

January 1, 2022

Octave Day of the Nativity of the Lord
Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

And [Jesus'] father and His mother marveled at what was said about Him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against; and a sword shall pierce through your own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Luke 2:33-35

Dearest Families of St. Vincent's,

Christ's peace and Christmas blessings be with you as we begin this new calendar year! From the first days since the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had to contend with the sword of suffering that would pierce the heart of their home in innumerable ways. Because we as members of the Church are included so intimately into the same destiny of the Holy Family, heart-piercing news comes again for us. Bishop Rhoades has asked me to share with you this weekend the following announcement:

I must inform you that the diocese received credible allegations against Father Eric Burgener of serious boundary violations with an adult. This necessitated that his faculties to perform public priestly ministry be removed. He has also been removed as parochial vicar of Saint Vincent de Paul Parish, Fort Wayne, and as hospital chaplain. Please pray for all involved. Knowing this is very difficult and painful news to receive, please let's pray for one another, for our church and most especially for all of those who are directly involved.

As your Pastor, entrusted by Christ with the care of your souls and the safeguarding of our life of faith at St. Vincent's, I accept this decision and agree with it as right and just. To this announcement, I must also freely add my own personal witness.

I was the one who first received on behalf of the Church these allegations, which I immediately shared with proper authority so that a formal investigation could begin. The young woman who shared them met with me on the second Sunday of Advent, accompanied by two friends. In this meeting and subsequent ones, I have been deeply impressed with this young woman's love of the Lord and the Church (including her respect for and trust of Priests), as well as her immense courage in sharing such excruciatingly painful experiences. Through this whole process, I have consistently found her claims to be both serious and credible.

Speaking generally, in my twenty-year experience working with people who have been hurt in any variety of ways by the Church's shepherds, I find recurring patterns of woundedness. There is so often the fear of not being believed and the shame of being thought even partially complicit in any misdeeds. Can the world ever be convinced that the evil really happened and that it was not consensual? There is agonized concern for the reputation of the one who has administered the sacramental graces of Christ, as well as the faith of all who may have benefitted from his ministry. Can the one who has been hurt or her family ever live any type of normal life again? It can feel as if either possible future---carrying such a secret or revealing it---leads to unspeakable humiliation all around. Perhaps most insidiously, there is the gnawing question of how many others have been hurt or may be hurt by one's silence and seeming inaction.

For as heart-piercing as the abuse scandals in and beyond the Church have been these many years, there are now structures of discernment in place for those who have suffered to share their experiences so that these sins and crimes do not continue to fester and that a measure of justice can prevail and healing begin.

I believe that it is vital for you to know in detail what these structures are and meet personally some of the people who serve directly in them. I have invited both Mary Glowaski, Bishop Rhoades' assistant in pastoral care and victim assistance coordinator, and Fr. Matthew Coonan, Bishop's vicar for clergy, to lead a presentation at St. Vincent's on Thursday, January 13 from 6:30-8:00PM in the Kuzmich Life Center. It will cover our Diocese's outreach to and support of those who have suffered abuse, the process within the Church and beyond it for investigating and adjudicating these claims, and the rights and responsibilities of Priests, including their support and formation in our Diocese so that we are always growing in health and addressing pathologies. It is also my hope to invite Donald Schmid, a member of our Diocesan Review Board and a federal prosecutor, to join us at some point in the future to discuss his invaluable experience in this process. For now, this weekend after all of the Masses Mary Glowaski is available in the parish library of our church gathering space to speak with anyone who has questions, concerns, or input.

I have served as a Priest now for two decades in the midst of these horrors, and each and every instance of scandalous failure in Priestly care of you---my cherished, loving, grace-filled congregation---flays my soul. I want you to know that I am not intimidated by this evil and refuse to be crushed by sorrow or shock or the shame brought to our Church and the ordained ministry that Christ has established. My anger---and I have been filled with it every hour of every day and night for the past four weeks---unceasingly takes the form of Christ's passionate commitment to spend myself entirely at the service of the growth of health and holiness in the families of our Church and in the ministry of our Priests and training of our seminarians. This is the charism of St. Vincent de Paul, the purpose of St. Mary Magdalene's Oratory, and the mission of our Parish. Zeal for this house *consumes* me (Psalm 69:9 = John 2:17)!

Beautiful people of St. Vincent's, you have always loved your Priests—all of us, through everything. We feel on a daily basis your constant care for us and intercession on our behalf. When I met with Fr. Eric last week, he was particularly anguished about how your faith would be wounded in this tragedy. I assured him that the Lord would keep safe whatever good He has worked through any of our ministries---it is ultimately Christ who loves us in His sacraments, and His love is stronger than sin or death.

No Christian is spared the heart-piercing sword of suffering. It passes in the evils of this world through Mother Mary's perfectly vulnerable soul to reach the open heart of Christ her son. And the final triumph of good over evil comes only from this wounded side of our Savior---the revelation of every secret truth, the vindication of every violated innocence, the forgiveness of every repented sin, the atonement for every crime, and the ultimate victory of His merciful love.

In St. Vincent's love of Christ,

Rev. Daniel Scheidt, Pastor