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Over the last couple of weeks, as a nation we have been tuning into the presidential and vice-presidential debates, or at least catching the commentary afterwards. On a personal level and as a religious leader, I have been disturbed by and greatly disappointed in the terrible disrespect shown by the debaters to one another. I do know that if my conduct were such when I was on my high school debate team I would have been censured and thrown off the debate team. For me, the decorum of the debates has been reprehensible, right down to the verbal trashing by candidates of the moderators. Even more disturbing is the evidence it renders to the quickening erosion of principles and values on which our nation is founded.

I am a firm believer in the electoral process and have, in general, always been proud of our democracy in action. As the founding document of our nation, the Declaration of Independence, enshrines: “*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*” How sad then that the dignity and sanctity of the human person as envisioned in these words is jeopardized not only by bad and sinful legislation both at the national and state level threatening life from conception to natural death, but by such behavior as gives credence that the human person is something to be trashed and disregarded as a gift from God!

A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege of celebrating Holy Mass with student representatives of Bishop Ludden Jr. – Sr. High School at Holy Family Church in Syracuse. After Mass, I visited the school and one of the first things these students mentioned to me was the tenor of the presidential debate the night before. They directly asked me about the disrespect being shown by both presidential candidates to each other and on display for the whole world to see. All I could think of is the scandal caused to our young people by such conduct! What kind of example and values are we leaving for future generations?

Of course, such a question brings to mind not only politicians, but religious leaders and those who claim to be believers as well! Is our behavior and conduct consistent with the message of the Jesus in whom we claim to believe in? I am dismayed by persons ordained and non-ordained who think they have been given the right to act as proxy on the judgment seat of God. My blunt reaction is “who died and made you God” concerning whether membership in a particular political party forfeits one’s possibility of heaven, or attempting to judge the state of the soul of Pope Francis or another church leader, or declaring the eternal damnation of a public figure! I think often of the rich young man who went away sad when Jesus showed him what he lacked, which for him was concern for the poor. At that moment, Jesus did not condemn him to perdition, but Scripture actually tells us that he looked on him “with love” (Mk. 10:17-22). What might happen if we would do the same “to imitate Christ and follow in his footsteps” (EV, 51)? Might we better lead others, indeed the world, closer to God’s throne of mercy!

Twenty-five years ago, Pope St. John Paul II wrote the encyclical, *The Gospel of Life* (*Evangelium vitae*) on the ***profound dignity*** of every human person. In a reflection on the anniversary of the document, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote: “*In his encyclical on the Gospel of life, Pope St. John Paul II recognizes the full range of threats against*

human life, from poverty and malnutrition to murder and war. He places particular emphasis, however, on threats to life at its beginning and end—precisely when it is most in need of protection. In modern times, children in their mothers' wombs and those approaching the end of their lives are certainly among the 'least of these' in our world's estimation. Practices such as abortion and assisted suicide tragically reject the truth that human life is always to be cherished and defended with loving concern."

"Human life is always to be cherished and defended with loving concern..." As Catholic Christians, as disciples of the Lord, this is what needs to be our focus whether it is an election year or not, especially in trying to deal with racism, civil unrest, and social inequality. Personally, one of the greatest challenges I face as a bishop is the call to be a reflection of the Good News of Jesus Christ that I preach. I know I fail in this regard on a daily basis, but I know also that practice brings results. And that is what I would like to challenge all believers in...that if we really think that Jesus Christ and his Gospel message can make a world of difference then we need to let it be part of our lives and change us which will then change our world.

This past Saturday, October 10th, a young Italian teenage, Carlo Acutis (b. 1991, d. 2006) was beatified; that is, declared "Blessed" in a ceremony in Assisi, the last step before sainthood. I am fascinated by this young man who lived only 15 short earthly years and died within a week's time from fulminant leukemia. Nonetheless, his life was fuller than most and left an impact not only on his family and classmates, but even those whose lives were lived on the fringe of human society. At a very young age, it was Carlo who brought his family to church, not the other way around. At the age of seven he made his First Holy Communion and began to participate in daily Mass, the daily Rosary, and in frequent prayer before Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. This Eucharistic devotion would become a core theme in his life, but would also be evidenced in his outward demeanor of cheerfulness, a stalwart defense of human life, especially the most vulnerable, and his giving spirit which included not asking gifts for himself, but instead for the poor around him. With his formidable computer skills he would design a website dedicated to the Eucharistic miracles of Our Lord throughout the world.

Carlo's life has led me to ask the question, "How hard do we try to be a saint?" I am struck especially by one of the quotes in his journal: <<Tutti nascono come originali, ma molto muiono come fotocopie.>> Translated it says, "All are born as an original, but many die as a photocopy." Each one of us is born as a distinctive creation of our Creator God; as the Prophet Jeremiah and St. Paul declare, "We are God's work of art" (Jer. 18:3, Eph. 2:10). How is God seen through us; or have you and I allowed sin and selfishness to mar the original? I know this question can cause me sadness because I wish I had my original innocence and its accompanying beauty in regards to different aspects of my life. Yet, I hear also the one seated on the throne in the Book of Revelation announcing, "See I make all things new" (Rv. 21:5). It is this hope that spurs me on to draw ever closer to Christ knowing that he can "write straight with the crooked lines of my life."

St. Paul reminded the Church of Philippi: "*But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Phil. 3:20). These words invite us to consider with the US Bishops: "*Do I talk about and act towards others as I would talk about and treat Jesus himself? Do I inform myself of the Church's teachings and engage in the civic arena as first a follower of Christ? Do I support and advocate for laws and policies that protect and defend human life? Do I help pregnant and parenting mothers in need? Am I ready to support a loved one nearing death?*"

More than ever, we adults need to remember the foundation that we are setting by our words and deeds for the next generation. I hear so much about wanting what is best for them and that means giving the best of ourselves.

And so, we pray:

O Father,
who has given us the ardent testimony,
of the young blessed Carlo Acutis,
who made the Eucharist the core of his life
and the strength of his daily commitments
so that everybody may love You above all else.

Confirm my faith,
nurture my hope,
strengthen my charity,
in the image of young Carlo
who, growing in these virtues,
now lives with You.
Grant me the grace that I need ...

I trust in You, Father,
and your Beloved Son Jesus,
in the Virgin Mary, our Dearest Mother,
and in the intervention of Blessed Carlo Acutis.

Amen.