

St. Thomas à Becket, August 5, 2018
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
Ex 16:2-4, 12-15, 31; Eph 4:17, 20-24; Jn 6:24-35
"Church in crisis"

How many of you have heard of the latest clergy sex abuse scandal? It has to do with the former Archbishop of Washington, DC, age 88, and recently accused of child abuse and other sexual misconduct, and unfortunately he is not the only one. Many Americans are maybe some of you are feeling sadness, anger and shame about this. I know I am. Yet I am still here, and you are too.

I know some people, especially in the U.S., are saying that this is the last straw. Archbishop McCarrick was a cardinal, at least until he resigned a few days ago, and one of the most prominent and influential bishops in America over the past decades. Speaking personally, I can tell you there have been times in the past several weeks when I felt so sick about this and some similar situations in different parts of the world, that I became very discouraged. Once again I am hesitant to go out on the street wearing my Roman collar, hoping to avoid the stares, hostility and nasty remarks that sometimes results after some of these scandals surface. This being Quebec, however, it's not so rare for a priest to get stares, hostility and nasty remarks at the best of times.

There are certainly many people who think all priests are child abusers, and some media are happy to encourage that idea. Fewer are interested to hear that the large majority of priests are dedicated to God and His people and faithful to their promise of celibacy. Of course, one priest betraying the trust of the Church and the people he serves is one too many. We *should* be held to a higher standard than a teacher or a hockey coach, as should family members who abuse their children. An American priest said this week that the archbishop's behaviour was "sickening and almost beyond comprehension", and then went on to say that:

“Even worse than this man’s personal atrocities, is the failure of other bishops to decry his sins and the damage he has done. . . . Most bishops simply have not spoken, and too many of those who have, sounded more like liability lawyers or company spokesmen protecting their interests than like the prophets and apostles who denounce unrighteousness and call God’s people to repentance and conversion, contrition, confession and amendment of life.”

This is the heart of it, not that there are plenty of sinners in the Church, but that it is at heart a spiritual crisis that requires a change in attitude, a change of heart.

So why am *I* still here today? One answer is to be found in the sixth chapter from the Gospel of St. John, is part of what is known as the Bread of Life discourse, with its rich eucharistic theology, and which we heard today and are hearing all through August. In a few weeks we will hear the part of the discourse where Jesus speaks very explicitly about eating his body and drinking his blood, and many leave him because they cannot accept what he is saying and are scandalized. He asks Peter, his number-one man, if he also will leave. Peter’s response is among the most moving words in all of Scripture: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”.

That’s why I am still here, because I believe with all my heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Saviour, and that the Catholic Church is the one he founded. The Church is a mess, but it has often been since Judas betrayed the Lord, and continuing so over the centuries, and there have certainly been centuries where the clergy were more widely corrupt and immoral, not to mention some of the popes, and we may not realize how blessed we are to have had one saintly pope after another over the past century. This is not to excuse or explain anyone’s behaviour which is so unbecoming any priest or deacon, not to mention bishop or cardinal. The mystery of evil.

What happens now? Will it ever end? Like the revelations about sexual misconduct of celebrities and others that have been going on in North America especially during the past year—the #MeToo phenomenon—I think it will get worse before it gets better in terms of the revelations still to come. Jesus says in the Scriptures that when He returns, everything will be brought to light, the good deeds and the misdeeds. Well, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse, we now live in a world in which, because of social media, this is happening to a degree: virtually nothing remains hidden. So, as we hope in the world of entertainment and sports and business and academia, because no one can get away with anything anymore, that there will be less bad behaviour, we hope that in the Church, the same will happen. But only if there is that change of heart, that interior conversion. If bishops and priests and all Catholics accept and live the teaching of the Church on the truth and meaning of human sexuality, this will stop. It's that simple.

The other reason I am here today is my commitment to serve you, the people of God assigned to me. Those of you here in church obviously still believe there is something to be gained by being here, you hunger for the Word of God and the Bread of Life, and if your shepherd abandons you on top of everything else, what then?

Yes, the Catholic Church is in crisis. A crisis can lead to death and destruction, but as many of us have experienced the other meaning of crisis, which is opportunity, meaning, a time of crisis can also be a time of rebirth and new life. We pray that this time of crisis in our Church will be a time of purification and new holiness.

On a practical note, you should be aware that in the fall St. Thomas a Becket will be implementing the diocesan policy for Responsible Pastoral Ministry, designed to provide a healthy and safe environment in our parish. There will be more information coming along, but all persons—clergy, employees and volunteers—who come in contact with children and other

vulnerable persons will be undergoing background checks and trained in appropriate behaviour.

Let us keep in our prayers our priests and bishops that we may remain faithful to our call, let us pray especially for victims of abuse at the hands of anyone. If there is anyone here who would like to talk to me about any of these issues or even something in your own lives, I would be happy to do so.

In the meantime, let us be aware of what is going on in the Church and in the world, the good and the bad, but let us not drown in the news. We also have the need and the obligation to read and rejoice in the Scriptures and the lives of the saints and good Catholic spiritual reading.

What St. Paul said to the church in Ephesus 2,000 years ago he says also to the priests and bishops and all of us in our second reading today: "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." Amen.

Father Peter Sabbath