

**Homily for the Mass for the Bishops' Plan Insurance Company  
Monday of the Thirtieth Week of Ordinary Time – Year II  
October 29, 2018**

**Holy Ghost Church  
1900 California Street  
Denver, Colorado**

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M dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The late Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George, for whom I was privileged to serve as Chancellor of the Archdiocese and as Auxiliary Bishop, wrote in his book entitled, *The Difference God Makes*, “The world permits everything and forgives nothing. God and the Church do not permit everything but forgive everything.”

This incisive statement has profound implications for us as we consider how to live as Catholics in the current crisis facing the Church. The seemingly endless stream of reports of clerical sexual abuse of minors going back for decades is deeply disturbing and has caused some people to question their faith. For some, these scandals may be a stumbling block that hinders newcomers from joining the Church. For those who are long-time members of the Church, the current crisis may prompt questioning and

doubts about their continued identification with an institution so marred by corruption.

It could be that God has permitted this current crisis as a test of faith, however, the test itself may not be what we initially think it is. The question of how God could permit such evil in the Church is answered rather simply and somewhat easily by citing the freedom that God has given to all human beings to choose between good and evil. He does not want to force our love, but wishes for us to love Him freely. It follows that sin is a logical consequence of this freedom, since the freedom to choose good must also entail the freedom to choose evil.

I would suggest that the greater test of faith may be whether or not we truly believe that “Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). For a world that “permits everything and forgives nothing,” it is difficult to believe that anyone could possibly forgive those who commit such heinous crimes and serious sins as the sexual abuse of minors.

Yes, we have this general understanding that Jesus came to forgive our sins and gave us the Church as the means of our salvation. We have no problem believing that God forgives our lesser faults, such as saying nasty

things to others, treating people rudely, and not saying our daily prayers. But does God really forgive murderers, thieves, drug abusers, adulterers, fornicators and even perpetrators who sexually abuse children? The answer, hard to believe, is yes, if they repent and beg for His mercy.

In fact, God not only forgives grave sins, but expects us to do the same. Immediately after teaching His disciples the prayer that we now call the "Our Father," Jesus added, "If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions" (Matthew 6:14-15). This teaching of our Lord is repeated in Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, which we heard in our first reading: "Brothers and sisters: Be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ" (Ephesians 4:32).

In reminding ourselves of this teaching, I am not saying that perpetrators of serious sins that are also crimes should not be punished. Neither was Saint Paul saying this, for in the very next paragraph he says, "Immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be mentioned among you, as is fitting among holy ones . . . Be sure of this, that no immoral or

impure or greedy person, that is, an idolater, has any inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and of God” (Ephesians 5: 3, 5).

In this regard, Pope St. John Paul II in 2002 clearly and emphatically declared, “People need to know that there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young.” Taking their cue from the Holy Father, in 2002 the Catholic Bishops of the United States adopted a “zero tolerance” policy for clergy who sexually abuse children. The *Essential Norms* that accompany the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* states, “When even a single act of sexual abuse by a priest or deacon is admitted or is established after an appropriate process in accord with canon law, the offending priest or deacon will be removed permanently from ecclesiastical ministry, not excluding dismissal from the clerical state, if the case so warrants” (Essential Norms, n. 6). This norm remains in effect.

So how does zero tolerance square with mercy and forgiveness? Is God the Just Judge or God the Merciful Father? The Catholic answer to such a question, of course, is not either/or, but both. These attributes of God are not contradictory, inconsistent or incompatible. God is all merciful as well as all just. It may be difficult for us from our human perspective to understand how that can be, but God does not have to diminish one of His attributes in

order to manifest another. Just as Jesus is true God and true man without either nature canceling or detracting from the other, God is always merciful and always just.

This is described eloquently in Psalm 89, where God says, “If they fail to observe my statutes, do not keep my commandments, I will punish their crime with a rod and their guilt with blows. But I will not take my mercy from him, nor will I betray my bond of faithfulness” (Psalm 89:32-34). Parents can see this in their relationship with their children: at times parents must correct their children and punish them, but they do not stop loving them. In fact, parents correct their children precisely because they love them. So does God our Father love us, correct us, and call us to repentance and conversion, as He asks us all to do the same with each other.

When these stories of scandal first broke a few weeks ago, I gave several media interviews to reporters inquiring about these matters. One reporter asked what I would say to people whose faith in the institution of the Church has been shaken by these scandals. I answered by saying that, ultimately, we are not called to put our faith in an institution; we are called to put our faith in Jesus Christ. Our Lord gave us the Church as a means to help us to get to heaven, but the Church is not an end in itself. Our Lord also

gave us bishops, priests and deacons to help the Christian faithful on this journey of faith. We must never forget that this is a ministry of service and not of privilege. Where trust has been broken or confidence has been eroded, we must work assiduously to regain it.

Even in the face of adversity, we must remain convinced that Christ has not abandoned us, and so we must not give up on our commitment to live as His disciples. We must recognize that giving up is exactly what Satan wants, for he is the prince of darkness. He wants us to turn our back on our Lord and His Church. On the contrary, like the disciples in the early Church, we must use this unfortunate set of circumstances to commit ourselves to live ever more fully for Christ as His disciples. We must keep saying “yes” to God for the rest of our lives.

May God give us this grace. Amen.