

SHRINE OF THE SACRED HEART

PARISH ADDRESS ON SEX ABUSE CRISIS IN THE CHURCH: AUGUST 25th and 26th 2018

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I wish to speak to you today on the painful and disturbing topic of the crisis of child sexual abuse that again confronts us as a church in the wake of the Pennsylvania grand jury report of the scope of child sexual abuse by clergy and the extent of the cover-up by church authorities over decades. This report has particular relevance and causes direct personal hurt and anger for us in the Archdiocese of Baltimore because of the involvement of our former Archbishop, Cardinal Keeler in covering up clergy abuse in the diocese of Harrisburg. This in turn only serves to refocus concern on the sexual abuse of children in our archdiocese and the issue of how it was addressed by church leadership here.

What I have to say to you today is difficult and may be disturbing or even offensive to some of you, but it is my duty as your pastor to address this issue and to invite you to engage in an open and honest parish discussion on this issue which deeply affects all of us as a Church. How this issue is dealt with will determine whether the Church in this country can go on to be a moral force for social good or continue to lose all moral authority and credibility in a quagmire of hypocrisy and corruption. In what I have to say I speak only for myself and from my experience in over forty-three years of ordained ministry as a priest.

The root meaning of “crisis” is a time that demands a judgement and decision that determines the future of things. In order for us to discern the judgements and decisions that must be made, it is necessary that we understand the true nature of the crisis that confronts us, and the realities in which it is rooted. Thus, it is imperative that we, as a Church, recognize that what we confront is not a crisis of sex, but a crisis of trust. The fact that there were pedophile priests, who took advantage of their position of trust to shamefully and criminally sexually abuse the most innocent and vulnerable among us, would have been a most painful and shocking scandal under any circumstances. But what made these inexcusable actions into the greatest crisis of credibility to confront the Church in modern times is the way these incidents were handled by Church authorities. Diocesan bishops and the circle of clergy who ran the diocesan bureaucracy systematically sought to cover-up these crimes and to buy the silence of victims or intimidate accusers into silence. Their actions often perpetuated the continuance of abuse by simply moving offending priests, rather than addressing their actions. Their over-riding objective was always to “protect the Church”, which apparently justified to them the further victimization of those abused, and the total disregard of truth and justice.

Thus, we must recognize and be willing to address the fact that the crisis that today confronts us is rooted in the corruption of power and the culture of governance in the Church itself, and the clerical culture of privilege and secrecy that supports it. The logic of corruption that underlies the creation of this situation is as simple as it is reprehensible: To protect the faith is to protect the Church. To protect the Church is easily translated into protecting the position of those in leadership, who see themselves as

the Church. Thus, the protection of the Church quickly becomes the protection of their “corporate asses and assets.” This mentality is only further entrenched by the careerism that motivates too many in positions of Church governance who know that advancement requires protecting authority and its corporate interests. The tragic irony of this governing mentality is that in its obsession with protecting the authority and reputation of the Church and the clergy, it has resulted in doing the opposite and is now threatening to strip the Church and its leaders of all moral authority.

Twenty years ago, when I was serving as Director of Public Relations for the Archdiocese, it was a time when the stories of clergy sexual abuse were beginning to become much more public in the wake of the crisis of clergy sexual abuse erupting in the Archdiocese of Boston under the tenure of then Cardinal Law. It was also a time when discussion in the national bishops’ conference began to focus on the reality that any priest found guilty of such actions needed to be permanently removed from ministry. I wrote a proposal for the Bishops urging that we needed to take a more proactive effort to communicate to clergy and lay leaders what the Archdiocese was doing in regard to handling cases of accusations of abuse by clergy and educating people on the issue . I argued that the core issue we needed to address was not sex but trust, that to avoid losing the trust of our people we needed to be more proactive in communicating with them on what had happened locally and what policies the Archdiocese was going to follow to deal with the issue. I was subsequently informed by the then Chancellor (now a bishop of another diocese) that we could not do this as there were too many people who could sue us, and if it appeared like we were trying to make ourselves look good they might get angry and do so. Needless to say, this attitude, while reflecting the concerns of attorneys, was not to prove to be a way of keeping the trust of the people of the Archdiocese.

Also at the heart of the failure of Church leadership to deal with this crisis has been the refusal of personal accountability by those in leadership. However, hopefully this reality is now being changed by the pressure brought about by civil legal authorities being more willing to investigate Church leadership, and by Pope Francis clearly signalling that the highest levels of the hierarchy are no longer exempt from that accountability. When Cardinal Law was compelled to resign as Archbishop of Boston, he moved (out of subpoena range) to Rome where he was given a place of honor as one of the American cardinals on the Congregation for Bishops. There was no public criticism or issue of his responsibility raised by the members of the U.S. Bishops’ Conference. Many people concerned about the issue of clergy sexual abuse in this country were scandalized at his continued position of respect and protection in the Church’s governance.

In contrast, Pope Francis’ firm action in disciplining Cardinal MaCarrick, and calling the bishops of the Church to be personally accountable, seems to signal the dawning of a new day of awareness and action on this issue of world- wide concern. In the wake of Pope Francis’ actions against Cardinal McCarrick, for the first time, American bishops have begun to follow his example in publicly addressing the responsibility of their fellow bishops. Archbishop Lori was among those showing leadership in his public statement on accountability for those in Church leadership positions, and I support him in this.

What remains to be seen is whether this flurry of new recognition of responsibility previously ignored will continue to grow and make a practical difference in making change in the culture of governance in the Church.

If this is to happen, it will require the willingness of the people of the Church, to recognize that they are the Church and exercise their responsibility (your responsibility) to demand such change. To let their pastors and bishops know their feelings and the transparency in Church governance they have a right to expect. Until the bishops and clergy who have run the diocesan bureaucracies in the spirit of the clerical culture of power I have described are replaced by those of a different spirit there will be no change.

In the mean- time there is still the question of where we (you and I) turn to find nurture for our faith and light to guide our way. For me, I have found the last forty-three years of ministry to be a journey of wonder and pain calling me to ever deeper levels of realization of the mystery of God in my life. It is a journey in which I have become clear that the Church is a means not an end. Through the Church I have learned the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. I have been honored with a ministry that has led me to meet so many people on the deepest levels of our human struggle and the mystery of God's presence in that struggle. And in the ways and times the Church has hurt or betrayed my trust, I have grown to know my faith has always been in Christ and not the Church. This is not the first time in its long history that the Church has lost the confidence and trust of its people, though for us it is perhaps the worst time in our experience. When the Church has been able to recover from such periods, it was because of those whose faith in Christ allowed them to change the Church. I believe that is our task and challenge. We cannot be passive victims expecting the hierarchy to make it all better. The people of the Church (laity and clergy together in equal partnership) must demand and make that change. We must not be afraid to push back and hold accountable those who are given leadership roles which are meant to be focused on service. We must be willing to take the responsibility to shape this thing which has shaped us, the Church.

In conclusion, as a student of history, I would leave this reflection as all such reflections should end, with a story. In the year 1801 the Papal Secretary of State, Cardinal Consalvi, went to Paris to negotiate a Concordat (a treaty governing Church-State relations) with Napoleon Bonaparte. As was his way, Napoleon wanted to make the rules of the conversation clear from the start. So when Consalvi entered the room for their first meeting Napoleon greeted him by saying: "Of course you know, Your Eminence, I have the power to destroy the Church!" To which Consolvi responded: "But Emperor, not even the priests have been able to do that!" After forty-three years of ministry I am betting my heart on the hope that Consalvi is still right! I invite you to join me in that bet.

It is an honor to be your pastor, and I will always strive to be worthy of your trust. Thank you for your kind indulgence in allowing me this honest expression of my heart to you today. God bless you all.

