



CONGREGATIO
PRO GENTIUM EVANGELIZATIONE

Homily

Diploma Course in Safeguarding of Minors – Gregorian University

Closing Liturgy – June 14, 2016

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned – the prayer of those who have placed their trust in God, our Merciful Father – must echo forth from every community because all of humanity is affected by the sin of Adam and by its unfortunate manifestations in the lives of individuals and communities.

In the more recent history of the Church, many Pastors and Religious Superiors have had to make recourse to this prayer in the wake of the terrible scandals of child abuse that have left open wounds and blistering scars in many parts of the Catholic Church. The victims, the perpetrators and many poor pastoral decisions are all part of this tragic story.

These horrible crimes, indeed, can be likened to the crime of Ahab in today's First Reading. Ahab was confronted with the truth of his evildoings by the Prophet Elijah after the voice of God revealed the king's hidden sin and warned of its serious consequences: *Because you have given yourself up to doing evil in the LORD's sight, I am bringing evil upon you ... because of how you have provoked me by leading Israel into sin.*

Ahab listened to the accusations of the prophet and accepted full responsibility for his crime: *He tore his garments and put on sackcloth over his bare flesh. He fasted, slept in the sackcloth, and went about subdued.* Because he repented, the Lord mitigated the punishment, even though many consequences still remained. The awareness of sin brought about a necessary response.

Dear friends, the Course in *Safeguarding Minors*, which you have completed here at the Pontifical Gregorian University, is one of the many ways in which the Church is responding to the wound of sexual abuse, one that has brought pain and anguish to victims, their families and all concerned. We need to listen to the voice of the prophet and respond with a repentant heart.

On numerous occasions Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has underlined the gravity of this reality in the life of the Church, and he stands with us today in committing ourselves to the prevention of future abuses. Also, he very much shares our sadness that these events ever occurred. During a Mass at Casa Santa Marta he said: *For some time now I have felt in my heart deep pain and suffering...at the fact that some priests and bishops, by sexually abusing minors, violated their innocence and their own priestly vocation.* (7/7/14)

One of the many unfortunate consequences of these actions is a loss of trust in the Church and the priesthood. Our Holy Father noted this on his flight from the Holy Land to Rome, when he said: *The abuse of minors is truly a horrible crime...these young people, these children are trusting...and then instead of leading them to holiness, [a priest] abuses them. And this is extremely serious!* (26/05/14) As we heard in today's Gospel passage, Our Lord Jesus wants to be near the little ones and desires that they may have the freedom to approach him as well: *"Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."* In light of the burning desire in the Heart of God that the little ones may be free to draw near to Him, we must do all we can to safeguard and rebuild trust in the Church, the Bride of Christ, through whom Jesus makes himself present to the world.

Indeed, the scandal of sexual abuse has done much harm within the Church, but it has also moved many to engage in a determined and loving response, with the aim of healing victims, bringing perpetrators to justice, and setting up structures for the prevention and adequate response to any and all cases of child abuse. Many initiatives have already been undertaken to ensure the safety of children, young people, and disabled adults. The prevention of the abuse of minors is and must continue to be a priority for the entire Church.

The *Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*, for its part, has taken initiatives in the Mission Territories that fall under its jurisdiction: sensitizing Episcopal Conferences regarding this issue, setting aside funds for scholarships to help prepare leaders in Mission Dioceses to respond adequately to this wrongdoing, and emphasizing this issue in the Seminar that every newly appointed Bishop must attend. Thus, efforts are being made to pay particular attention to areas where the Church is still young and developing. The same Congregation gives its full support and cooperation to the formative and academic efforts of the Centre for Child Protection and pledges its diligent involvement in the areas where this theme of prevention has yet to firmly take hold. The Holy See's Missionary Dicastery, in light of the recent *Motu Proprio*, *COME UNA MADRE AMOREVOLE*, will also be actively engaged in combating any negligence committed by those whom the Lord has entrusted with the task of shepherding the flock as bishops.

These are all signs of how seriously the Church is responding to this painful reality, of her solicitude for all concerned, and of her conviction and determination to move ahead with clear, sound, and resolute measures that safeguard the dignity of everyone. The Church will not cease to uphold the need for ever greater transparency, sensitivity, compassion, and resolute action.

In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, let us be moved by the infinite compassion of God towards sinners. It is this mercy that is needed most of all when facing the current challenges surrounding the sexual abuse of minors. Everyone involved is in need of the Father's mercy for both healing and strength. It is the Mercy of God that fills hearts with the strength to face the hurts of the past with courage and to meet the challenges of the future with hope. It is a healing mercy that restores inner peace and tranquility. It is also God's loving mercy that gives to the perpetrators of these crimes, many who in the past were themselves victims, the courage to accept responsibility for their actions and to resolutely seek psychological and spiritual healing from this deep internal malady. As the Psalmist says, *I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is before me always.*

Dear brothers and sisters, I congratulate you on completing this course in *Safeguarding* and I praise the efforts of the *Centre for Child Protection*. Thank you for your engagement in working for a solid and lasting response to this dreadful phenomenon. I pray that, as you return to your Dioceses and Religious Communities, you will become catalysts for the protection of minors, urging those in authority to be ever diligent in this area and bringing about healing wherever necessary.

May God bless you all in your future ministries. **Amen.**