

The Courage to Embrace Life

McAllen Pregnancy Center Anniversary Banquet

May 7, 2010

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One of the great blessings about growing up in South Texas is the influence of the Spanish language, and the whole culturally vivid tradition that sustains it, on our families. We generally move easily from one language to another. Even if one is not conversant in Spanish, growing up in South Texas means that generally we understand the implicit sense of things whenever someone we know and love moves from one language to another. This is a cultural gift we should not fail to appreciate.

When I was growing up I used to hear certain phrases, fairly common in Spanish conversation. We still hear them, and use them. They are expressions often spoken rather like a sigh, something to mark a passage of time, an event, or the response to a situation. Not exactly *dichos*, or *sayings*, they are more like common expressions in response to life. Beneath them are years of experience and understanding. I am fairly certain these turns of phrase would ring familiar to many of you here this evening.

I would like to use some of these phrases to speak about what it means to work for a culture of life, about what it means to take a stand in favor of the unborn child.

The first phrase is a description of what a person can feel like when something unexpected happens, a personal disaster that from one moment to the next throws everything into question.

Se me cerró el mundo. *The world closed up on me*, we would say in English. When the world closes up on you, it is usually because something unexpected befalls you. All of a sudden, the bill collector showed up demanding the rent, no more extensions. Or, the help you were counting on to get you through a difficult time, disappeared. Whatever the cause, the experience is one of everything closing in on you, of having no recourse, of having no way out of this dark cloud that suddenly envelopes you. Your world is this dark cloud closing in upon you. The phrase also names an experience of isolation. There is no one to turn to. You are alone in this crisis.

I think we have to admit that these experiences happen to us all, and we have all felt at one time or another that the world was closing in on us. Sometimes these are big crises, sometimes small.

But we have to admit also that when a young woman suddenly finds herself unexpectedly with child, she can experience a kind of fear and isolation that can make her feel that she has no one to turn to, no one to take her part. Perhaps she fears the

abandonment of her boyfriend, or the rejection of her parents, or the loss of a job, or the end of a chance to finish school. Whatever the source of her fears, the feeling *se me está cerrando el mundo*, is very real, and often leads to panic and a rush to make a quick decision to make things like they were before.

Now then, often when I was growing up, when someone said *se me cerró el mundo*, they did so while telling a story about a personal experience. The fact that they were telling the story usually meant that there was something after the crisis, something good that happens to bring the story to a resolution. And so, the all-important two words, *Y luego... And then*, most often immediately followed. This marks the turn of the story, the human experience of feeling helped, rescued, touched by the help of someone else.

Se me cerró el mundo, y luego, un amigo de trabajo me prestó ayuda. Y luego, indicates the source of help that came forward, through the intervention of someone else, a helping hand. For a Catholic, the intervention may most often come through the hand of a family member, friend or neighbor, but we know that it is also a manifestation of a God who looks after us by putting good people in our path. For the Catholic faith involves a deep sense that God is a God of providence, one who looks out for us by inspiring someone to come to our aid.

In many ways I might add, because it was forged in an age of faith, the Spanish language communicates this same sense of providence. That is why, for example, when something unexpected happens, like when your car breaks down and you cannot make a trip you were planning, you hear: *Es que Dios no quiso*. This means that God did not want you to take the trip, which really means, He was looking out for you.

What we must realize is that for many young people in difficult situations, there is lacking a sense of where the help they long for can come from. Families are broken and distant, friends are sometimes too busy to bother with our worries; many young people wonder if there is anyone who cares enough to extend a helping hand, a hand that can in time be seen by them as an expression of the Lord looking out for them. Will their experience of isolation have a happier turn, an *y luego*, to mark the turn of their personal stories?

Our young people often fall into deep sadness or despair because they feel alone and isolated. They do not hope in God because they do not feel connected to people willing to hear and help them. The loss of family unity and community concern, neighborhood concern, is the great tragedy of our time. Its effects are too devastating to be counted, but in the end, we see the effect in the sadness of many young people for whom life is experienced as a burden before it is really lived.

The heart of an expectant mother in a situation of isolation, with her world closing in around her, may ache about the thought of destroying the life of the child in her womb, but the panic of the moment, and perhaps the sad counsel of a misguided and selfish

boyfriend or family member, makes it plausible to make a decision to end the life. *The government says it is OK, after all. So it cannot be that bad.*

But for most women in this situation, they know they have to find a way to kill their own conscience before they make the decision to end the life of the child. The natural inclination of a person is to protect a life; but it is increasingly the case that social pressures run in opposition to the natural inclination of human consciences. Choosing to end a life is presented as a convenient solution. With time the social conscience dies, and with it the common sense that life is a great good that must be protected, even if it means we have to change our plans. This brings me to the next idiomatic expression.

Para servirle: Now this is a phrase that we hear to this day, though not as often as perhaps we did a generation ago. It was what you said when someone expressed gratitude for an act of kindness. *Para servirle* is actually a way of saying *you're welcome*, but it bespeaks an attitude of service: *I am here to help you*. It carries a sense that *it is a joy for me to serve you*.

I am particularly fond of this phrase, for it expresses a kind of active humility. I think it is fairly unique to Mexican usage of the Spanish language. Whatever the historical reasons for the development of its usage, the fact is that it now connotes a desire to help, and to be known as one whose very existence is tied to the desire to be of service.

It is a properly Christian attitude that is named here, for it expresses the noble desire of all human hearts to reach out in assistance to someone else. The opposite of *para servirle* is *it is not my problem*, or *you are on your own*. This opposite has always been a possibility as a human response to difficulties suffered by another person. I would say it is particularly strong in a dominant culture like our own, where individualism is exalted above the community's good, or where my right not to be bothered with your troubles is more important than your need for a helping hand. To a young person facing a world closing in around them, the only hope is to encounter someone who can say by their actions *estoy para servirle*.

The Lord Jesus knew this about us, about the fact that within human hearts and societies there is a persistent battle between *para servirle* and *not my problem*. Hence, He gave to us the parable of the Good Samaritan, to show us, among other things, that for a human being to be fully mature and to live a Godly life, he or she must be willing to see the needs of someone whose world is closing in on them, and must be willing to go out of his or her way to attend to the need. In this way the Lord teaches us the mystery of love involves the courage to be generous with our time and attention.

The poor man had fallen in with robbers, and was left for half dead. Two professional keepers of the law passed him by, and attended not to the fact that his world had closed down around him; neither of them went out of his way to say *Let me help you, I am here to serve you*.

Se le cerró el mundo al pobre golpeado, pero ninguno de los letrados se desvió de su camino para decirle: Déjeme ayudarlo, aquí estoy para servirle.

Part of the strength of the parable of the Good Samaritan is the clear lesson that indifference is not an option for us; to let a suffering go by without notice is equivalent to failing to love. Sadly, the indifferent passers-by are more dead on the inside than the man left for half-dead on side of the road.

The culture of *para servirle* is the culture of life; it recognizes in the person whose world has closed in around them the need to offer the practical comfort and assistance that makes life possible, livable and authentically human. And in our time it recognizes in the young woman facing a life-changing decision a call to do all that is humanly possible to make it possible for her to see a way to hope again in the goodness of life, both in the goodness of her own life, and in the goodness of the life of her child.

This is why a facility like McAllen Pregnancy Center is a vital part of the human and Christian effort to make the culture of service real in our world, and certainly real here in the Rio Grande Valley. As you know, the center was given life through the conscious concern to continue the legacy of Adelina Carmen Guerra. Her children and now many others give of themselves generously to see to it that in the heart of McAllen there is a place, and there are people, who are ready to extend a helping hand, to say *para servirle*, to any woman who feels her world may be closing in around her.

We believe that if given a chance, a woman would rather choose to see the life of her child come to term, and we believe that it is our responsibility to help her see that this a real, practical and loving possibility in her life. We must first of all show her that she is not alone in this situation, that there are ways to make a good decision, a decision not made alone, but with the persevering presence of many there to help her.

A world hospitable to human life does not just happen, it has to be built and fought for; we fight by extending the hand that is willing to help, willing to be there in the difficult times.

This brings me to another phrase I used to hear: *para todo hay remedio, menos la muerte. For everything there is a remedy, save for death.* This was a phrase, at least in my hearing, which carried a consoling sense of hope. There is always a way forward. It may not be an easy way forward, it may not be the way forward that I first planned on, but there is a good way forward. It is not so much that those who counsel women contemplating abortion have all the answers, it is rather that they communicate that there is help available to help her choose life. We must communicate hope first of all.

This hope is communicated because we seek to be a people that are willing to do what is necessary to help someone in need. In the case of the pregnancy center, to do what is necessary to help two people in need, both the mother and the child. The mother needs

a light of support, a word of hope and good counsel; the child needs a chance to survive. As a Christian Catholic Center, the McAllen pregnancy center strives to live the Gospel of the Good Samaritan: If it takes my shirt to keep you warm, I will give it. If it takes my money to help you find a place to carry your child to term, we will give it. If it takes my time to keep you from falling into a sense that the world has closed in around you, I will give it. That is the creed of the people who work to support a pro-life center.

A center like the McAllen Pregnancy Center, and the other pro-life pregnancy centers in the Valley, not only provides a service to give life a chance to survive; they are also places that serve as signs to the whole Valley about what a good community of people living together should be about. We should all be about the work of reaching out to persons in need, especially our young people. No one should feel alone and abandoned in this Valley. If we are in this together, we can find ways always to make life the natural, the humanly responsible option.

A just society is one that makes a conscious effort to support life. No one should feel that the only way I can do well is if someone else is denied the right to live and grow and contribute to the well being of the human family.

This, therefore, is why it is so important that we continue to pray and work for a change in the law of the land. We are not asking that the government adopt a religious creed. We are demanding that it stand in favor of life not death. It is not humane for a government that claims to protect what is good in human life and society to stand indifferent to the choice between the life and death of an unborn child. Indifference to the suffering of another is not a human option. At the very least, the government should promote the option for life. The law teaches, and our law is teaching our children that death is as good as life when it comes to a child.

And we Catholics, along with all persons of good will, be they religious or not, will not waver in our conviction that life is a precious human good, and that before the tribunal of justice and law, choosing death cannot be given equal footing with choosing life.

Finally, one more phrase: *Dios es muy grande*. So simple, so often heard. *God is very big*. We live and move and have our being in the truth that God's ways are bigger than our own, and his designs more marvelous than our own. The Lord of life has purposes that our minds cannot foresee. The difficult and generous decision of a young mother to carry her child to term will bear fruit in the future beyond the birth of the child. For every child born into the world is a light and a hope, a future Good Samaritan who can help someone else overcome the shadow of a world that can seem to close in around us.

And in the end, this is the great call of our time, the great call of the Church in modern society: we must announce with all the force at our command that life is worth the fight, worth the sacrifice, worth the effort.

I fear that only a society that has lost hope in its own future can stand idly by while its children are neglected, abandoned, or disposed of before birth. Only a society that has lost its sense of the great common bond that unites the human race in its struggle to see goodness and justice and love prevail can be indifferent to the plight of its young mothers who want to give birth to life, but who have lost the will to be bearers of life. Hopelessness is a disease of the soul that grows in the hearts of many. The only definitive remedy (*para todo hay remedio*) is the hope we have in Christ.

When we preach Christ, we preach a love that triumphs over darkness and death. The world loses hope because it can no longer believe that love, in the end, will prevail. It wants to believe it, but having lost its faith, it has lost also its hope.

We teach a love that wins by giving itself away, and we witness to this by our own generous willingness to give of ourselves so that others may live. Only by our witness can hope in the triumph of love be rekindled in hearts that have grown cold and indifferent and afraid of life. And only by our conviction in faith can we have the courage to live this hope in love.

May your faith in Christ Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead, never waver, my friends, for in that faith you are healed from despair and discouragement. In that faith in the love that does not die, you can ignite the fire that ushers in a culture that embraces life as a gift that always makes the world a better place.

En un mundo que prefiera mantenerse cerrado, solo el amor que se dedica al servicio de los demás, principalmente a los más pequeños, tiene la fuerza para dar luz a la esperanza. La esperanza confía en el triunfo del amor. Sin esa esperanza, el mundo si se cierra, y el remedio desaparece de la vista. Ámense unos a otros, así como yo les he amado. Con estas palabras el Señor nos entrega a la misión de defender la vida de todos.

I want to thank all of you for your presence here tonight, for your commitment to the cause of life and love. I want to thank you for your support of the McAllen Pregnancy Center, and for your willingness to live your life in the grace of Christ, so that you can be a sign of hope in a world desperately in need of this light. *Estamos en este mundo para servir. Estoy aquí yo para servirles a ustedes, y me da consuelo saber que ustedes buscan como servir a los demás.* It gives me consolation as your Bishop to know that you have the courage to serve those most in need. We give of ourselves for the life of the next generation, and in this God is glorified. May God bless you all.