

## LESSONS FROM THE STAIRCASE: CONFRONTING DIFFICULT SOCIAL ILLS

“Be sober and vigilant.” (1 Peter 5:8a) So begins the pithy advice in St. Peter’s first epistle. He goes on to say, “Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour.” In our frenetically paced society, being **sober and vigilant** packs little punch and is easily dismissed as being stodgy and old-school. My early morning treks down Cathedral Hill steps have been both frustrating and poignant, as I have encountered the homeless. Occasionally I have received friendly greetings—most often we simply go our separate ways. Discussion is dicey at best before sunrise; rather, I typically offer a simple “Good morning.” Sensing a genuine response recently, I decided that if this man was still on the steps when I next ascended, I would speak to him. “How are you doing?” That’s all it took— an **invitation** to dialogue.

I asked him if he had sought help from some of the area agencies, suggesting **Higher Ground** (Catholic Charities). They have **193 single units** and I would assist him. He then shared that he “got into it” with a personal care assistant and was banned from their facility. “For how long,” I inquired? Without batting an eye— “For a year,” he replied. That is a significant penalty. He stayed for a time in area hotels-turned-shelters, “burned his bridges” with his adult children and was homeless for the past two months. Did I feel threatened by him? **Certainly not.** He is truly one to whom **my heart went out.** But we have experienced a troubling **uptick of activity** near the Cathedral. I am neither **trying to scare** people away, nor being overly dramatic for effect. However, we have “eyes” looking out for you at **every single Mass**, weekday and weekends. Even still, some could enter who are troubled or looking for trouble.

While the front doors were propped open to let in some needed morning fresh air, a man wandered in before morning Mass. In an instant he began to follow a daily Mass goer around. Once spotted, he quickly left. But he came back a few minutes later, loudly banging an object twice on the closed front door of the Cathedral, **startling** everyone. He was likely mentally ill or under the influence of a controlled substance. A Cathedral staff member was on the ball and called for help. The Police were responsive, professional and helpful. I pulled up the video and the officer invited me to send him a screen shot. He texted me back **within 15 minutes** sharing that the man was involved in a **more serious incident** downtown. Our video was **instrumental** in identifying him. I have shared both my concerns with the Police Commander, as well as my desire to try to help. He was quite responsive to my concerns. But you, the Cathedral faithful, have a right to know of the significant challenges just below us and how it impacts us.

Your safety and security are paramount, even as I seek to educate myself on the thorny issues surrounding **homelessness, addiction and crime.** All three are real, complicated and intertwined. City officials on both sides of the river have allowed **encampments** to spring up. The Police readily shared with me that such encampments are enticements for those who seek to exploit the vulnerable, whether for drugs or prostitution. The Minneapolis Park Board decision to allow scores of tents at **Powderhorn Park** has proven to be an abysmal failure. Could any city official have been **surprised** at the huge **crime spike**? Right here, I have observed “Kamp Kellogg” growing— first ten, then twenty, thirty, even forty tents where in May none existed. More are staged behind the History Center, exit ramps, or next to the former Chancery annex (Cathedral school).

“Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong.” (1 Cor. 16:13). If you see something suspicious, approach an usher or maintenance staff. Do not approach people yourselves. Be **prudent** and **vigilant.** We are trying to balance our desire to be welcoming, including people for whom life has produced hardships and who may seek a few moments of solace and solitude at a Sunday Mass. I have no intention of preventing that, but my **primary concern** is for your safety. We routinely review video footage to keep an eye on the campus. Our church remains closed due to Covid-19 outside of Mass and confessions, but one could make a case for this due simply to the uptick in activity in the area.

This is a difficult topic about which to write, but I cannot ignore the increase of police sirens I hear in the general vicinity of Cathedral Hill. Nor will I ignore the **trash and litter.** We work hard to keep the campus tidy and inviting, but it would be naïve to think that this situation does not affect us. Please know that we are being

vigilant. We all desire to help— but realistically it is difficult to know how best to do so effectively. Some living in tents have chosen not to avail themselves of the comprehensive assistance offered by our shelters and social service agencies. This saddens me, but we must have **honest discussion** about how best to assist people. I am extremely concerned— there has to be a better solution.

- Just as many schools are canceling various extra-curricular activities out of caution, so too we have been honestly **evaluating the prospects** for our choir programs this fall. Given the type of training involved with choral activities, Covid-19 has impacted prospects for group choral activities.
- While driving to a dentist appointment, I thought I saw a cell phone in the intersection of Selby and Dale. Pressed for time, I kept driving, but my **conscience kicked in** and I pulled over and walked back during a red light to grab the intact phone. At the dentist office, just as I had begun to google “how to identify an owner of a lost...” the phone rang. “Hello,” I said tentatively. “Looking for your phone?” It was her friend calling and they were both relieved. As we arranged for its return, I heard the friend say in the background, “So it **was** on top of my car!” Can’t make it up!
- While I understand the frustration that people feel when being **turned away** from Mass due to Covid-19 capacity regulations, there is no credible excuse for being verbally abusive to any of our staff, who are simply doing their jobs. What occurred last Sunday was completely unacceptable. Please thank a staff member for their service.
- We all pass our free time differently, but currently I am fascinated by looking online at old **maps of the city of Saint Paul** and seeing how Pig’s Eye slowly but surely transformed itself into our capital city. Check out the wide variety of maps from 1869 to 1945 by visiting the John Borchert Map Library. Find your street; check if it once had a different name than it does now. You might be surprised! Click on <http://geo.lib.umn.edu/historicmn/stpaul.pdf>.
- We have begun to replace the **sacristy floor tiles** and to restore the beautiful marble accents, so dulled after all these years. The floor will **sparkle**, and the removal of an old storage cabinet has created more open seating before major events. This project is funded through the Cathedral Heritage Foundation.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector