

Child Protection Sunday 2018

In 2018 the Australian Catholic Church marks Child Safeguarding Sunday on 9 September. That Sunday concludes National Child Protection Week.

It may assist to pass this to your Safeguarding Office as well as to parishes, schools and other ministries as appropriate.

Uniquely this year Child Protection Sunday follows on the heels of the formal response of the Australian Catholic Church to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the release of the advice provided to Church Leaders by its Truth Justice and Healing Council.

Child Protection Sunday affords an Opportunity for Dioceses, Eparchies, Religious Institutes and Ministerial PJPs to complement that National Catholic Response with factual information on how individual church entities are themselves active participants in the protection/ safeguarding of minors and vulnerable adults.

When the Australian Prime Minister offers the response of the Commonwealth Government in Parliament on 22 October we pray it may bring a further sense of how we, both as a Church and as a Nation have faced the terrible truth that we failed our children, but also as a church and as a nation we have now embarked on a new path.

To assist with liturgical and prayerful preparation for Sunday 9 September we append Homily Notes and Prayers of the Faithful provided by Fr Andrew Hamilton SJ

Child protection Sunday

Homily notes.

If we want to protect our house from robbers, we might think of fitting our doors with strong locks, barring vulnerable windows and installing an alarm system that will ring at the local police station. That could deter robbers from breaking in.

Protecting people, however, demands more than that. Particularly in the case of children. To protect them we need to make a broad space in which children are free to run and play as the please, in which they can grow and explore the world, and in which they know that they will be listened to and are safe. In that space they will have the company of mature adults whose eyes and ears are open to notice potential dangers and to deal with them. Their care means that children can grow carefree.

Child Protection Sunday recalls to us our task of ensuring that children in our churches and schools can grow, talk and play safely. The day carries great weight because we know that in the Catholic Church too many people entrusted with the care of children exploited and abused them. Those protecting the house became bandits. Child Protection Sunday is a time for locks and alarms: for ensuring that proper protocols and safeguards are observed. More deeply it is a time for asking how better we can make the Church a welcoming space in which children can flourish.

The readings for today's Mass invite us to reflect on this task.

The first reading, from Isaiah, addresses people whose faith is tested in hard times. Having been exiled from Israel, the land that God had promised them, they were dispirited and isolated. Their experience resonates with many Catholics today for whom the crimes of clerical sexual abuse of children and the devastating effects on the lives of its victims weigh heavily and sap their confidence and joy in living their faith. The burden is borne particularly by those who themselves have survived abuse or know and love those affected by it.

Isaiah tells the people not to be afraid, because God is coming to save them. He then describes in vivid images what it means to be made whole – it is like the blind suddenly seeing, the deaf hearing, the lame walking freely. It is like a parched and waterless desert where jackals prey being transformed into a green and fertile land where rivers and streams flow. The images invite us first to imagine a church in which predators prowl, hope dies, children are unsafe and victims of abuse go unheard and unattended to. And then to imagine it as a place where children can safely grow and thrive, and people whose lives have been maimed can be welcomed, heard and come to walk freely.

In the second reading St James describes a world in which rich people exploit poor people because they are powerful enough to do so. He imagines a meal where the rich sit in the best places and leave the poor to stand or sit on the floor. He reminds his readers that the poor are rich in faith and belong to God's kingdom. His image reminds us of the sense of power and entitlement that people who abuse children often display, often associated with their priesthood or religious calling. It also reminds us of those who put the reputation and privileged place of the Church ahead of the safety of the vulnerable. That contrasts with the simple trust and faith of children in whom God's love for each human being stands out most clearly.

In Mark's story Jesus heals a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment. Jesus usually cures with a simple word sometimes accompanied by laying on hands. But he cures this man by putting his fingers into his ears and mouth. Jesus' touch brings healing and confidence to the man in the story. The story reminds us of the blessing and importance of physical expressions of love between parents and children in their growth to affectionate and healthy adults. Through gestures such as hugs they show their love and recognise that they themselves are deeply loved.

Jesus' encounter with this man also brings home to us the horror of the sexual abuse of children, where the innocent openness of children is exploited by gestures that are caricatures of affection. They destroy trust and mine the path to happy adulthood. To protect children we must ensure that they are treated with the respect and love that Jesus has modelled for us.

In Mark's story, too, the man is brought out a world of silence into one where he can hear and speak clearly, and so be able to participate fully in the life of the community. The Catholic community was also trapped in silence when responding to the sexual abuse of children. Children were not listened to, those who heard did not believe, or failed to report it, priests and Bishops tried to preserve public silence about it. This was a silent world in which children suffered. The Church to which Jesus calls us is one where people speak freely, children play safely, and life is lived transparently.

Prayers of the Faithful

We pray for Pope Francis and for the Bishops who guide our Church. May they ensure that in the Church children are respected, that they can speak and be heard, and so grow into trusting and faithful adults.

We pray in sorrow for the people whose lives have been maimed by representatives of the Catholic Church. May they be touched by Christ, and be freed to live full and happy lives. From the Church, may they find justice and love.

We pray for the parish community in which our children are nurtured. May we treasure our children, be vigilant and fearless in protecting them from harm, and live as a community in which all may speak boldly.

We pray for the parents, teachers, administrators and other adults, who are responsible for keeping our church safe for children. May they make it a garden in which children can grow and play trustingly in God's company.

We pray for our Church spread throughout the world. In it may the voices of children be heard. May the eyes of all be opened to see the harm that children have suffered, their ears opened to listen to them, and their hearts opened to welcome and protect them.

We pray for our children. May they be safe in families, schools and church, and have a voice that is heard. May they grow into faithful and loving adults who know that they are deeply loved.