



Protecting God's Children for Adults

The Prevention and Mitigation of Abuse of Vulnerable Adults Part I: The Paradox of Vulnerability

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"I tell you, if they keep silent, the stones will cry out!"

-Luke 19:40

When we speak of vulnerable adults, we must think of all of the ways in which we are vulnerable in situations—in relationships and in the various circumstances in our lives. This four-part series of articles will address the issue of vulnerable adults and how we, through the Protecting God's Children® (PGC) Program, can address the various circumstances that arise in certain areas of concern. The content of the PGC program for adults is effective in addressing abuse prevention for vulnerable adults. These articles will address various areas of concern in protecting those we love—including ourselves.

Dictionaries define “vulnerable” as:

- Capable of being physically or emotionally wounded;
- Open to attack or damage, assailable [vulnerable to criticism].



We are all, therefore, through the ordinary actions of our daily lives, by definition—vulnerable. All of us are Children of God who have been made good and placed on the path to perfection of God's love by opening ourselves up to God's will. However, this places us all in a vulnerable position as we trust others to assist, guide, and nurture us.

We seek a delicate balance when we are open to God's will, confident in our chosen path, and determined in our Faith all at the same time. The Saints give us concrete examples of this, showing us clearly both the joys and sufferings of putting one's self in a vulnerable position. Jesus, himself, became vulnerable for love of us.

Through His example, we strive to live in the sureness of Faith, while finding our way through vulnerable times, places, and circumstances in our lives.

If we strive to be the opposite of vulnerable, we become invulnerable or invincible. We find ourselves as persons living in a world that is impenetrable, indestructible, powerful, secure, strong, unbeatable, and untouchable.

While at first glance these words evoke images of power and privilege, and places that might offer peace of mind and heart, we see that they are words that do not in any way demonstrate the qualities of a good Christian minister.

Synonyms for the word vulnerable are accessible, defenseless, sensitive, susceptible, tender, thin-skinned, unguarded, unprotected, unsafe, weak, wide open; antonyms are closed, guarded, protected, safe, and secure.

Words have power; adding simply a prefix of a couple of letters can change its meaning entirely. So too can a title, position, or circumstance in life make a measurable difference in the way we perceive, embrace, and accept vulnerability. For those with much, embracing the posture of vulnerability can mean either a great leap into the unknown or a small step toward it. It all depends upon the circumstances of support and resources available. For those with fewer resources, the movement toward vulnerability may be shorter in distance, but with a higher cost to the person emotionally.

The measure can't be quantified or qualified. Thus, we can never effectively compare the lives of those persons living with and without disabilities. How often are God's gifts overwhelming blessings for some, but challenges for others?

The Paradox of Vulnerability

All of these introductory words, while perhaps somewhat confusing, lead us to explore the paradox of vulnerability. Vulnerability is most often associated with being helpless and weak, but we find that being vulnerable affords us the opportunity to accept the kindness of others in ways that we never expected. Jesus' example of the man born blind in John 9:3 is a perfect example of our Christian call to help those less fortunate than ourselves. Jesus answers the disciple's queries of why the man was born blind by stating: "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him."

Being vulnerable also makes one open to being hurt. When the disciples asked Jesus about the origins of the man's blindness, they referred to the common theological thought at the that time that it was due to sin. When individuals use the vulnerabilities of others to label, take control of them, act out their frustrations or anger upon them, or exploit them, this is the gravest sins. Hurting others who are defenseless is reprehensible.

This problem has been repeated through the ages in various forms. Unfortunately, we see the problem as something or someone far from our reach, and come to the rescue too late. Most unfortunate is the fact that we have not eradicated it from our ways altogether.

Carmelite Saint Teresa Benedicta (Edith Stein) who lived through the torments of the concentration camps, summed up the appropriate Christian response to these tragedies by saying, "The burden of the cross that Christ assumed is that of corrupted human nature, with all its consequences in sin and suffering to which fallen humanity is subject. The meaning of the way of the cross is to carry this burden out of the world. Suffering brings us face to face with each other and ourselves in ways that are impossible to avoid. Pain gets our attention and forces us to figure out what we stand for, which is what life and death are all about. The answers are not

completely satisfying at the intellectual level. Thus, we find ourselves, reluctantly at first, on a pilgrimage with God through the worst of what humankind is capable of perpetrating. We are on a journey with God through the crushing realities that spring up right in the middle of our lives—sickness, death and the loss of fortune or friends, opportunities and dreams. What good answers could these possibly have?”

Saint Theresa Benedicta hearkens back to the age-old question the Disciples asked Jesus: “Why is there suffering?” Jesus’ response is clear and makes the works of God visible—our duty is to carry the burdens of the cross out of the world.

We again see the paradox—“Being vulnerable isn’t about being weak; it’s about harnessing the necessary strength to be open and authentic.” Being true to our call as Christians is to let God’s power and grace work through us to give a voice to every vulnerable person we encounter. To further the paradox, we must identify the various ways we can become vulnerable so we are open to healing and binding the wounds of others. Embracing the opportunities before us by taking on the posture of Jesus’ great mandatum is as unique as each of us who have been specially created. There is no prescription, formula, or specific way to carry the burdens out of the world. Simply put, we should be encouraged by paying close attention to our own interior life and be propelled from these graces to move forward in reaching out to give voice and to extend a hand to vulnerable others. Focusing on being better at what we do best will create communities of care and concern for all—where each voice, especially vulnerable unheard voices, will be listened to and heard clearly. As leaders in our blessed Church, we have the opportunity to seek out the vulnerable, listen to them and provide a plan for their safety and wellbeing.

Our history of salvation has proven over time that God keeps His promises to us. He would never leave us to suffering without Hope. His grace working through all of us, from the weakest to the mightiest, empowers us to call forth the voices of those who have been silenced. Our call is to protect them and to raise them up as loved, cherished, and viable members of the community whose gifts are affirmed and encouraged.