

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time/Mass of Reparation and Healing

October 7, 2018

3:00 p.m.

St. Philip Parish, Battle Creek

There have been so many occasions that have brought people together here in this Church over the years to celebrate our Faith in God, and on many of those occasions, I have been here with you. There have been happy and joyful occasions such as graduations, weddings, and anniversaries; there have been sad and reflective occasions, such as funerals, times of national or regional tragedies; and there have been normal and ordinary occasions, such as the weekday and Sunday celebrations of Eucharist throughout the weeks of the liturgical year.

In very many ways, this gathering today may be the most challenging and difficult occasion of all.

As we do every time we come here for any and every occasion, we come together as People of Faith. But today, at this Mass which focuses on the sins and failures of some priests and bishops, we come as people whose faith has been shaken, whose confidence in the Church and her leaders has been badly damaged or temporarily lost, and whose hearts and souls, normally filled with trust, instead are filled with confusion, disappointment, disillusionment, anger and distrust.

As your Bishop, I stand before you embarrassed because of what a number of my brother Bishops have been accused of doing, which includes, in some cases, mismanagement of serious issues; in other cases, possible intentional cover-ups that may have kept predator priests in ministry and interfered with just and compassionate treatment of victims; and in a few cases, and clearly the worst example of all failures, some few, who themselves committed heinous crimes of sexual abuse against innocent and trusting children and/or vulnerable adults. I hope you know that it breaks my heart to say that out loud in this holy place.

In the name of the Church, I apologize from the depths of my being to all of you, and to all the Faithful who have a right to expect so much more, and who, because of the actions of some, have all been hurt, shocked, and, yes, scandalized.

The summer months of June and July were sullied by the shocking reports of a Cardinal of the Church who admitted to taking advantage of seminarians and young priests, and worst of all, as it turns out, was also guilty of many crimes of child sexual abuse. Not only were we shocked by the details, but then we learned over the ensuing weeks, from the Archbishop Vignano Letter and many other sources, that it seems clear that there were many in positions of authority and influence who knew of these crimes and terrible sins at the time they were taking place, but turned a blind eye. While searching for where the truth is in all those allegations is still taking place, what is abundantly clear is that there is something terribly wrong and sinful about all of that. In that regard, I also deeply apologize to all of you for the failure of those bishops who did not stand up for what was right, and who failed in their responsibility to be good and faithful Shepherds of the Flock of Christ.

And then, in the middle of August, came the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report, which recounted in pornographic detail what more than 300 priests in 6 dioceses in Pennsylvania did to 1,000 children over a period of 70 years; shock and anger turned into rage. As one who grew up, and spent the vast majority of my life as a priest in Pittsburgh, one of those Pennsylvania dioceses, I was particularly troubled by the gravity and enormity of that report, and was personally pained as many of those situations involved priests and people I know.

While I am very sorry for all of you, and all the Faithful of our Diocese, who have been so deeply shaken by all of this, I need to express my deepest apologies particularly to the Victims. To any, and all, victims of clergy sexual abuse especially, but victims of any kind of sexual abuse by anyone associated with the Church, I beg your forgiveness on behalf of the Church. And I take this occasion to publicly urge any one who, as a child, was a victim of clergy sexual abuse; if you haven't done so already, please report it by contacting the "Hot Line" available on our diocesan website, and I assure you, we will follow up immediately. There really aren't any words that can express the depths of regret for the pain, suffering, and trauma you have endured. We stand with you, and stand ready to do all that we can to support you in any way possible.

While we don't have any good words to express our outrage, today's Gospel passage that we just listened to shows us Jesus in action, with a few choice words of reprimand for His disciples just for "rebuking" the children who had come to try to be near Him.

We don't hear Jesus get angry very often in the Gospels, but when the "little ones" were involved, from the disciples rebuking them, or anyone scandalizing them, that was cause for Jesus' righteous anger to flare. St. Mark tells us that "*Jesus became indignant (when He saw the disciples trying to keep the children from coming to Him) and said to them, 'Let the children come to Me; do not prevent them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'*" We can only imagine what Jesus is saying about those, ordained to be His representatives, who sexually abused, and in many cases, permanently damaged any of these "little ones"! We heard something close to His outrage last Sunday when He said that anyone who hurts a little one and leads him/her astray, "*it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.*" I think that makes it very clear where Jesus Himself stands on the evils of clergy sexual abuse!

I think there is also something else that is very clear: there is a big problem that all of us have become painfully aware of in the Church, and it must be dealt with in no uncertain terms. Once again, taking the lead from the "indignant" reaction by Jesus in today's Gospel, and with the drastic steps that we heard Him propose in last Sunday's Gospel that need to be taken in the face of the sin of scandal or any sin that in any way hurts "the little ones", this problem in the Church must be "rooted out", the evil must be "cut off", and anyone not willing to do whatever it takes to protect the little ones should be "plucked out" and replaced by those who are.

This Summer-time was filled with Scandals. As people with wounded faith, let our gathering here today help us to pray for a Fall-time of Forgiveness; to pray for Reparation---to somehow try to "repair" what is broken; to pray for an openness to be healed.

We are God's holy People. We are People of Faith. Whether we come here for a joyful occasion, or for this very painful occasion; whether we come as people strong in our faith, or people wounded and shaken in our faith----we ARE who se ARE! We are God's holy People of Faith.

And God wants something more for us! So, let's just reflect for a moment on perhaps the deeper meaning in today's Scripture Readings---to go beyond these Readings that are most often interpreted only in terms of Marriage and Divorce.

Jesus was asked by the Pharisees what He thought about the question if it was "*lawful for a husband to divorce his wife*". St. Mark told us that in fact the Pharisees asked him that question, not because they wanted to really know what He thought, but because they were

“testing Him”. They wanted to catch Him, trip Him up, hope that they could get something on Him that would help them to discredit Him.

What Jesus did was force them to go back to the very beginning----to the Genesis account of Creation, which is what we heard in our First Reading today. What Jesus was doing was forcing them to think about what God’s original Plan was for human beings. The first thing we heard in today’s first Reading is that there was still something lacking in the human person, the highpoint of all of God’s creation. We heard God Himself say as much when He said: “*It is not good for the (hu)man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him.*” And that original “partnership” or “marriage” becomes the model----the ideal----for all marriages. So, God’s original plan for human beings is that we are called to be in relationship with one another, and with our Loving God. That’s the Plan.

And then, Original Sin took place, and ever since, God’s Plan has been disrupted by human choices that oftentimes take us away from God. Yet, God’s Plan remains: that we human beings are “wired” to find our true and lasting happiness in healthy and holy relationships with one another and with God.

And so when Jesus points the Pharisees back to the Original Plan, that is where we also need to look to find the “more” that God wants for us. We find our happiness when we are living in harmony with one another, when our relationships are healthy and holy, and when we treat each other with dignity and respect, and when we protect, safeguard, and welcome the “little ones” into our midst. Anything short of that will not only bring us discord and unhappiness, but also causes Jesus to be indignant for the sake of “the little ones”.

Our Loving God and Father has sent us His Son Jesus to reconcile the world to God and to save us from our sins. He, in turn, has sent us His Holy Spirit to guide the Church and to make His dwelling among us. Through our Baptism into Christ, and our Confirmation in the Lord, we are people filled with the Holy Spirit, for the purpose of being Jesus’ Witnesses in the world! We are People of Faith who are called to be prompted by the Holy Spirit to speak out on behalf of the “little ones”, those mistreated, oppressed, scandalized or abused; and to speak against the evils that we find in the world, and, yes, sadly, in the Church. The Holy Spirit works to root out Evil, and the Holy Spirit always works to repair what is broken, to heal what is wounded, and to unite what is divided. The Holy Spirit will always work thru all of us as members of the Body of Christ to accomplish and to further the mission of the Church. And as members of the Body of Christ, when we see one member or part of the Body doing what is wrong, or hurting the rest of the Body by his/her sins, then the rest of the Body must call him/them to greater accountability, whether those members are priests, bishops, cardinals or any other position in the Body.

I also take this occasion today to apologize to you on my own behalf if there has been any way that I have not served you well, or shepherded our Diocesan Family of Faith in the proper ways. And I take this occasion today to assure you of my absolute commitment to continue to work to restore trust here in our Diocese, and to continue doing whatever we can to make sure that our children are safe and those who are vulnerable are protected.

I also want you to know that I have confidence that the Bishops’ Conference will investigate completely all these public scandalous incidents so that we can come to an understanding of how the awful revelations that came to light this summer could have happened, and to take whatever steps are called for to make sure that nothing like that ever happens again.

We pray today for Reparation----to repair what has been broken. We also pray today for Healing----at least to begin the process of healing, to make efforts to restore trust, to heal the

wounds in the Body, and to allow the Spirit of God, Who lives within each of us, to guide us to work for transparency in the Church, accountability for Bishops, and a spirit of openness and greater communication among us all.

And most of all, let us pray that the ***Summer of Scandals*** will never, ever take place again, and that this ***Fall time of Forgiveness***, will lead us into a new ***Springtime of Hope***, because--- we are a People of Faith. And our Faith is rooted in the unwavering Hope in our God Who loves us and sent His Son to save us, and by doing so, has conquered for all time, the power of Sin and Death thru His own Death and Resurrection.

Jesus is our Hope, and in Him we always find our way to our Eternal Home.

May God bless us all, now and always!