

Homily for Child Protection Week

Child Protection Sunday, which is observed in the Catholic Church, comes at the end of Child Protection Week. The theme of the week is Putting Children First. The phrase catches well the attitude of the heart on whose force all the protocols and regulations designed to ensure children's safety depend. It might also guide our reflection on Child Protection Sunday.

As we reflect on the destructive criminal actions perpetrated against children by Catholic priests, religious and lay people in Catholic institutions, and on the need to ensure that children will now be safe from them, there is no better starting point than putting children first. People who abused children put their own needs, desires, fantasies and frustrations before the good of the children entrusted to their care. They failed to put children first, but used them as means to their own gratification. The institutions of which they were part also failed to put children first. They often allowed and defended a culture in which the welfare of children was subordinated to the observance of punitive rules and to saving the reputation of the institution and the Church. Children were not put first.

Now that institutions both in the Church and the wider society are developing protocols and regulations that keep children safe, Child Protection Sunday invites us to reflect more deeply on what it means to put children first. It certainly means ensuring a safe space in which children can live and grow in wisdom, self-assurance and confidence that they are respected and valued for who they are. The space must be one in which children meet mature adults who understand and care for them and help them to grow. The boundaries of regulation and protocol protect this rich world of respectful and warm relationships. It is an unselfish world where adults recognise and respect the human dignity of each child and nurture the distinctive gift that they are.

At first sight the Mass readings of the Twenty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time with which Child Protection Sunday coincides may seem remote from its concerns. The readings focus on anger and forgiveness, on sin and not on rebuilding. Yet if we look more deeply into the human qualities needed to put children first, they are pertinent.

Reading 1, *Sirach 27:30--28:7*

The reading from the Book of Sirach, a work on how to live faithfully in daily life, describes attitudes that make us see children as expendable. In families, institutions and societies where anger, ill will, resentment, hatred and the desire for vengeance rule, children will not be put first. They will be neglected or used as weapons to hurt enemies. In that emotionally dangerous world they will grow to imitate the values they see around them, or spend their life fleeing from conflict. If such a world is to breathe and find space for children, it can only come from people who bring into it pity, compassion and forgiveness.

Reading 2, *Romans 14:7-9*

The brief passage from St Paul's Letter to the Romans is part of Paul's reflection on different opinions and practices among Christians. They were deeply divisive in his communities. In these verses he insists that people live together peaceably despite their differences. It is important that whatever we do, we do for Christ who is Lord of us all. We must focus on God's love that brings us together and not on the things that divide us. This principle of focusing on what matters most also

underlies putting children first. It invites us not to insist on our different opinions and practices when with children but always to ask what is for the good of the children.

Gospel, *Matthew 18:21-35*

The Gospel passage is about forgiveness. Peter asks how often we should forgive someone who wrongs us: a great number of times? Jesus raises him to a humungous number of times. He then doubles down by telling a story. It contrasts the attitude of a generous employer who cancels the large debt of his manager, with the brutality of the manager who then throws into gaol a person owing him a small sum. The point of the story is that when there is dispute about the respect or service we owe to other people, we should not focus on what is owed us but on the people with whom we are in dispute. We should see them as persons and not as rivals or as enemies. In all our relationships we are to put the person first. The story speaks to our attitudes to children, too. People who abuse children see them as possessions to be used for their own gratification, or even as debtors who owe them service. Jesus way is one of compassion that always looks to the good of the other person.

These readings invite us to reflect on our own attitudes and on how far compassion or selfishness dominates our lives. The emphasis on forgiveness also raises a delicate question that we Catholics must ask ourselves: what should be our attitude to our fellow Catholics, priests, religious and lay people who have abused children? Once all the attitudes and practices that ensure children will be safe within our Catholic world are observed and have become instinctive to us, the Gospel still asks us what claims forgiveness will make on us.

790

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