

Homily for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

And Reaction to the Church's Clergy Sexual Abuse Problem

Sunday, August 19, 2018

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Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

I had a lot of mixed emotions when I looked over this Sunday's scripture readings and began thinking about what I would say to you this weekend. The comparison between the wise and the foolish in the first and second readings really struck me. So did Saint Paul's warning to avoid things that lead to debauchery. And the words of the Psalm caught me, especially the verse: "Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame."

I happened to be reading these scriptures on Wednesday, the day the Pennsylvania Attorney General released his report on a grand jury investigation into decades of very disgusting and very evil behavior by Catholic priests and bishops in his state. These revolting revelations followed stories about the equally terrible behavior of one of the Catholic Church's most senior leaders, the former cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

And so, the thoughts running through my mind were: What incredible fools we have leading the Catholic Church.

"Look to the Lord that you may be radiant with joy, that your faces may not blush with shame."

Well, personally, I am disgusted and ashamed. I am ashamed that these criminals were Catholic priests and bishops. When I look at how my church and the priesthood have been turned into fodder for comedy shows, I am very, very angry.

I would like to see Theodore McCarrick punished severely for his behavior, and likewise the bishops of Pennsylvania. Maybe some excommunications should be handed out. But I know that, aside from McCarrick, many of the offending bishops are retired or dead and new bishops have taken their places, bishops who are honestly trying to clean up the messes of their predecessors. Retired and dead too are many of the priests who committed the crimes. The grand jury report included crimes committed as far back as 1947. The majority were committed in a span from 1960 to 1980. I was 10 years old in 1980. In 1960, the present bishop of this diocese was 2 years old. A new generation of priests and bishops has taken over. But they are the ones who bear the responsibility to correct the crimes of their predecessors. They are the ones who are looked upon with scorn and suspicion today.

Clergy sexual abuse has been a terrible and painful wound. It hadn't quite healed, but it was bandaged and on its way to healing. But this week, not only was the bandaid ripped off, but the wound was torn open and stomped on. And I doubt it'll be sewn back up anytime soon.

What are we to do? Should we leave the church? Many already have. Maybe we priests should stage a walkout in protest. Just walk away from our parishes for a month. No masses for a month, no funerals, no weddings, no Eucharist. But would that be helpful? Would withholding our parish support be helpful, as one Catholic publication advised?

If we slow down and think for a moment, this terrible time in the life of our church could actually help us find helpful ways to respond whenever we feel betrayal or shame or profound anger.

The starting point, perhaps, is to first put things into perspective. We need to place ourselves in the shoes of the victims. They were wounded in ways that were bigger than betrayal or humiliation. Their wounds are physical, mental, and emotional. They were physically assaulted; we were not. Their wounds will never heal. Their wounds will be a part of them for the rest of their lives.

But that being said, don't deny your own wounds. These revelations have hurt all of us, and we need to address our wounds.

Secondly, we need to pray and pray hard. Eucharistic Adoration, the Rosary, and one another can be invaluable aids to prayer.

Thirdly, if you are angry, make it a healthy anger. A healthy anger leads to positive change. An unhealthy anger eats away at you from inside and eventually destroys you. Don't let your anger destroy. One way to have a healthy anger is to let the Holy Spirit share your anger.

Invite the Holy Spirit into your thoughts, and together come up with a reason for why you are still a Catholic, why you still come to church and contribute to the parish. You need to come up with a ready answer to that question and be prepared to offer it, because in the coming weeks and months cynical people are going to be asking you why you still go to church. They may be your family members, former parishioners, people at work or school, or people on Facebook. Give them an answer for your faith.

For me, the answer I would give is that the Catholic Church is bigger than its sinful members. It's bigger and better than Theodore McCarrick, it's bigger than pedophile priests and incompetent bishops. I don't worship Theodore McCarrick or Bernard Law, I worship the Body of Christ. And right now the Body is wounded and needs care.

Fourthly, as we see so many fools who are bishops who just don't "get it," we need to be on the side of wisdom, and encourage wisdom whenever we see it in the church. We need to encourage our good priests and those bishops that seem to "get it," including our own bishop. Through his leadership we have what we think is a very strong system of protecting the children of our parish. We do not let anyone exercise any ministry around children without having passed a state criminal offender records investigation, as well as a comprehensive program called Virtus, which teaches

how to identify and report suspected child predators. We need to keep trying and keep encouraging wise practices and eliminate foolish ones from the church.

And lastly, we need to have hope. Hope is a supernatural virtue. What we are experiencing now as American Catholics is a little like a catastrophic house fire. We might be disillusioned, unable to believe that this is really happening. Then that might transition to a kind of numb confusion. Then it may lead you to question your faith. If you get there you will have a lot of company. Today even many priests are questioning why we stay, myself included.

But if we can cultivate hope, Catholics might understand that Jesus is trying to lead us through that fire. He can also make it a purifying fire, so that we can emerge from this really sad and critical chapter in the Church as much stronger disciples and more committed members of the Body of Christ.

There is something we should keep in mind. At the crucifixion, the Body of Christ had been badly beaten, bruised, spit upon, ridiculed, and pierced by thorns and a soldier's lance. But - and this is the clincher - the body remained intact. Not a bone of his body was broken.