

## Homily on the Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church

Today I believe I have to address the “elephant in the sanctuary,” viz., the revelations that came out from the Pennsylvania grand jury’s investigation into the priestly abuse of children going back decades and the cover-up by the bishops, along with the news of Archbishop McCarrick’s predatory activities and his rise within the hierarchy, despite this being known by those in authority, and the devastating allegation yesterday by the Vatican’s former ambassador to the United States, that the Pope himself was aware of McCarrick’s actions and did nothing, even relied upon him as a trusted advisor. The allegations of the former Vatican ambassador are colored by the fact that he singles out some of the more liberal American bishops as being guilty of a cover-up, while neglecting to mention any of the more conservative bishops. This betrays a possible political agenda in his accusations. Yes, there is politics in the Church, and the knives are out! Nonetheless, the Holy Father needs to respond to these charges. If true, then sadly the cover-up goes to the very top of the ecclesiastical pyramid.

I cannot speak for the Church, I cannot apologize for the Church, I am only one individual, but I can begin by sharing with you my own introduction into the pain and the disillusionment resulting from priests abusing children. About thirty-five years ago I conducted a support group for separated and divorced Catholics. Most of the people in the group would stay for a few months, and then would move on when they felt they had gotten what they needed from the group. There were a few people who felt that the group had helped them so much that they wanted to stay on, to speak from their own experience to those who were still going through the trauma of their broken marriage, to assure them that things did get better, to just hang in there, that there is a life after divorce. One of these was a mother of two pre-teenage children, a boy and a girl. Our group would meet twice a month and without fail, the first thing she would tell me upon arriving was that a priest-friend of hers, “Father Jack,” was taking care of her kids for the evening, and what a wonderful guy he was. I didn’t know him because he was a member of a religious order, so his world and mine did not intersect. But, she would go on and on singing his praises, what a support he was to her. And frankly I grew a bit tired of hearing the broken record time and time again. You can see where this is heading.

Eventually I was transferred to a parish upstate and lost contact with this woman and the other members of the support group. One day about twenty years later I noticed a headline on the front page of the New York Post. I forget now exactly how it read, but in typical Post fashion it was an expose of a priest who had befriended a parishioner, had insinuated himself into her family and proceeded to abuse her children. I remembered that the woman I knew from the support group had been a journalist. She herself was the author of the article in the Post, and being a journalist by profession was particularly able to relate her story in gripping detail. As I read her account—it was told over two days--I almost threw up. I remembered her telling me that this guy even used to stay with her parents while vacationing in Florida. I could feel the sense of betrayal she must have felt. The article went on to say how one of her children had developed an eating disorder and the other had attempted suicide. What struck me above all was the deceit, the insidiousness, the scheming of this individual who would take advantage of someone who had trusted him so completely, who had held him in such high esteem. And, I felt a twinge of guilt because she left her kids alone with this predator while she was helping me conduct our support group.

How, as Catholics, can we respond when the Church has failed so miserably in protecting its little ones? What can one say? The church seems to be acting like every other institution when under threat of exposure for its wrong-doing. It circles the wagons in an attempt at self-preservation. We see the same behavior with other institutions, whether it be a university protecting a football coach, a school a revered teacher, or a mother her husband in the face of abuse of her own child. Why, because people look to an institution, whether it be the church, the school, or the family to give them security, an identity, a sense of purpose in life. So when it is threatened, they will do whatever it takes to defend it, even lie. They “believe” in the institution more than they believe in God, It has effectively taken the place of God in their lives.

Of course, we expect more of the Church. As William Shakespeare said, “Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.” Or, according to the old Latin proverb, “Corruptio optimi est pessima.” The corruption of the best is the worst. The Church holds itself to a higher standard than any other human institution. It is entrusted with preaching God’s word and feeding the flock. Today we see how sadly it has failed in this responsibility. It is divinely established, but composed of all too human leaders.

Anyone with a sense of history knows it was ever thus. Back in the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Italian writer Boccaccio describes the scene of the Papal Court in Rome in his book, *The Decameron*, a collection of a hundred short stories depicting life at the time. One story is about a Jewish man living in Paris who is thinking about becoming a Catholic, but he is unconvinced by all the theological arguments that are presented to him. Against the advice of his friend who is trying to win him over to the faith, he decides to travel to Rome. There he witnesses all the corruption in the Papal Court. He returns to Paris and tells his friend that he wants to be baptized. His friend is astonished. What convinced him? That an institution so corrupt could have lasted so many centuries despite the best efforts of so many to bring it down from the inside is indeed a proof that the Church was divinely established. And this was written two hundred years before the Borgias came on the scene. Rather cynical, but nonetheless it contains a grain of truth. Someone once quipped that God invented the church so that atheists could have a fighting chance. They have certainly been provided a lot of ammunition in recent days.

We should see the church for what it is—an institution both divine and all too human. We should not idealize it and look to it for more than it can provide. That is a form of idolatry—to ask of some created thing what only God can provide. No one can deny the immense good the Church has performed down through the centuries, both institutionally and in the lives of its members. But the bad has to be reckoned in as well. St Paul writes in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, a Christian community that had its own share of scandals, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels (jars of clay) to show what this surpassingly great power is from God and not from us (2 Cor. 4:7).” The earthen vessels were the clay pots used to transport wine—it is the junk that archaeologists find all over the Mediterranean. Today we speak of “feet of clay,” but the corruption of some does not take away from the immense value of the message we have received.

I had thought this was all behind us. Sadly it is not. What can we do? Certainly we can demand that transparency and accountability be expected at every level, from the bottom to the very top. And that those who have covered up the sordid facts, allowing the malignancy to spread should resign their positions of leadership within the church. Priests are responsible to bishops, but bishops are responsible to no one except the Pope. Although the Pope has spoken strongly in condemning the abuse, he has not set up any specific structures to insure the bishops are doing their job. We need a commission of lay people, skilled in the field of investigation, to find out within the American hierarchy who knew what and when did they know it.

In the final analysis we have to make our own the words of Peter at the conclusion of today’s Gospel. When Peter sees that many are turning away, and asked by Jesus, “Do you also want to leave?” he replies, “Master, to whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.” We have to rely upon our faith in what is essential. The Church with all its defects is still the place where the risen Jesus is made available to us in word and sacrament. It is the community of disciples who share the vision of Jesus, trying to make this world a better place and trying to draw closer to God. Maybe we could try to be “spiritual, but not religious,” but in that path there is more to be lost than to be gained. We need the structure the Church provides both socially and individually. Let us strive together to build a better church, to be a better church.

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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC, August 26, 2018