

Both houses of congress have now passed a bill barring partial-birth abortion in the United States. President Bush has said he will sign the legislation. You don't have to be a devout Christian to find this procedure repulsive. In partial-birth abortions, the baby is turned into the breech position. A surgeon pulls the child partially out by the legs with forceps. While the head is still inside the womb, the base of the skull is stabbed, the brains are sucked out, crushing the head, and then the dead baby is delivered. Thousands of these procedures are performed in the United States every year, most on children between 20 and 24 weeks' gestation.

Those arguing in favor of the procedure say it preserves freedom of choice for women and permits a medical option for their health. They claim that for mothers, it may be a life-saving procedure. Of course, it is always a death-inducing procedure for the child, and the instances when partial-birth abortion might be the only option to save the life of the mother are virtually non-existent.

The Catholic Church is well-known for our position opposing the legalization of abortion, and many other Christian Churches agree, especially on a procedure like this one. To those who value human life, it is hard to imagine how someone could be blind enough to support a partial-birth abortion. Yet thousands do. The decision to abort is a very difficult one, with long-term emotional consequences.

In today's passage from Jeremiah, Israel is returning home from exile. Many of the people are needy; they are scattered and sick, and some of them are pregnant. God says, "I will gather them from the ends of the world, with the blind and the lame in their midst, the mothers and those with child; they shall return as an immense throng. They departed in tears, but I will console them and guide them. For I am a father to Israel, Ephraim is my first-born."

God has a special care for the needy, including the unborn. God's care also extends to mothers considering an abortion. In Jeremiah, God yearned to bring the blind back home again to Jerusalem. Today, God yearns to bring home again all of us who are blinded by sin in any way. God forgives and grants vision to those who could not see the right thing to do when times grew tense. As a church, we defend the rights of the unborn, but we also forgive those who failed to protect them. With God's care, we can help build a society of people who respect one another and who value human life.