the question: "What is honour?" is, I suppose, Falstaff's answer (in *Henry IV, Part 1*). Falstaff, lovable rogue and villain, must press an army, and he recruits the dregs of society—vagabonds and knaves, tapsters and thieves, prodigals and villains, "the cankers of a calm world," Prince Hal calls them. When Prince Hal remonstrates: "I did never see such pitiful rascals," Falstaff replies: "Tut, tut, mortal men, Hal, mortal men. Fit to stuff a cannon."

Now this, I submit, is precisely what the pro-life movement is made up of: mortal, fallible, men and women, ordinary erring people, fit to stuff a cannon, or fit to stuff an envelope, fit to join a life chain, fit to write a protest letter. Nothing remarkable, not many heroes, just ordinary people whose common sense and morality tells them that creatures made in the image and likeness of God are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect from conception to natural death.

In Shakespeare's play, when the noise of battle can be heard, Falstaff confesses that he would like to run away and hide, but ". . . honour pricks me on." Then follows his famous soliloquy on the meaning of honour:

Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honour set a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? Air—a trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon—and so ends my catechism.

This delightful but cynical, you might say "postmodern" view of honour, is prevalent today in Canada.

Now those of you who have studied English literature will know that William Shakespeare was steeped in the Bible. The Bible considers honour

to be much more than Falstaff's "mere scutcheon."

In fact, unlike the library catalogue which turns up so few references to honour, the Bible overflows with it; more than 50 references in the Old Testament, at least 35 in the New Testament, not counting 15 or so additional references to "honourable." That fact gave me my first clue as to what "honour" means. It means honouring God.

The Oxford English Dictionary includes "reverence" and "veneration" as synonyms for the word "honour." These words are applied almost exclusively to the worship of God.

For those of us in this post-Christian era who retain a vestigial memory of Scripture, some of the biblical references are familiar. "Honour thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the earth." Or, God's promise to Israel in the first book of Samuel: "Them that honour me, I will honour." Or the Psalmist's hymn of wonder and praise: "When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast made: what is man that thou art mindful of him; and the son of man that thou visitest him? . . . Thou hast crowned him with glory and honour . . ." Or this saying of Jesus, comforting to anyone who pontificates: "A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country . . ." And, finally, in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation that came to Saint John on the island of Patmos, when he dreamt of a second coming of the Lord, when men shall bow before Him, and He shall receive "blessing and honour and power for evermore."

In the Bible, "honour" sometimes refers to the regard in which God is to be held; at other times, it refers to the inner state of a person, an honourable man, someone who discerns a just balance between one's obligations to God and one's duties to one's fellow men. So honour originates with honouring God; He is the Creator and preserver of life, the final moral judge who will reveal all hearts aright. But honour extends to our obligations as human beings to our fellow citizens.

Let me give an example. Thomas More [1478-1545] was a man who honoured God. He was the most powerful man in King Henry VIII's government, knighted for his exemplary service to King and country. But when King Henry insisted on marrying young Anne Boleyn and divorcing his wife, Catherine, and when the King demanded that Sir Thomas More swear to the Act of Succession, More refused. He declined to speak publicly against his Sovereign, but nor would he swear the required oath. Robert Bolt's moving play *A Man for All Seasons* dramatizes the struggle between More, who insisted on remaining silent, and the King, who demanded More's acquiescence if not public support.

Now why did the King insist that Thomas More declare himself in favour

of the King's remarriage? Well, precisely because More was known to be the most honourable man in the realm. If More approved of the King's divorce and remarriage, everyone would think that it must be right.

Sometimes I think this is the most important role the pro-life movement has played—to be a silent witness to honour the right; we are often mocked, sometimes reviled, always it seems ignored, but we bear a *constant* witness that even in these dark times not everyone looked the other way when the unborn and the vulnerable were left unprotected.

After a sham trial, Thomas More was sentenced to death and executed on July 6, 1545. As he ascended the gallows, More told the expectant crowd that he died “. . . the King's loyal servant, but God's servant first.” Now that is honour.

Two centuries later, an English vicar named Frederick Faber (1814-1863) thought of Thomas More and wrote a hymn to honour, a hymn that became one of the best known hymns of Christendom, although now banned from most Protestant hymnals as “sexist”:

*Faith of our fathers, living still
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword,
O how our hearts beat high with joy
Whene'r we hear that glorious word!*

*Faith of our fathers, holy faith,
We will be true to Thee till death.*

Pro-lifers are people committed to the faith of our fathers, a faith that says the King's law is entitled to respect, but we are God's servants first.

Here a brief biographical explanation. I came to the pro-life movement at its beginning. In 1968 Justice Minister Pierre Trudeau had introduced Criminal Code amendments which, among other changes, were to allow legal abortions. Abortions became legal if three physicians on a hospital therapeutic abortion committee were prepared to certify in writing that continuation of a pregnancy would endanger a woman's life or health.

In 1970, the first full year of legalized abortion, there were 11,000 legal abortions. Despite modern medical advances reducing the risks of pregnancy, within a decade that figure had risen to over 100,000 abortions in Canadian hospitals. Then, in its *Morgentaler* decision on January 28, 1988, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the Criminal Code restrictions entirely, as being contrary to Canada's newly-minted Charter of Rights—another Trudeau legacy. Since 1988 Canada has been unique among countries in the Western world in having no law on abortion.

As abortion was legalized and flourished, the Canadian pro-life move-

ment sprang up, and for 4 decades it has spanned all political parties, all religious denominations, all distinctions of class and race.

My first involvement came in 1970 when I moved from Toronto to Ottawa to teach law at Carleton University. At a dinner party one evening a young woman asked me what I did and I said I taught law, including Civil Liberties. “Good,” she said, “you can teach the Civil Liberties position on abortion.” “Oh, and what’s that?” I asked her. “You know,” she replied, “a woman’s right to control her own body.” Now this woman was a school teacher, and when I realized that this was the depth of her understanding, and this was what she was telling elementary school students, I knew I had to get involved in pro-life advocacy. In those early days I had the privilege of working with many of the founders of Canadian pro-life; people like Dr. Heather Morris; Joe Borowski; Dr. Morris Schumiatcher; Ursula Appolini and Gwen Landolt; Dr. Barry de Veber and Dr. Harley Smythe; George Grant and John Muggeridge; and Father Alphonse de Valk.

And that honourable roll-call brings me to the second meaning of honour—honouring life.

Here again, the Bible is our sourcebook; it says: “I have set before you this day life and death; choose life” (Deuteronomy). “See,” says the prophet Isaiah, “I will not forget you . . . I have carved you on the palm of my hand.” The Psalmist says: “In God’s favour is life; . . . weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.” And Jesus said: “I am come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly.” From the first page of Genesis to the last page of Revelations, the Bible says “Honour life.” The pro-life movement has sought to do that.

Yet another aspect of honour is the honour of one’s country. But today this raises a question: what if one’s country is no longer worthy of honour?

Whether Canadian law is any longer worthy of respect is a large and disturbing question; I have spent much time in recent years writing on this topic and I will not attempt here to summarize my conclusions. Let me say just this: Canada’s lack of protection of the unborn is the legacy of several Liberal Prime Ministers—Pierre Trudeau, John Turner, Jean Chretien, and Paul Martin—each one of whom was a professed Roman Catholic. Yet the greatest man of our generation, the late Pope John Paul II—a bright and shining light indeed—in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, The Gospel of Life, wrote that a Christian must not respect laws, or even comply with laws which are contrary to God’s law.

I was born in Canada and, with only occasional forays abroad, I have lived here all my life. Yet I understand Canada less and less and feel ever

more a stranger here. Canada for me has become a foreign country in many ways.

A country where Linda Gibbons is repeatedly imprisoned because she prays within 40 meters of an abortuary, but where the abortionist who practices his grisly craft there, Dr. Henry Morgentaler, is honoured by Western University. Canada has become a virtual one party state where the most significant decisions are taken not by members of parliament, whom we elect, but by unelected judges. A country where the Queen's representative is chosen from the CBC's chattering classes, people congenitally hostile to monarchical government. I could go on, but you get my point.

I do not say such things to undermine your patriotism, although I agree with Dr. Johnson that blind, unthinking patriotism is "...the last refuge of the scoundrel." Rather, I say these things because, if we are to honour our country, we must be vigilant when we see the bedrock principles of our country, democratic accountability, parliamentary supremacy, and the rule of law, undermined. C. S. Lewis put it this way in his book *The Abolition of Man*: "We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst."

The best example of honouring one's country is the soldier. So let me ask: What is the present condition of Canada's military? Do we any longer have armed forces capable of bringing honour to our country, or have our armed forces been systematically demoralized and deconstructed? One has only to ask the question to answer it. In his poem, "The Soldier's Return," Robert Burns writes:

*For gold the merchant ploughs the main,
The farmer ploughs the manor;
But glory is the soldier's prize
The soldier's wealth is honour!
The brave, poor soldier ne'er despise,
Nor count him as a stranger:
Remember he's his country's stay
In day and hour of danger.*

An illustration of honouring one's country comes to us across 26 centuries. Six centuries before Christ, the Romans were at war with the Etruscans. When the Etruscans marched on Rome, the Romans were greatly outnumbered. A messenger came to the capital to tell the Romans that thousands of Etruscan soldiers would soon be at the bridge over the Tiber River. One old man, Horatius, much too old for military service, went out and found two friends, and the three of them buckled on old, rusted armour, took up their

ancient spears, and went out to stand on the bridge. They thought they might delay the Etruscan army long enough for Roman citizens to hew down the pillars on which that bridge stood. And that is exactly what they did. Was it heroic? Well, twenty four hundred years later, the English poet and historian Thomas Macaulay, recalled what they did in this verse:

*Then out spake brave Horatius,
The Captain of the gate;
"To every man upon this earth
Death cometh soon or late.
And how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers
For his country and his gods?"*

I sometimes think of pro-lifers as like Horatius standing on the crumbling bridge that is Canada, a bridge from which the foundations have been hacked away, determined to bear witness to the truth; for its own sake, for God's sake, for honour's sake, and yes, for Canada's sake.

Now through most of my years in the pro-life movement, I confess that I have been deeply pessimistic about our chances of changing anything; from the initial legislation in 1968, through the petition of one million signatures in the 70s, to the 1988 Supreme Court *Morgentaler* decision, to the Court's lowering the age of sexual consent in the 90s, right up to last June when Western University went ahead, despite widespread alumni protests, to honour an abortionist, the Canadian pro-life story is one of unbroken parliamentary and judicial defeats. Again and again we lose; yet your presence tonight is proof that we are not defeated.

Recently, however, and rather to my surprise, I have become more optimistic about the pro-life future. There are three reasons for this: First, thanks to ultrasound, sonography, and other medical advances in fetal imaging and treatment, no rational person can any longer deny the humanity of the unborn. In the early days, abortion advocates used to say that a fetus was just a blob of tissue, so abortion had no greater moral significance than, say, an appendectomy. Medical advances mean that those days, and those arguments, are gone forever.

Second, several recent studies suggest that the younger generation (those under 30) are more opposed to abortion than their parents were. At least in the United States, where anti-consensus thinking is not yet a crime or a human rights violation, young women, particularly, seem to be more strongly pro-life than we had any right to hope.

Third, history suggests that systems constructed entirely upon lies cannot

stand forever; the pro-abortion State must contort itself in ever more bizarre and despotic ways in order to sustain the abortion related lies. I retain a perhaps naïve belief that at some moment, and without much forewarning, the whole edifice of abortion lies, like the Berlin wall, will crumble and fall down before our eyes.

The fourth kind of honour that I want to mention is the honour of the regiment. This kind of honour is unique to military and para-military organizations and it consists of pride in past accomplishments and *esprit d'corps*. As an outsider who never served in the military, it would be presumptuous of me to hold forth about something I have not experienced. But we do experience a measure of this with battles in the pro-life movement.

Let me tell you one true story that illustrates this kind of honour, a story from the first world war related by Walter McPeak.

Two members of the same regiment had fought in the trenches of France. During an attempted advance one man was struck by a German bullet. In the trench, the other man asked his commanding officer for permission to venture out into no man's land to recover the body; at first the officer refused, saying that his friend was almost certainly dead and he would be risking his own life to no purpose. But the first soldier persisted, and the officer finally consented. So over the top the soldier went, and just as he reached his comrade, the wounded man died. Somehow that soldier made it back to the trench but without the body. "You see," the commanding officer said, "You risked your life for nothing." "No," replied the soldier, "he was conscious when I got there and he said: 'Tom, I knew you would come, I knew you would come.' Then he died. I did what he expected of me and that is reward enough."

In the pro-life movement, we seek to bear witness to the truth because God expects that of us, and we expect it of ourselves, and that is reward enough.

Now I began tonight by talking about Falstaff's cynical view of honour; but, you know, William Shakespeare contains universes within himself. In his play *King Henry V*, the year is 1515. The young King stands upon French soil on St. Crispin's day, to prepare his men for battle. Do you know any words on honour more rousing than these?

*This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered,
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;*

*And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap, whiles any speaks,
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.*

The final kind of honour I wish to mention—and you can see now that honour is a protean concept—is honour of tradition. That is not a popular notion today. We are a society that deifies change and worships the new. We forget that we do not exist only in the present moment. We have a past—and we owe ancestral obligations to those who sacrificed for us, just as we owe obligations to the future, to our children and children's children.

That wise old warrior, G. K. Chesterton, had a wonderful phrase for this: He called it “the democracy of the dead.” In his classic work, *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton wrote: “Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to them being disqualified by the accident of death.”

I have an illustration of this drawn from the milieu in which I spent most of my working life—the University. During the 1960s, that era when everything seemed up for grabs, the Dean of a Canadian University decided that it was time to shake up his very traditional Philosophy Department. Enough of a stale curriculum full of ancients like Plato and Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas—those who today are derisively called DWEMS (Dead White European Males). Full of the democratic enthusiasms of the moment, the Dean decided to poll the students, and he sent each a letter asking whom they would choose to study. Imagine his surprise when many letters came back from students saying they would like to study Plato and Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. The Dean called a meeting and said to the student representatives: “Look, why are you being un-cooperative? Don't you want to venture out on something new?” And one student replied: “Yes, Sir, we are interested in new things, but how can we test something new until we know what was truly great in the past?”

For the rest of his career that Dean would relate that story whenever some young Turk wanted to do away with long-standing tradition.

In the year 1900 the British Antarctic explorer, Ernest Shackleton placed this advertisement in the London Times: “Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success. Ernest Shackleton.”

Shackleton later said that it seemed to him as if “. . . every man in Great Britain were determined to accompany me, so great was the response.” And those few that did accompany him were rewarded with the honour that flows from self-sacrifice and integrity.

So what have I said to you tonight?

I have suggested several different meanings of honour, and I have tried to give an illustration of each. Honour of God; honour of life; honour of Country; honour of the Regiment; and honour of tradition.

In the end, all of these kinds of honour depend upon integrity. If there is no honour at the heart's core, there can be no other kind of honour. Pericles, the 4th century orator, general and statesman who presided over the “golden age” of Athens, in his *Funeral Oration* said: “It is only the love of honour that never grows old; and honour it is, not gain as some would have it, that rejoices the heart of age and helplessness.”

For the better part of half a century, the pro-life movement has stood honourably and has stood for honour: for the defence of human life; the honour of God; the honour of country and tradition. It has stood up for the weak and undefended.

I am honoured to be part of the pro-life movement, and I am honoured to have been your guest and to have been able to say this to you tonight.