

THE ABUSE CRISIS AGAIN

Speaking about the devil, Jesus said, **“He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him (Jn 8:44).”**

By now, nearly all of you have heard about the most recent news concerning sexual abuse by Catholic priests and bishops and the subsequent cover-ups. These revelations have left nearly everyone I have spoken with very upset. There are a whole range of emotions. You are hurt, and you feel betrayed by those you have trusted. You are saddened because the Church you love has been degraded. You are embarrassed to be known as a Catholic, and you are disgusted with what you have heard. Finally, you are angry over the injustice of it all because none of these things were your fault, but you still have to answer for them. I share your feelings as well.

We are all what might be called the secondary victims of these sins. However, more important than us are the primary victims, those who were abused by priests. Men who were supposed to have represented God and who above anyone else should have been worthy of trust. In many cases, these victims lives have been ruined and their faith destroyed. I pray that someday they might be healed and be at peace.

That said, today, I think I must speak to this issue in more detail, and I want to do three things. First, review the facts as I understand them. Second, tell you what I think about all this, and third, say something about what we can do about it.

So first, what is going on? As a young priest, I first heard about this back about 1990 when I learned that a priest from our Diocese had abused some children in the Brainerd area. This prompted our Bishop at the time, Roger Schwietz, to put in place a sexual misconduct policy for our Diocese. In fact, we were one of the first to do so. In 1992, in response to more cases that were revealed nationwide, our nation’s bishops put in place background checks and policies for handling these cases. However, as it turns out, there were many more cases than anyone realized at the time.

Then in 2002, revelations that Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston had not only not implemented the guidelines but had also left in ministry a notorious abuser prompted the press nationwide to start investigating further. They uncovered numerous cases. This in turn prompted the Bishops to adopt a zero-tolerance policy for priests. That was in June of 2002.

It was then that nearly all of the priests who had credible accusations against them were removed from ministry, and there were many. One report indicated that there were over 4000 priests who had abused minors between 1950 and 2002.

Also at about the same time, a number of Dioceses and religious orders were sued by victims and some state laws were changed to allow civil lawsuits to be filed for older cases. That is what happened here in Minnesota and why the Diocese of Duluth is now in bankruptcy court.

As the years went by, the global scale of this sin became known. There were revelations from Ireland, Germany, Australia and many other countries. It also became clear that there were still bishops who had not cleaned house or who had moved priests around or who themselves were guilty of abuse. However, as action was taken by our bishops here in the United States, things began to die down until now.

So, what is now in the news is this. First, revelations that former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C. had been credibly accused of abuse, and worse, he was still allowed to serve as a bishop. Second, the grand jury report from Pennsylvania which chronicled in sordid detail how the bishops of that state dealt with priests and what the priests did. Finally, last week came the letter from Archbishop Vigano who was the Pope's ambassador to the United States (the Apostolic Nuncio) and who said that he told Pope Francis back in 2013 about Cardinal McCarrick but that the Pope did nothing about this and instead allowed McCarrick to continue to serve in the Church.

So that's a brief summary of things over the last almost 30 years – which is most of my priesthood. This brings me to my second point. What do I think about all this? And before I tell you, I want to give you some hope.

At least in the United States, today nearly everything you hear about this subject is old news. Since 2002, when the zero-tolerance policy was put in place, there have been on average less than ten cases a year from across the nation. Almost all of the cases in Pennsylvania as well as here in our Diocese date back to the 80s or 70s or even earlier. There are some cases from the 90s but hardly any after that. So, for the most part, we are dealing with things that happened 30 and 40 years ago and even before then.

As for the bishops who were responsible during that time, most are now retired, very old or dead. Cardinal McCarrick for example is 88. So, while the lawsuits continue, there is hardly any new dirt here in the U.S. However, that is not the case in the rest of the world.

In many places, the clean-up has not started or is only now getting underway. And, just as was the case here, bishops in some countries are covering up or in some cases are complicit.

My point is this. While I cannot say with absolute certainty, I am now pretty sure that if and when new cases or even old ones come to light here in the United States, they are acted upon immediately.

So now, what do I think?

I think that this abuse crisis is more serious than anything the Catholic Church has faced in the last 500 years. It is equal in gravity to the crisis which the Church faced at the time of the Reformation and that began with Martin Luther in 1517. That crisis divided Christendom and brought about the Protestant religions. We are still living with the wounds and divisions it caused to this very day.

Then as now, the crisis was due to the corruption of the clergy, and that is what we have now, a corruption of the clergy on a large scale. I do not know how large, only God knows that, but I would say it's significant.

At the time of the Reformation, bishops were living like princes. Instead of tending to the Church, they were involved in secular governments. Many did not live in their own dioceses and not a few had more than one diocese from which they drew revenue for personal use. Priests were untrained; some were illiterate, and many had concubines. There were all sorts of problems, and it wasn't until protests began (nearly all instigated by priests who later left the Church – Luther, Knox, and Calvin come to mind here), that reforms began.

We have a similar situation now. Corruption in the clergy – much of it linked to homosexuality by the way – and that has led us to where we are today.

The abuse crisis is all about lies inspired by the devil, the father of lies. It's not about good men who did bad things, but rather, it's about evil men who have been pretending to do good things. It's about people pretending to be what they are not. It's about those who were willing to harm young people – almost all of them young teens by the way – to satisfy their own lusts. It's also about bishops who were more concerned for the reputation of the Church than for those who were being harmed. Finally, it's about a misplaced compassion whereby this sick behavior was excused as not all that bad.

So how did all this happen? It happened because we have forgotten the great truths God has revealed to us. First that God has created us; second that we are sinners and finally, that the wounds of original sin run deep in us and that is why we need a Savior.

When someone sins, they have to do something to ease their conscience, and they have one of two options. They can either admit their guilt and go to confession. Or, they can justify themselves and rationalize their behavior and say that what they did was not all that bad. When someone sins, they must choose one or the other option or else they would go crazy.

Now, if a priest sins in a serious way, he does not do so without knowing what the Church teaches. He cannot plead ignorance. So, if he is not going to go to confession and to admit his sin, then he has to rationalize his sin away. Furthermore, as a consequence of justifying his behavior in this way, he will no longer proclaim to his congregation the truth about what the Church teaches concerning his sin because he himself no longer believes it is a sin.

That kind of priest will not teach the truth, and he won't teach the truth because it goes against how he lives. Another thing is this. If he stays in the priesthood, he will usually end up redirecting his energies to secular things, to things of this life rather than those of the next.

And here is something else. Priests like that have no fear of hell because they have rationalized away its existence. That is why you don't hear much about hell today or about purgatory or about the remedy for sin which is frequent confession and prayer and penance.

Belief in the existence of hell and eternal damnation is a strong motivator for doing good. It helps us avoid sin and moves us to go to confession when we have fallen. Jesus spoke of these things often, and so did Saint Paul and the rest of the Apostles, but now they are all looked upon by most as old-fashion, as silly throwbacks to a less sophisticated time. We are so much more enlightened now.

There are even bishops today who think like this. One, Robert Zollitsch, who was head of the Catholic Bishops Conference in Germany said that “Jesus did not die for the sins of the people.” That man is a heretic, and he should have been removed from office.

So to my last point. What do we do? The Church is bleeding. We are all bleeding. We are suffering with the Church, and this is another form of the cross.

So what to do? I would urge prayer and fasting. I think that these latest revelations are the last straw for many people. They are just going to leave the Church and be done with it. The Church has been crippled, and our moral authority is zero. The seeds of division and mistrust have now germinated and matured, and it will take years and decades for the Church to recover its reputation, and all of this in a time when the voice of truth is needed more than ever in the world. No doubt the demons are rejoicing over this.

One last thing. I said that I believe this is the most serious crisis the Church has faced in 500 years, and that’s because it goes to the very highest places in the Church. Archbishop Vigano has said that the Pope knew about Cardinal McCarrick. If that is true, and I say if, then the Pope himself has lost all credibility, and if so, then he is no longer in a position to govern the Church, and the best thing he could do would be to resign.

Furthermore, if Vigano is telling the truth, and if the Pope doesn’t resign, I think it will provoke a schism in the Church similar to that which happened at the time of the Reformation. Time will tell. We will see what happens as the facts are revealed and come to light.

In the meantime let us call on the Lord to purify His Church and let us ask for our Lady’s intercession and protection. Finally, let me leave you with this thought: **Don’t leave Jesus because of Judas.** There is in fact hope.

Some years ago, I went to Great Basin National Park in Nevada. There I saw some bristlecone pine trees. Some were between three and four thousand years old. They are the oldest living things on Earth. They were gnarled and had many broken and dead branches, but they were still alive.

The Catholic Church is like those old trees. It has withstood many trials and tribulations both from within and without, but it is still here, and it is here because Jesus promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against it, and they will not. So now is not the time to give up. Rather now is the time to stay and defend our Lord and to fight for the truth with the spiritual weapons we have. Prayer, penance, the sacraments, the saints and most of all our Blessed Mother. Mary help of Christians, pray for us. Amen.