

Safe Haven Sunday Homily

January 29, 2023

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This Sunday we are celebrating “Safe Haven Sunday” throughout the Diocese.

As you know, I was a priest of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, and year after year, the Bengals were the worst team in the NFL. Just three years ago, they finished dead last. The only thing good about the season was that they got the first pick in the NFL draft, and they selected a young man named Joe Burrow. The following season, Joe Burrow showed some promise, and the team had high hopes, but he hurt his knee, and again, they finished near the bottom. The Cincinnati Bengals were perennial cellar dwellers.

They never thought they could really win the big game, but then last year something changed. Little by little, they began to play together. Burrow was, of course, great but the rest of the team also came together. They showed teamwork, determination. They had a few setbacks in the middle of the season, but then they began to gain momentum. They began to believe that they could win. They won a series of games and made it to the Super Bowl. Although they lost, everyone saw they had made progress. The same thing happened again this year; things started out rough, but then mid-season, they turned things around and won eight games in a row.

This Sunday we celebrate Safe Haven Sunday. We want our parishes, schools, and homes to be “safe havens”, where the love of God can grow and where members of families and parishes have a sense of security and belonging. We want to keep our families and our children safe. Our homes, our hearts, our minds are being flooded with imagery, impure imagery, imagery that demeans women and children.

We need, as a family, to protect ourselves against this and to fight back. This is a special Sunday dedicated to equipping parents and families with those tools to fight back against the scourge that is invading our homes. In our Gospel, we heard the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, the teacher *par excellence*, proposes Himself as the New Moses, the new Teacher, with the New Law – the Law of Love. The Beatitudes are the interior attitudes He expects His disciples to have – the spirituality of the Christian disciple.

One of the Beatitudes is: “*Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.*” Our foe, our competitor for our attention, is the evil one. He wants to block our vision of God, so he puts these images in front of us. They are everywhere – they come to us on our computers, on telephones, in advertising, on television, and through live-streaming, and they distract us from the vision of God. They cause us, little by little, to begin seeing

people, who are made in God's image and likeness, as things to be used rather than persons to be loved. We cannot continue to ignore this problem and to stick our heads in the ground like ostriches.

This Sunday is a special Sunday dedicated to helping us recover the vision of God and the vision of man and woman made in God's image and likeness. Many people who unfortunately fall into this sin think, "Well, it's a private thing; it really doesn't hurt anyone." But is that really true? Many people view these images, and gradually their consciences become desensitized.

Sin, in the first place, is an offense against God, but it also wounds the human person, made in God's image and likeness. Slowly, people become addicted to these images, films, and pictures, and they can't get them out of their heads. They begin to become enslaved to them and, therefore, less free. The individual viewing these things is harmed, as are the so-called "actors and actresses" because many of the people recruited for these films are not really recruited but kidnapped and trafficked – both children and adults. This isn't simply a private crime.

This type of sin also wounds marriages. How many people are hurt because they believe their spouse hasn't been faithful to them?! Just a few verses beyond the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "*You have heard it said to you 'you shall not commit adultery,' but I say to you any man who has looked upon a woman with lust in his heart has already committed adultery with her.*" Often marriages are wounded by this so-called private sin, which then impacts children.

We want our children to grow up safe, free from harm, and free to make good choices, especially with respect to their vocations. How many young people want to find intimacy and want to get married, but they can't because don't feel free? They say, "There is this dark part of my life that keeps me from giving the true gift of myself." How many times religious, seminarians, and priests want to make a gift of themselves but they don't or can't because something is holding them back, keeping them hostage or they can't detach from this type of imagery?!

Once more, God has called us to be His children. Though baptism, He has made us temples of the Holy Spirit, and He has called us to live in the freedom of the sons and daughters of God. Sometimes we think, "Well, how can I be a missionary?" "How can I be an evangelist?" "How can I even grace a church door if I've been looking at these types of images?" Perhaps some of the prophets or great saints who preceded us thought the same. St. Paul was a great sinner, but he encountered the Living God on the road to Damascus, and he was utterly converted and changed his life. He was set aside to be the

Apostle to the Gentiles, and knowing his weakness, he could boast only in the Lord Jesus Christ, as we heard in the Second Reading.

St. Paul writes: *“God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God. It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus.”*

God also sees our potential for greatness, despite our weaknesses, even if we have this particular weakness in our life, and he calls us from mediocrity to greatness: to being a disciple; to becoming, as we heard last Sunday, “fishers of men.” Someone like Simon Peter would then leave his father and his nets to follow Jesus, setting off on a great adventure of faith. Of course, he would stumble and fall, but he would also do great things, exclaiming “You are the Christ, the son of the Living God.” At the Last Supper, Simon Peter said, “Lord, I will never deny you,” but when push came to shove, he denied the Lord three times and Jesus looked at Peter, and Peter wept. He wept bitterly for his sins. But the Lord never gave up on him. After the Resurrection, the Lord would appear to him and say, “Simon, son of John, do you love me? Do you love me more than these?” Peter one day would glorify the Lord by being crucified upside down, having been transformed by the power of God's grace.

We too might think we cannot do great things, because we have sinned greatly, but the Lord's love - his Mercy - is greater than our sins. We see our faults, sometimes we even define ourselves by our faults. The Lord does not do so. He sees our potential for greatness. He refuses to define us by our faults. Instead, He calls us to follow him, and He will do great things in us. He is relentless in his mercy. God never ceases to find a way to save us - to help us to carry on. In fact, He gave us His Son. The Cross reveals what God is willing to do to save us.

If God is willing to make an effort, maybe I should be willing to make the effort too to get well, to be his disciple, and to do great things for God, His church, and the Kingdom. But in order to do that, we need to be free. In churches throughout the Diocese and through the Office of Evangelization, there are resources to begin having conversations with your family about this issue.

Our priests make themselves radically available for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation to help people experience forgiveness. Sometimes, people come back pretty regularly and say, “Father I did it again, or you know I don't want to do it, but I, like Saint Paul I did the very thing I did not wish to do.” It's okay - at least they're willing

to try to get better, and we're willing to help. If you need help breaking free, know that your parish and your parish priest is here for you.

All of us have to get back on the road. We have to think about the possibility of overcoming our sins by God's grace and being victorious. For many, many years the Cincinnati Bengals thought, we are the worst team in football – we cannot win - we can never be great. There was a self-fulfilling prophecy. But, then little by little they had success, and they built upon small successes and celebrated small victories. Even though at times they had some setbacks, they were determined. They had a sense of purpose and a sense of mission. Then they began to believe we can get this done - we can win - we can conquer.

We as Christians compete for a greater prize than the Vince Lombardi Trophy or worldly fame - we compete for the prize of eternal life and the vision of God. *Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.* May God bless you and your families and may He keep us all safe in his protective care.