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Pro-life, pro-lives

A common carp against the pro-life movement is that “we only care about babies in the womb.” This disingenuous dig is not heard much anymore, in part because the callous practice of euthanasia has expanded so quickly, and in part because the incoherence of the criticism is more than faintly embarrassing. Advocates for automotive safety focus their attention on the reduction of incidents of vehicular injury and death for the same reason that pro-life Canadians urge the protection of the unborn: because it is obvious where the danger, in each case, lies. The glimmer of truth that such chiding distorts is that concern for human life must be wholistic—and, on that point, every sincere pro-life advocate readily agrees. Our ongoing campaign to end the moral obscenity of legal prenatal infanticide is entirely continuous with a larger, broader pro-natal attitude. Abortion is an atrocious evil precisely because every birth is a prodigious good.

Welcome and well-taken, then, is the counsel that Abby Roth—sister of the conservative pundit, Ben Shapiro—gave recently to a gathering of “Young Americans for Freedom.” Addressing the conference, she noted that “often, being pro-life is put in the context of encouraging women to embrace motherhood where the child was unexpected or the result of a poor choice.” This will obviously remain the focus of the political pro-life movement, and Roth affirmed that we should continue to “fight for the lives of innocent children in the womb no matter how they’re conceived.” “But,” she continued, “being pro-life means encouraging more lives. Let’s encourage people to have more babies,” since “babies are a blessing” and are, in fact, “the greatest gift God gives us.” After noting that “in just 50 years, we went from the idea that having four kids was a normal and suitable choice to the idea that having more than two was the choice of a crazy person,” Roth exhorted her listeners to buck this downward trend, and be open to the great blessing of progeny. As she succinctly put it: “Big families are back—embrace it, love it, do it!”

What is so salutary about Roth’s enabling remarks is that big families are not back: the birth rate for developed countries hovers just below 1.5, which is well below what demographers identify as replacement rate of 2.1. We are living in an unprecedented age of contracting family size: not only are the number of children which married couples welcome much smaller than they were, but

couples are marrying later (when they do marry) and, in the aggregate, fewer such pairings are even taking place. The number of adults living with their parents and living alone creeps up even as the number of married couples, and even people cohabiting, slowly but steadily declines. In fact, according to the most recent figures from the United States’ Current Population Survey, more 18-35-year-old women in that country live with their parents, grandparents, or other family than with a partner. The situation is not that different here in Canada.

Cultural commentators have long predicted the arrival of this sad state of affairs, and the unhappy scenarios that they projected—with timely warnings about the population implosions that would follow in the wake of the collapse of birth-rates—have now arrived. But just as darkness only makes the light seem more refulgent, powerful, and precious, so too does the population dwindling through which we are living only make the Biblical imperative, “Go forth and multiply” (*Gen* 1:28), more urgent, prophetic, and alluring. This call reached our first parents in Eden and, precisely because they heeded it, that same call can reach us now. The deep wisdom of this primordial command lies in the fact that the meaning of life has, for most people at most moments in history, been found in making more lives. The unbroken continuum from childhood to maturation to child-bearing and child-rearing is the material reality that sustains our human community, and is, likewise, the basis for the spiritual enterprises that imbue our counted days with purpose, beauty, and goodness.

Mother’s Day is a wonderful occasion to remind ourselves of these enduring truths as we celebrate, with abiding gratitude, the gift of mothers: the superabundance that we have all received from them, and the sheer fact of their existence on which our own, of course, depends. As Roth so rightly put it, quoting a well-traveled bit of wisdom: “Children are not a distraction from more important work—they are the most important work.” Mothers know this better than anyone, and show it to everyone through their continual gifts of life and self. This Mother’s Day, let us adopt the posture that Roth encourages, opening ourselves to life and cherishing family formation and growth wherever we can, and as much as we can.