

When the parish council met right before Labor Day, we discussed the current scandal in the church, and they asked if I would address it during a homily.

I imagine that I feel pretty much the same as many of you do. I'm angry, frustrated, disappointed – both in brother priests and in the bishops. I'm embarrassed, and there are days I'd like to just run away from it all. I get the frustration of all of you. I have it myself. But I don't think that running away is the right thing to do. This needs to be fixed, and because we are a community, we all have to be part of the solution, whether we like it or not. Parishioner Becky Danninger sent me Bishop Robert Barron's most recent comments about the situation, and he pointed out that as the baptized, we are all called to be priests, prophets and kings. Priests are to be people of prayer. We all need to pray. Prophets call out sin and call us forward in integrity. We all need more integrity. And kings are those who bring order out of chaos, trying to be makers of peace. And we all need to be about the work of peace.

Also, I want to apologize, in whatever small way I can, to anyone who has been abused by a member of the clergy, or church, or by anyone, and all those who have been affected by abuse – families, friends, communities. The Diocese offers counseling services for anyone who has suffered this horror. Words are not as good as deeds, but words are important too. If you are comfortable still even talking to a priest, I would be humbled to meet with you, pray with you, and perhaps offer some small bit of healing. If not, please talk to another member of the church who can offer you the same. The diocese has a hotline for this, and you can call at any time. I've asked that the number be in our bulletin on a weekly basis, and also on our website. It is already on the diocesan website, and in the diocesan newspaper. We are all the body of Christ, and it will take the whole body to heal this wound.

St. Francis de Sales over 300 years ago spoke about priestly scandals, horrific ones like the ones we are reading about over and over in the news today. He said: "Those who commit these types of scandals are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder!", that is they are destroying the faith by their terrible actions and examples. However St. Francis de Sales went on further and warned his listeners: "I'm here among you to prevent something far worse. While those who give scandal are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder, those who take scandal....those who allow scandal to destroy their faith.....are guilty of spiritual suicide."

And that, my brothers and sisters, is my greatest fear, that many will give in to the panic, give in to the darkness and give in to the scandal. We are not Catholic because of the moral excellence of our leadership; (God help you if you are depending on me to be a saint!) we are Catholics because of the death and resurrection of Christ. We are not Catholics because our leaders are outstandingly inspirational; we are Catholics because of the Eucharist, the Sacraments, the Blessed Mother and the Saints. Christ promised us that "the Gates of hell would not prevail against His Church" but that does not mean we wouldn't feel Hell's hot breath.

These are tough days for all of us. Sex and money scandals among priests have been called by one commentator 'The Church's Watergate.' Many people's faith has been shaken; understandably so. Trust, once given and then betrayed, is not easily restored. Faith in organized religion is difficult at the best of times and so, given all this disillusionment, it is becoming ever easier for people to believe that it would best to go through life independent of the institutional church.

Moreover, for those who despise or demean organized religion – militant agnostics, religious loners, anti-clericals – this is high season. What all these scandals are doing is helping confirm their most

hopeful suspicions. Religion is a hoax; organized church practice serves the interests of those who organize it; Roman Catholic celibacy is a front; everyone has an angle; in the church, as elsewhere, sex and money are what it's ultimately all about: the institutional part of religion is what corrupts faith; pure self-sacrifice does not exist within the churches; one is best off without organized religion; Jesus founded a kingdom, humans created the churches. All these Water-gate type of revelations are finally revealing the truth!

What do we say and do in the face of all of this?

All healing begins with a lancing of the wound. We should, despite the pain and humiliation of all of this, be grateful that the truth is being exposed. In the long run, the truth will set us free. This is actually a graced moment for us, painful as this grace is. Only when we know we have a problem can we begin to heal it. For too long this problem has been hidden. Now the darkness has been exposed to the light. This is grace.

In the short run, the prognosis is less positive. We have to be prepared for a season, perhaps a very long one, of continued pain and embarrassment and a further erosion of trust. As one of my priest friends pointed out: "There are 49 more states to go." We have to accept this – and accept it without self-pity, rationalization, half-baked justifications, or any attempts to water down the seriousness of what is revealed in these scandals. Partly we are sick and, like a virus that has infected the body, this has to run its course and the body, in pain and fever, has to build up a new immune system. In the short run, we can do what the Book of Lamentations advises: "Put your mouth to the dust and wait!"

Beyond that, those of us who are not directly involved in these scandals, either personally or institutionally, must resist the temptation to distance ourselves and our churches from them with the attitude, "Don't look at me, I'm innocent, this is somebody else's problem."

It is our problem, irrespective of whether we are innocent or guilty. All Catholics, along with all other sincere believers in Christ, form one body. Christ's body. Those who were abused are our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters. And those who did the abusing are our brothers and sisters as well. And as St. Paul reminded us, when one part of the body suffers, all the body suffers with it. (1 Cor 12:26) We are all in this together, with Christ. We may not facilely link ourselves with our church's graced moments – its saints, martyrs, proud achievements, and then slickly distance ourselves from its dark history, its compromises, its perversity, its pedophilia and its sex and money scandals. To be a member of the church, to be a believer, is to be linked to all of this, grace and sin.

In this context it might be helpful to remember that Christ died between two thieves. He was innocent; they were not. However, because His sacrifice was seen against that horizon, it was judged by association, by those present, to be as tainted as the deaths of those He died with. People watching the crucifixion did not distinguish between who was guilty and who was innocent. They assessed what they saw en bloc. For them -- all crucifixions meant the same thing.

The church is still judged in the same way. Wearing my clerical collar in public often feels very uncomfortable these days. To be a church member is still to be connected, by association, with sin and sinners. Christ was the object of suspicion and misunderstanding. Every kind of accusation was leveled against Him. This will be true, always of us, His Church.

Like Christ, the church – us – will always be seen by outsiders as framed against a certain horizon – on display with scoundrels, child molesters, fakes, frauds, bad thieves. The crucifixion of Christ is still going on and it is mixed in with the personal tragedies of the honest and dishonest sinners. Christ is always pinned up among thieves.

But in one sense, we should not be surprised by this. The historical Jesus was found there. Why should we not be found there? Over a century ago, the great Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher stated that “the temptation is always to despise religion in its actual form, namely in its concrete historical expression in the churches where it finds itself hopelessly and inextricably intertwined with the sin, the temptation, pettiness and foibles of ordinary human beings.” Invariably, the temptation is to say “I can handle God, but I won’t be involved with all this human stuff called the Catholic church.”

Jesus walked with sinners, ate with sinners, was accused with them and died with them. We are forever in solidarity with Christ in this. Lately the church has been dying a lot with sinners. It has been a humiliating experience – but then, so was the crucifixion. (this largely adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, *FORGOTTEN AMONG THE LILIES*, p. 259-262)

So where do we all go from here? I’m sure that we’ve not heard the last of this. But I keep circling back to two things. First, Simon Peter’s response to Jesus when many abandoned Him and returned to their homes after He spoke about the Bread of Life. We heard this text just a couple of weeks ago. After so many had left Him, Jesus asked His disciples: “Will you leave me too?” And Peter made the true disciples’ response: “Lord to whom shall we go, you alone have the words of eternal life.” I’m staying, no matter what. The Church has been screwed up before and it survived, because of the Holy Spirit, the promise of Christ, and its saints who stuck it out. I don’t know where else to go. I want to stay. I need your company in that. I want you to stay too.

And second, I keep coming back to the saints. They almost all struggled with the church. Dorothy Day, the devoted apostle, liked to quote Romano Guardini’s insight: “The church is the cross on which Christ is crucified today.” Thomas Merton, when silenced by his religious superiors, wrote to a friend with undisguised anger that a monk would not be allowed to speak against war: “Man, I would think that it just might possibly salvage a last shred of repute for an institution that many consider to be dead on its feet...” St. Catherine of Siena, during a time of church scandals in the 14th century, wrote to a group of cardinals in Rome, saying, “You are flowers that shed no perfume, but a stench that makes the whole world reek.” Even the saints – or perhaps, ESPECIALLY the saints – face disappointments, frustration, and anger with organized religion. When I am feeling discouraged about the Catholic Church, I remember that for all their problems with the church, people like Day, Merton, and Catherine of Siena remained firmly within the Catholic community. During moments of frustration, I can say, “Well, they were smarter and holier than I am, and they stuck it out.” (adapted from James Martin, *MY LIFE WITH THE SAINTS*, p. 375) I want to stick it out. I want you to stick it out as well. We need each other. At least I need you.

Life is a marathon, not a sprint. So is the life of the followers of Christ. Discipleship is hard and full of all kinds of obstacles. Where else can I go? “You alone, Lord, have the words of eternal life.” Thanks for listening. Thanks for staying. Please come back. We’ll walk this hard path of the cross together, knowing full well how the story ends – in resurrection. Christ will heal us. Amen.