

February 22, 2019

Dear Friends,

Not long ago, someone remarked to me about how difficult it is to be Catholic these days. An understatement, I thought. It seems that scarcely a day goes by that we are not greeted (assaulted would be the better word) by some new and shocking revelation that relates to one aspect or another of the sexual abuse scandal that, for far too long, has been rocking the church—not just in this country, not just in the developed countries of the world, but seemingly everywhere.

We are scandalized, disgusted, and weary beyond words. Our hearts ache for the thousands of victims who carry heavy burdens through their lives. And while I can't speak for all of us, I am quite sure that most of us who follow the news--and who relate day after day to friends, neighbors, and coworkers (and, often enough, to family members who no longer consider themselves Catholic)--are finding it increasingly difficult to explain why we continue to identify as Catholic, why we continue to practice our faith. I wish I could provide comfort for you at a profoundly difficult time. I wish I could provide answers to the questions you are struggling with. I wish I could reassure you that the worst is over and that things will quiet down soon. I cannot. All I can do is offer a few considerations that may help provide some context and some nuance--both of which, when it comes to news reports, seem to be in short supply.

First, the church, despite all its egregious sins and failings, its fatal compromises and its deceptions, will weather this storm and, with the grace of God, become a stronger, more credible, more effective instrument for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe this with all my heart. For this to happen, however, our bishops must prayerfully listen to God's Spirit, humbly hear the cries of God's people, and resolutely take bold and deliberate steps to root out of the church every discernible trace of abuse, cover-up, dishonesty, self-deception, and hypocrisy. Only in this way will a dispirited and deeply wounded church be able to move forward and carry out its sacred mission.

Not every representation in the secular media regarding these issues can be taken as gospel. Don't get me wrong: I am not accusing the secular media of ill will or deliberate misrepresentation, but we shouldn't expect secular news sources to have a carefully nuanced understanding of the church, its life, its history, its theology, or its canons. I also think it's true to say that the church has not always helped the situation: too often it has been far from forthcoming with clear, complete, transparent, and unbiased information.

Despite what we often hear in news stories, it is not true to say or to imply that the United States Bishops have not taken serious and significant steps to deal with the abuse crisis. That they have been slow in doing so is unarguable, that they have been uneven in their response is also beyond dispute, but since 2002 when they adopted the so-called Dallas Charter, the bishops have taken major steps not only to address the sad history of the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults in the church, but also to put into place a set of policies and protocols to prevent its ever happening again. So, even last summer's revelations of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury, lurid and shocking as they were, should be seen as reports on criminal activity that took place prior to 2002—and much of it fifty or more years ago. This will bring no comfort to victims, and it certainly does not in any way excuse past crimes and misdeeds, but it provides nuance and acknowledges facts that were largely overlooked in much, if not all, of the reporting. And so, while it is true that before 2002 most, if not all, bishops made serious errors (sometimes on the basis of flawed advice from mental health and treatment professionals), it is not fair to overlook the major changes in policy and practice that have been adopted and implemented, nor is it fair to characterize all bishops as turning a blind eye, ignoring victims and their families, protecting offenders, and guarding the church's reputation at all costs.

The learning curve for dealing with these issues has been long and slow--too long and too slow. But the same can be said for society in general, including families, youth organizations, and other churches and institutions, both public and private. Put simply, society understands these issues much better now than it did decades ago: for us in the church it means that we have come to realize that the sexual abuse of children is not just a grave sin, but also a serious crime, and that it is, in almost every case, treatable but not curable. Some bishops awakened

to these realities rather quickly and took them to heart decades ago; others, sadly, were slow to act.

The church is global. The church exists in countries around the world where cultural differences are well beyond our experience or comprehension. For that reason it shouldn't be too surprising that issues of sexual abuse and cover-up are not the same everywhere and that only today are we beginning to hear stories coming out of places like Africa and India. In spite of all our cultural differences, however, the church must adopt enlightened--and, as far as possible--unified approaches for dealing with these issues. The current meeting in Rome is an important step in that direction but only a step, and three days of dialogue, reflection, and meeting with victims can hardly be expected to heal this long-festering wound. If, during the meeting, the most important issues are identified, mistakes owned and repented, and a comprehensive course of action adopted, that is probably as much as we should expect. For now.

The debate within the church at the present time regarding the causes underlying sexual abuse is an extremely important one involving very complex issues. Some would narrow it all down to mandatory celibacy for priests, others want to blame gays within the priesthood, others the general sexual permissiveness within our culture, and still others the clerical culture within the church that places priests on a pedestal and gives them an inordinate amount of power. I think it is safe to say that, despite claims made by representatives of various ideological factions within the church, the jury is still out when it comes to identifying all the causes. My prayer is that this week's meeting of bishops with Pope Francis—who is committed to finding solutions and has been very candid about admitting his own mistakes—will begin a frank discussion of the causes, and open the way to necessary changes and reforms, no matter how sweeping. I also hope that those bishops who have made quite clear their opposition to Pope Francis and his leadership, will set aside polemics and divisiveness and work together with him to find lasting solutions to the crisis we are facing.

Let me close with this thought. We will do well to keep in mind that the church has dealt with grave crises and scandals many times throughout its long history and, thanks to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the courageous witness of saints beyond number, the church has been deepened, purified, and energized. And I would add that none of the evils we are dealing with—no matter how

grave—is able to undo the immense amount of good that the church, the holy yet sinful People of God, accomplishes every day in our parishes, ministries, and institutions here and around the world. We in this parish are witnesses to this every day—in fact, we are part of it. All of which puts me in mind of a recent editorial in *America* magazine, by its editor, Father Matt Malone. He writes:

“In any given hour, on any given day, the news in the church is more good than bad. Much more. By a magnitude of millions more. That’s because most of the news in the church is the Good News of Jesus Christ. That’s something we know as people of faith, but it is also empirically true: Every day millions, billions of people are served by the church, helped and healed through its sacraments, and accompanied through its social services. Couples marry, children are baptized, young people are confirmed in their faith, sinners are forgiven. This is happening right now as you read this in every place the church calls home.”

My friends, all of us are committed to the holy mission of the church. In this most trying of times, may we find strength in our faith, hope for the future, and the joy that comes from preaching and living the gospel of Christ. I know that you join me, your fellow parishioners, our bishops, and the entire church in praying that we will. May it be so!

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