



The Diocese of Charleston

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Homily for Child Abuse Prevention Month Observance St. John the Baptist R.C. Cathedral April 2, 2011

“I want to see!!” cries the blind man in the eighteenth chapter of St. Luke’s Gospel when questioned by Jesus as to what he asks of Him. While the story in today’s Gospel passage from St. John is not the same story and does not involve the same man, it is not unreasonable to surmise that if asked, the man born blind in today’s story would respond in similar fashion. He probably hungered for light and color the way a traveler in the desert would hunger for water. There are all sorts of images presented in today’s scripture readings and they form a certain connectedness, especially concerning the commemoration we observe today: blindness, suffering, sin, faith, hope.

What does it mean to say “I want to see?” Certainly, we can readily admit that the limitation of physical sight is a major handicap. Our eyes present a world that opens up to us all sorts of possibilities. Loss of that sight or never having had it prevents us from enjoying much of the beauty of creation and definitely limits our understanding of the world as it exists. It is easy for us to relate with the man’s desire to “have his eyes opened.” But there is another, perhaps fuller meaning to the word “see.” When we cry out those same words, “I want to see” do we not mean to say we wish to understand, to comprehend, maybe even to experience situations and circumstances in new or deeper ways, perhaps in more wholesome ways. It is not simply our eyes that we wish to be opened, but also our minds, our hearts, our consciences. And this certainly is the second gift that Jesus gives to this suffering man: the gift of insight, what we might be able to call faith. And it is this gift that enables the man eventually to fall on his knees and accept Jesus while uttering the words, “I believe.”

Blindness plunges us into a world of darkness; for those physically blind, a world without light; for those psychologically or emotionally blind, a world with little meaning; for those spiritually blind, a world of sin. In our second reading today from the Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians, Paul equates darkness to a world of sin and clearly warns the people to have nothing to do with the futile works of darkness. So frequently we ascribe to the nighttime high crime rates and other works of evil. Nighttime and darkness are often quite scary, even to adults, but for children they can be terrifying. Live in the light, Paul proclaims; put the darkness behind you and illumine all your actions; be children of the light and Christ, the light of the world will shine on you.

Children who are abused live in darkness: it is the darkness of suffering and for many that darkness can follow them well into adulthood. Even in cases where treatment is offered, often it is insufficient, because too many children hide the abuse in the cloak of shame and in some cases it is never brought out of the darkness into the light. Some never allow themselves to deal with their pain in a constructive manner – it’s just too difficult. Abuse comes in many forms: physical, sexual, and emotional abuse can be devastating and the neglect that many children experience through lack of adequate health care, food, education and affirmation deprive them of realizing that they are “children of the light” in Jesus Christ.

The abusers themselves also live in darkness; while they also might be in the darkness of suffering because they themselves may have been victims, many are certainly in the darkness of sin. They need healing, reconciliation and treatment themselves. However, forgiveness and mercy must also be accompanied by justice and oversight. The price for inflicting this abuse on children must be paid: evil and criminal actions have consequences and society rightly demands accountability.

The problem is massive and it affects every aspect of our society: most abuse occurs in the home with relatives and close friends of the family. These situations in the past have been addressed rarely, but we are becoming more and more aware of these halls of darkness; schools and youth organizations have also been afflicted with people who should be in helping situations for young people, but who have used the cover of their positions to hurt them. And of course, we here in this place today know quite well how the Church which has been commissioned by Jesus to be the proclaimer of the Light has been an agent of darkness for so many young people. Pope John Paul II said that “the sexual abuse of young people is by every standard wrong and rightly considered a crime by society; it is also an appalling sin in the eyes of God.” Do people realize how widespread the problem is. In the Church in the United States, we know of over 15,000 allegations of abuse by priests and other church personnel over the last 60 years. We hope and pray that these allegations have been dealt with appropriately – we know that in some cases they have not. Studies have indicated that over 3 million children by the time they reach eleventh grade have been the target of physical sexual exploitation by an employee of the public schools of our nation. (1) Thousands of children are caught up in the horror of human trafficking where all sorts of abuse occurs; child pornography can be described as an epidemic and there does not seem to be any study of the home situation, but estimates indicate numbers larger than any of these noted. Does this not indicate to us that there exists this huge cover of darkness over a very vulnerable population and that we must do all in our power to enter into combat with it? I refer to these numbers simply to point out that this problem permeates every part of our society and affects millions of children.

We in the leadership of the Church have been a serious part of the problem and we are obliged to repent for this transgression. Part of this repentance must include being in the forefront of efforts to eradicate this scourge. We in the diocese of Charleston have put into place many policies and safeguards through our Office of Child Protection Services: the office has done over 20,000 background checks since 2005 and mandated comprehensive training through our safe environment program for all employees and those volunteers who would be involved with children; educational programs for children and parents have been offered in our parishes and schools; more thorough psychological screening for prospective priests and deacons has been implemented and we have promoted an increased awareness of inappropriate behavior towards minors. Serious allegations are reported to authorities and counseling availability is in place for all who have been or might be victims. Our very observance of this Child Abuse prevention month is just one more indication that our diocese is taking the problem seriously. Recently, I was present at the convention of the South Carolina Council of Catholic Women and I was pleased to hear that they have adopted wholeheartedly the mission of the National Council of Catholic Women in waging war on pornography and human trafficking especially involving children. (2) Local government too has been ever more vigilant in recent years to offer a truly safe environment for young people in schools and civic organizations. There is so much to do, yet it cannot simply be a task of the institutional Church, or church and private organizations or the public schools or local government. If we are truly serious about eliminating the darkness of abuse and allowing the light of safety and protection to shine on our children, we must all participate.

Parents, educate your children on what is appropriate behavior for adults dealing with them and what is inappropriate. Develop a deep sense of trust with your children so that they may feel free to discuss with you any attempts by anybody to go beyond what would be considered acceptable boundaries. While I am not necessarily a fan, it has been stated by a former first lady that “it takes a village to raise a child,” I do believe that there is a strong element of truth in that phrase. Let’s all look out for each other’s children; isolation provides a strong situation for abuse to occur.

Some good advice for all of us: be informed and do learn about the problem. Recognize that there are all kinds of information available and all kinds of studies that highlight the issues and offer advice for solutions and help for victims. Locally, here in Charleston help is available, both for information and victim assistance from the Dee Norton Lowcountry Children’s Center (www.dnlcc.org) and an internet site (www.darkness2light.org); and there are many others on the web. The diocese as well offers assistance through Louisa Storen, our victim assistance coordinator who has helped many people.

We are all called to do the best we can in living lives that reflect opposition to this horrible darkness. Just take the issue of child pornography: it exists because pornography itself is a multi-million dollar business. Statistics show that approximately 40 million Americans are sexually involved with the internet and the U.S. Customs service estimates that there are over 100,000 websites that offer illegal child pornography.(2) These sites would not exist if there were no clients. Are there strategies that we can all use to assist in removing this horror? Is it not imperative that each of us must bring this issue to prayer: prayer for the victims, prayer for forgiveness and certainly prayer for guidance as we move on hopefully to a brighter future.

Child abuse is a worldwide problem, and it would be naïve to think that if we were to eliminate completely the problem in the Church, the problem would cease to exist. (Not that I would ever stop hoping and working to see this happen in the Church.) We should all be involved in this war against abuse where children are seen simply as objects. What has happened in the Church is a tragedy, but in one sense I am thankful that this problem has been illuminated—it has caused the institution to work toward purifying ourselves and because of the constant media attention I believe it has caused other segments of society to take notice of the problem not only in the Church, but also in every part of our lives. Much progress has been made, but it must continue and we can never stop working on it, because each child should always feel loved, cherished and safe.

As St. Paul says in our second reading today, “be like children of the light, for the effects of the light are seen in complete goodness and right living and truth.” Yes Lord, we want to see! Be our Helper and our Guide. Amen.

+Robert E. Guglielmone
Bishop of Charleston

- (1) Charol Shakeshaft, *Educator Sexual Misconduct: A Synthesis of Existing Literature*; A report to the U.S. Department of Education; Hofstra University, NY: 2004
- (2) National Council of Catholic Women Campaign for Human Dignity: A resource Manual for NCCW members