

Impressions from the 2008 March for Life, Washington, DC by Tom Kelly, Parishioner, St. Joan of Arc

This past week I went to Washington, DC with a group of adults and teens from St. Joan's to participate in the March for Life. This was my first time doing this. Here are some of my impressions.

The night before the March our group went to the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception for Mass. We arrived two hours before Mass was to start but there was not a seat to be found in this, one of the largest churches in the world. It was difficult even walking down the aisles because every vacant spot had one or two teenagers already parked in it. I started to glimpse the energy and intensity that the teens brought to this event. It was a good reminder for the adults among us that hope is still the order of the day and that for God, all things are possible.

The teens were reasonably well behaved in the Upper Church where the Mass was celebrated. But in the Lower Church, also known as the Crypt, where many more teens had gathered to watch the Mass on TV, the teens were a little more boisterous. I saw something there I had never seen before. In one section of the Crypt where it was getting a little noisy, an Army sergeant, dressed in a camouflage uniform strode in and announced in his best stentorian voice, "You WILL be quiet here out of the respect for the Blessed Sacrament!" I know the Marines guard the streets of Heaven. I guess the Army has been assigned the shrines and cathedrals. If I had any thought of speaking, I put it out of my mind immediately, as did all the teens there.

I thought the March to mark the 35th anniversary of Roe v. Wade, would be a somber event. Instead I found myself in the largest pep rally I have ever seen. Tens of thousands of cheering, chanting energetic high school students were here to proclaim their love for life.

Watching the contingents gather on the Mall was inspiring. It was a bit like witnessing the mustering of civil war era troops coming from their various states to form one giant army. They used signs and chants and distinctive pieces of clothing to keep their groups in tact and to let all know who they are. They had come from New Orleans and Patterson, New Jersey and Springfield, Illinois and Chagrin Falls and lots of places in between. Sisters and nuns were the sergeants of this army. They watched over their troops and kept them in order. Some of the sisters wore large plastic bags, like garbage bags, over their habits as hastily improvised protection from the rain.

I don't know the size of the crowd. Some newspaper reports put it at 225,000. Whatever it was, it was huge. The last time I was in a crowd of this size was when I participated in anti-Viet Nam war marches, also in DC, more than 35 years ago. There are some similarities but what I kept thinking of as I walked to the Supreme Court building was that there are no jerks in this crowd. I wished that all the people I come across in my daily life were as kind and considerate as those I marched with.

Catholics seemed to be the bulk of the marchers, but other religions were represented. I saw various Orthodox groups, Lutherans and Methodists and Jews, among others. There was even one man whose sign said "Anarchist Agnostic Against Abortion." He was welcome too.

I went to this March with a moderate interest in seeing Roe v. Wade overturned. I came away with a conviction that it must be overturned and with energy and hope that it can be done.