

THE LONG ROAD HOME: A JOURNEY FOR THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

Have you ever traveled from Washington D.C. to Saint Paul, MN via Knoxville, TN? Probably not— consult a map and you will see why. It is 380 miles out of the way! It has surely been more than twenty years since I have taken an all-night bus trip. Attending the March for Life with a group of 180 pilgrims from the Archdiocese was a magnificent experience, one that I will not soon forget, nor my lower back for that matter! The return trip was via the scenic route (i.e. the southern route) in order to avoid the storms across Ohio and Pennsylvania. The turnpike was closed! The group included four coach buses, representing parish youth groups, a few Catholic schools and some adult chaperones. While there, **Archbishop Hebda** joined us for all the events, even taking his turn hearing confessions. **Fr. Joe Bambanek** from St. Pius X was the other priest and he gave a wonderful homily immediately prior to attending the March.

My bus included 28 pilgrims from Saint Agnes School, 11 from Chesterton Academy, and 4 from St. Mary's in Sleepy Eye, all of whom quickly became fast friends and allies on behalf of innocent life! I truly marveled at the plethora of banners from Catholic high schools and dioceses across the country at the March. Groups had unique ways to identify themselves: matching scarfs, hats, sweatshirts, etc. Flags atop extension poles were everywhere, proving very helpful to those separated from their group. Just look up for your flag. St. Peter's on Capitol Hill near the end of the route provided hot chocolate, donuts, and restrooms! I could not resist asking, and learned they ordered 200 dozen donuts, cutting each in half. I had never seen the U.S. Supreme Court building before— the Cass Gilbert masterpiece is massive. I took a moment to contemplate justice, praying at its steps, gazing at the statues outside, about which I wrote last summer.

Archbishop Hebda offered a special Mass at the **National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception**, truly one of the most beautiful churches, not just in the nation, but in the world. I skipped the optional excursion after Mass, preferring to spend additional time in the Basilica. The Shrine boasts numerous chapels, both on the main level and in the crypt, each dedicated to a different saint. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is in the crypt, and it was a welcome reprieve from the crowds. Seeing the **shiny marble floors** everywhere, my curiosity got the best of me and at one point asked a staff member how many people were employed at the Basilica. The answer— “At least 100, maybe more.” Wow! The March for Life was also ecumenical, though overwhelmingly Catholic by the looks of it. Perhaps the finest speech was delivered by **Ben Shapiro**, a brilliant orthodox Jewish political commentator, speaker and writer. Ben does not shy away from sharing his pro-life views during his numerous appearances on college campuses, where he seeks to engage students from all perspectives in real and substantive dialogue on the issues.

We also participated in an ecumenical **Students for Life of America** Conference held at an African-American Baptist Church in Maryland, whose theater-style sanctuary seats more than the Cathedral! The vast array of speakers and break-out sessions was truly impressive. **Lunch** was courtesy of **Chick-fil-A**, and it was delicious! The conference began with a general session led by a former Cleveland Browns running back Willie Green, who shared a very personal story of his high school sweetheart who became pregnant during their senior year. She was pressured to have an abortion, but through the grace of God resisted those calls. She is now his wife, and they have eight beautiful children together. Due to the government shutdown, crossing the state line to Maryland became a security and logistical challenge, so **Vice President Pence** addressed us via video, promising to attend next year's conference in person. He spoke at the March for Life the day before, and our group was situated towards the front.

The conference offered apologetic tips to the participants that I found extremely helpful. We watched a video clip showing passionate pro-life advocates engaging in discussion with a staunchly pro-choice woman. The arguments of the pro-life man centered around the unique DNA of an unborn child and he was 100% accurate. He was also 100% ineffective. The woman responded, “Why do you only talk about DNA? What about me?” The point of the lesson was not that the man was wrong— he was not. It was that he did not **engage her on a personal level**, merely a scientific one. There is surely a place for scientific arguments, but the leaders were encouraging the youth to **engage the person** first, believing it is the most effective way to deal with those tense moments of an encounter during which people feel so passionately.

I was edified seeing pro-life marchers lovingly engage the twenty or so abortion-rights advocates at the steps of the Supreme Court, never hurling invective at them. The pro-choice women could not help but hear the powerful “Silent No More” voices of courageous women speaking about the abortions that they regretted. With God’s grace, I pray those loving speeches touched their hearts, leading to conversion. I hope a **group of young people from the Cathedral** might consider attending next year—I would attend again in a heartbeat. However, I cannot tell a fib—I checked my frequent flier balance, wondering how many miles it takes for a round trip flight to Washington D.C.? Nothing against Knoxville, mind you—been there, done that!

- Sixty years ago last Friday, St. John XXIII surprised all at St. Paul’s Outside the Walls by announcing his intention to call an **ecumenical council**. During a ceremony on Christian Unity he said: “We announce to you, indeed trembling a little with emotion, but at the same time with humble resolution of intention, the name and the proposal of a twofold celebration: a diocesan synod for the city, and an ecumenical council for the Universal Church.”
- My take away following the alleged racist behavior of students from **Covington Catholic** towards a Native American elder at the Lincoln Memorial? A social media frenzy fueled people’s preconceived notions, easily leading to **snap judgments**, absent of the cold, hard facts. Following the release of a brief video, the media exploded. Twenty-four hours later, the reality appeared radically different.
- Due to the renovation of Rice Park, the centerpiece of this year’s St. Paul Winter Carnival is **Kellogg Mall Park**. Most are unaware that the little park nestled by the river across from the Intercontinental Hotel is both the site of the “Pig’s Eye” settlement as well as that of our **first Cathedral**. “Pigs Eye” Parrant would surely have approved! Perhaps someone will carve an ice sculpture of the log chapel! What is it about ice-related events and Cathedrals, anyway?
- My **spirits have been lifted** by the scores of cards offering condolences that I received following my Dad’s funeral. Heartfelt thanks to those parishioners who took the time to write or attend the funeral. It has meant so much to my family.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector