

A message from the pastor  
on the scandals in the Church

The grand jury report on the abuses in the Church in Pennsylvania have angered and disgusted me as much as they have you. Words cannot express my shock at some of these cases; they sound like plots for some cheap macabre horror movie. Reading about some of these cases has been surreal, as if I am reading about an institution of which I am not a part, as if I'm looking in from the outside.

But then I realize that I am someone who went through Catholic schools from 1st through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and that my high school was an all-boys school run by priests. After my first career as an educator, I spent almost 6 years in formation for ordination, 4 ½ of those in the seminary. I have been ordained a priest for 28 years. Never in my history as a boy in Catholic school or in my parish did I ever experience or hear a suggestion of sexual abuse by priests. Never in my time in seminary or in almost 3 decades as a priest have I known of "rings" of predatory priests or of conspiracies or cover ups to protect them. So I am perhaps more shocked, as someone "in the system", to read about the cases in the grand jury report.

In Ezekiel 34:1-11, God gives a terrible condemnation to those whom He has appointed as shepherds for His people. He accuses them of pasturing themselves instead of pasturing their sheep. They have not bound up the injured or sought the lost, but they have lorded it over their sheep harshly and brutally. Since God's shepherds proved to be unworthy, God says that He will shepherd His people Himself. It is amazing how timely this prophecy is to us today.

There are two things I find noteworthy in this passage. The first thing is that Ezekiel prophesied 700 years before Christ, so the problem of unworthy shepherds who abuse their power over God's people is nothing new. It is, sadly, the reality of sin in the human race. The second thing of note is that God is the ultimate shepherd of His flock in this prophecy; likewise, the Church is always CHRIST'S Church. Even when shepherds are sinful and unworthy, it is Christ who is the Good Shepherd of the Church.

Perhaps all the publicity makes one ask, "Why should I be a Roman Catholic?" I expect the shame I feel as a Catholic priest these days is felt just as much by any Catholic. I do not even want to be seen in public these days with my Roman collar on. But it's important to acknowledge that, throughout history, there have been saints AND sinners in the Church. Moreover, it's important to remember that the "Church" is **all** baptized Catholics, not just clergy, and that where there is sin in the Body of Christ, there is also grace and heroic virtue: "... however much sin increased, grace was always greater..." (Romans 5:20). In the long history of Christianity, the Church has survived because of the balancing presence of great saints coexisting with scandal and sin; as Dorothy Day said, "It is the saints that keep appearing all through history who keep things going." But it's also important to note that the Church today is not the Church that is described in the Grand Jury Report. It has not been for a long time. Over the course of the last 30 years, there have been significant changes made as to how we prevent abuse and report allegations.

This is precisely the time when the Church needs holy people, holy priests, and good vocations. This is the moment to rouse ourselves to a more faithful witness to the Gospel in the Church. Let's be proud to be Catholic; we have a glorious heritage. We must also acknowledge the spiritual warfare that is being waged in this moment: "But woe to you, earth and sea, for the Devil has come down to you in great fury, for he knows he has but a short time." (Revelation 12:12) Satan wants nothing more than to weaken and discourage the witness of Christ's Body, the Church, in the world. We who follow Christ must not let the darkness prevail!

Personally, this has been painful for me. Everyone should be able to trust their pastor, their priest. I became a priest to preach the Gospel and to feed ALL of Christ's flock (cf. John 21:15-17), all ages, both genders. Now, if I give attention and pastoral affection to the children and youth among the people God has entrusted to my pastoral care, I feel self-conscious of suspicion. I want everyone to know that I'm going to endeavor to continue to be spontaneous and free in all my relationships and I choose not to be controlled by the fear of second-guessing by others. As your pastor, my foremost charge is to try to bring all closer to Jesus and to salvation through His love, working through the instrumentality of my humanity. As a pastor of souls, I am personally outraged that any other priest would use the trust given him to violate the spirit and body of any child or young person. I have always had a particular desire to foster the greater love and zeal for Christ in the hearts of children and young people, and I will not let this evil inhibit me from fulfilling that charge. It would be a betrayal of the Gospel to do so.

Church, let us continue to pray for the protection of all children and youth from anything that can harm their souls and bodies; for the spiritual renewal of the American priesthood; and that God will raise up worthy men for the priesthood in our Diocese.

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.