



The Eleventh Week of the Year and Day for Life 18 June 2023 – Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“You received without charge, give without charge”.

One of the stories that has impacted many this past week is the one headed “The Backpack Hero” in the media. It is about the young Catholic man who tackled the knifeman in Annecy. He used his backpack to stop the man who was attacking young children in a park in the French Alps. In a report on Saturday last 10 June, it says that Henri, a 24 year old, had been on a nine month tour of the French Cathedrals when the attack happened in the town of Annecy on Thursday 8th. He’s been hailed a ‘hero’ after he was filmed swinging his bag at the suspect, who had turned to slash him. Footage also showed Henri chasing the man across the grass. This Management graduate – who has declined to give his surname – told the TV station C News he had followed his instincts: *“All I know is, I was not there by chance. It was unthinkable to do nothing.... I followed my instincts and did what I could to protect the weak”.*

Commenting on the suggestion that the suspect – a 31 year old Syrian man with refugee status in Sweden – also identifying as Christian, Henri said it was *“profoundly unchristian to attack the vulnerable”* and that *“something very bad had inhabited him”.*

The phrase “Merci Henri” started to trend online, but Henri posted on social media to say: *“Pray for the children, I am doing fine.”* President Emmanuel Macron praised Henri for his bravery and said his actions were a *“source of hope”* when they met in Annecy on Friday. Four children aged between 22 and 36 months and 2 pensioners were wounded in the assault. One of the children, a British girl, is now said to be “awake” while the other 3 victims are stable. The suspect, according to the report, remains in custody and is due to undergo a psychiatric assessment. Police say no terrorist motive is suspected.

Bishop Robert Baron, an American Catholic Bishop, is well known for his evangelisation work using modern social media. This week he posted: *“The minute you walk outside of your Church on Sunday, you’re in mission territory”.* These words come to mind in the case of Henri; they also came to mind as I read the words of Jesus to the Apostles at the end of the section from St Matthew’s Gospel for Mass on the Eleventh Sunday of the Year *“You received without charge, give without charge”.* It seems to me these words sum up the attitude of Henri: he didn’t expect anything in return for his bravery. These words of

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Jesus were to underpin the mission of the Apostles; they also underpin our mission. On Fathers' Day we turn to Family in our celebrations: we show appreciation of Dads as we do of Mums on the Day marked out for them. Thank God for Days like this because we take so much for granted, and that begins at home where we are looked after, supported and loved. The same goes for our Life of Faith; the greatest gift is eternal life that we are given at Baptism and we take it, the Sacraments, the Family of the Church; so easily we take all of this for granted. This Sunday we are challenged to give without charge just as we have received without charge.

This is the Sunday in the Church Year when we think of the gift of life itself – on the Day for Life. I don't think the date is connected to Father's Day, and yet isn't it so appropriate? The wonder of new human life and the role of parents in conceiving a child is the miracle that is often overtaken by controversy. Bishop John Sherrington, the lead Bishop for Life Issues, Auxiliary Bishop in Westminster, writes to fellow Bishops for this weekend: *"I ask you to encourage your clergy... to encourage the faithful to pray, to engage in formation about the protection of life in the womb, and campaign for improvements in legislation to better protect the unborn"*.

As it happens this is the week when there has been so much controversy around the mother who took abortion pills past the date when the child was viable, could have been born. The sad death of the child was not even mentioned by many in the public debate; instead it is being presented by some as a "healthcare" issue alone.

Yes, as Bishop Robert Barron posted *"The minute you step outside Church on Sunday you're in mission territory"*. I imagine many parishes will offer opportunities for parishioners to sign petitions to MPs and others on the issue of protecting human life in the womb at the appropriate time.

Today, let us give thanks for all the gifts we have received, not least the gift of life now and eternal life to come, and be ready, like the Apostles, to reflect on all we have received without charge and commit to pass it on to others without charge. In that giving we receive! *Merci Henri*.

In conclusion I suggest this prayer from resources prepared for the Day for Life by the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

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Prayer to St Joseph

Defender of Life

Dearest Saint Joseph,
at the word of an angel,
you lovingly took Mary into your home.
As God's humble servant, you guided
the Holy Family on the road to Bethlehem,
welcomed Jesus as your own son
in the shelter of a manger,
and fled far from your homeland
for the safety of both Mother and Child.

We praise God that as their faithful protector,
you never hesitated to sacrifice
for those entrusted to you.
May your example inspire us also
to welcome, cherish, and safeguard
God's most precious gift of life.

Help us to faithfully commit ourselves
to the service and defence of human life –
especially where it is vulnerable or threatened,
Obtain for us the grace to do the will of God in all things.

Amen.

For those who would like to look up what the Bishops are saying on this subject, the website can be found at: <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/day-for-life/>

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