

Office of the Bishop

## Safe Haven Sunday Letter 2019

Greetings in Christ!

Today's Gospel reading begins with Jesus telling his disciples a parable. He begins with two questions, "*Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?*"

This weekend we are celebrating Safe Haven Sunday throughout our diocese. I am addressing all the faithful of our diocese through this letter to raise awareness so that we can lead our young people away from a modern-day pit that so many are falling into today. This is my invitation to you: consider the serious responsibility that we all share to protect our children from harm. We live in a culture that contains many hazards to both the moral and spiritual health of our children. In recent years much has been done to make our schools and parishes safer for the children of our diocese.

Many of you are aware of our mandated safe-environment training, background checks, and ethical standards that have been in place and have made a profound impact on the culture in our diocese. And, this past week in Rome, a summit called by Pope Francis is sought to address greater change in the Church universal for safety, accountability, and healing.

While our schools have done much, many of our homes still have more to do. Technology, entertainment, and the internet have given us many good things. But, they also have a dark side. For the sake of this message being delivered at Holy Mass I will use the term "bad pictures." I think we all know just what I'm talking about and I think this is a very helpful term for parents to use to explain what this evil is, especially prior to first exposure. Perhaps you are already aware of the gravity of our current situation? Just in case, here are just a few alarming statistics.

This problem is now among the leading causes of divorce. In a 2018 report, 56 percent of U.S. divorces involved one party having "an obsessive interest in [these bad picture and video] websites."

The average age of first exposure to these bad pictures has dropped dramatically in the past decade. A study from last year revealed that 51 percent of male students and 32 percent of female students first viewed bad pictures or videos before age 13.

Increasingly, viewing bad videos is leading children to copy that behavior with other children. According to Heidi Olsen, an RN who practices nursing at Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, the biggest age range of people committing indecent assaults against children are other children ages 11-15 years old. In a July 2018 article in which Heidi shared this new development, she comments on the cause of this phenomenon, "[Bad videos] are often a main factor, and sometimes the only factor, that influenced a child to act out in [this] harmful way," she wrote.

I realize that it is agonizing for most parents to even think of talking to young children about internet safety.

**Diocese of Kansas City - St. Joseph**

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Your children are growing up in a different world than you did—a world where a predatory industry is seeking to corrupt your children using tactics designed to hotwire their brains and cause addiction.

As parents this is your territory. You are the first educator, first responder, and first counselor for your children, especially in the area of chastity. Once children have Mobile devices with access to bad content it's not just looking at bad pictures that you'll need to prepare them to deal with. There are the social apps that can lead to real life harm, photo sharing that can lead children to engage in risky and degrading behavior, and more apps and settings than most parents will ever be able to figure out. It's a lot for a parent to handle.

However, when parents face this danger head-on by talking openly and with mercy and truth, kids don't have to face it alone.

As your bishop, may I suggest a few things that parents can do.

Develop trusting relationships with your kids. If you're not talking with your children about this, who will help them navigate their technology use and media consumption?

Nurture a life of virtue and prayer; pray as a family and encourage them to frequent the sacrament of confession. We have provided parishes with prayer cards and I encourage you to take them home.

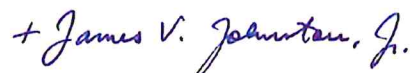
Consider using monitoring and blocking software and pay close attention to what happens at school, friends' homes, anywhere that might have screens that you can't monitor.

Learn the facts about the dangers. Make a plan, pray, and make your plan a reality for the sake of your children and their future. We have partnered with Covenant Eyes to provide a free, easy-to-use 7-day educational program and a free month of access to their monitoring and blocking software. You will find the sign-up information on the prayer cards and, if your parish has provided them, a booklet called "Equipped: Smart Catholic Parenting." If you have a smart phone, please take a moment to sign-up right now. It's ok to take out your phone in church for this important purpose. Simply text the word SECURE to 66866.

Finally, here's something all of us can do, even if we don't have children living at home. It is connected to one of the Priorities in our diocesan Mutually Shared Vision - "Healing our Family." We can follow Jesus' advice from today's Gospel and "*remove the wooden beam from*" our own eye. We can resolve to live our own discipleship in such a way that we can boldly speak about this sin with conviction in God's mercy and truth. We can pray and fast for those we know who are afflicted by this sin. We can draw close to Jesus for our own needs and receive his mercy and healing.

This is a battle we can win. In fact, it is a battle that has already been won by Jesus Christ, Our Savior. This is the Good News proclaimed so boldly by St. Paul in our second reading today - "*Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*"

Gratefully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ James V. Johnston, Jr."

Most Reverend James V. Johnston, Jr.  
Bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph