

I.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."

These words of Jesus seem especially appropriate for us Catholics these days.

As members of the Body of Christ – the "People of God on a pilgrim journey" (to use that wonderful image that was used repeatedly in the documents of the Second Vatican Council) – **we hurt right now.**

We hurt, in various ways, as a result of the sexual abuse of clergy in our Church... and we hurt as a result of the abuse, or misuse, of power in our Church.

I know that – as a priest of 38 years – I've been on a roller coaster of disgust, sadness, questioning, and anger over the course of these past several weeks. **I get** how that anger, shame and disgust can make us feel like putting a millstone around the necks of abusers as well as some of our bishops, and throwing them into the sea. Because of the mix of feelings I've had about all these revelations that have come to light, I've had moments of questioning my own vocation as a priest. How can I continue to give my life to such a dysfunctional organization?

But then, as **part** of my own roller-coaster ride of emotions, I've **also** had those times of sensing glimmers of hope and a growing confidence that God **is** guiding his Church, God's people, through **this** storm, as God has brought the Church through various storms over the course of the past 20 centuries.

II.

I used some of these very words to introduce our *Evening of Prayer and*

Discussion this past Monday evening. Around 70 parishioners were in attendance as we gathered for what was basically a "listening session" at which everyone was encouraged to share their thoughts about the challenges facing our Church. We called upon the Holy Spirit's guidance at the beginning of the evening and placed our discussion in a framework of prayer and healing for the Catholic community. I didn't pretend to have all the answers (actually, some of the participants had excellent responses to issues raised by others). We could have spent far longer together than the 90 minutes that were allotted for the gathering... but there were a few important "takeaways" from the gathering that I thought were both reasonable and necessary for the health of our faith community of St. Theresa:

- First, we all have the right – and the need – to be regularly updated about the progress (or lack thereof) that the Church is making in addressing issues that keep us from fully reflecting WHO WE ARE as the Body of Christ in our world.
- Second, "listening sessions" like Mondays can be very fruitful in allowing parishioners to be heard by their priests and other ministers in the Church – and so **these will happen** on some regular basis (quarterly or more often when circumstances call for them), allowing parishioners and staff alike to bring forth and discuss whatever might be on their minds. **Ongoing, transparent communication is imperative.**
- Third, dealing with **any** challenge facing the Church **involves ALL of us, because WE are the Church.** WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER. All of us *together* make up the Body of Christ; **bishops, priests and religious share the same flawed and sinful humanity** of every other member of the Body of Christ... as we make our pilgrim way to the reign of God. None of us is perfect until we are united with God in life to come! Bishops, priests, deacons and religious, then, are no "better than" (or "above") anyone else. **We clergy have no right to place ourselves – or allow ourselves to be placed by others – on pedestals.** The tendency to do so is the sin that our Holy

Father Francis refers to as “clericalism,” and it is an underlying cause of much of what’s been wrong with the Church for a long time: the more powerful protecting the status quo. **All of us together have to be part of making our Church a truer reflection of Christ!**

In Monday evening’s session, many good (and tough) questions were raised. Questions like:

- Why is sexual abuse an ongoing issue in the Church? We’ve been hearing about this for years!
- What’s being done to end abuse by bishops, priests, deacons and others who work in the Church?
- How can we trust that our children are safe around church and other Catholic institutions?
- What steps are Pope Francis, the Vatican and Church leadership taking to “clean things up?”
- In the midst of the abuse, cover-up, political in-fighting and scandal that seems to be defining our Church these days, why should I remain Catholic?

III.

To say the least, the discussion was lively. I’d like to share a few insights, some of which I shared Monday evening, which may be helpful as we collectively and individually work our way through this storm...

First and foremost, I want to share with you my conviction that there is absolutely NO excuse, justification or rationale for ANY priest or bishop in the Church to sexually abuse or attempt to cover up that abuse. One incident of abuse or cover-up in the Church is one too many. Any criminal behavior on the part of a priest or bishop needs to be brought to the light of day and prosecuted under civil law as well as Canon Law (the legal code of the Church).

Having said that, I want to encourage you to take a bulletin home with you and carefully read the *Reflections* column – you may find some reasons to

hope in the bulletin piece itself and some facts in the resources that are referenced there.

I think it's **very important for us to keep in mind that abuse of power and sexual abuse is not a Catholic problem alone.** Yes, such abuse is **completely unacceptable in a community that is the Body of Christ in our world – but such abuse is found in every profession, in every religion and in every demographic of society.** There is no excuse for abuse of another human being ANYWHERE, but it's a fact that we hear more about sexual abuse and the abuse of power outside the Church every time we turn on the news.

Statistics are important, and can help clear up some false assumptions or misunderstandings. The authors of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report were careful to note on page 6 of that report (quote) "We know that the bulk of the discussion in this report concerns events that occurred BEFORE the early 2000's." The report went back 70 years; the peak years of reported sexual abuse by Catholic clergy seem to have been in the 60's, 70's and early 80's – and such incidents have dropped off substantially since the mid 1990's... largely due to heightened awareness, a changing standard of care that does not allow for an offender to be sent to therapy and then reassigned to a different job (which at one time was the accepted protocol in the mental health community of dealing with these issues, no matter what walk of life the offender came from). In the past, bishops made it a practice to keep sexual misconduct quiet for what they **thought** was for the good of the organization (and their own self-preservation). "Do anything to avoid scandal." **In those days, when sexual issues in general were not discussed openly, most organizations, institutions and even families did all that they could to keep sexual misconduct of their members quiet, to sweep those incidents under the carpet. Now, the dirty secrets are coming to light – and bishops, as well as leaders outside the Church, are increasingly being held accountable.** Thank God. Pope Francis is already planning to gather the presidents of all the world's Bishops Conferences in February to increase bishops' accountability and to keep the vulnerable safe in our Church.

What's happening now to help keep children safe? Since the early 2000's, Safe Environment Training has been mandated for all Church personnel and volunteers (and even Catholic School parents). Students, too, receive training: beginning in our three-year old program, all students in Catholic Schools are taught first how to tell "good touch from bad touch" and, at age appropriate levels, how to maintain healthy boundaries, how to report boundary violations, how to keep safe on the Internet... and how not to become a victim. You can learn more about Safe Environment Training by checking out the website noted in the *Reflections* column.

The Church IS making progress in the area of creating safe environments for all... however, new abuse allegations have not entirely disappeared. Between the years 2015 and 2017, there were **22 allegations** of clergy sexual misconduct made **nationwide** – that's an average of **seven per year** across the United States. **The only acceptable statistic is zero**. But to place those reports in some context, **in 2017 alone – just in the state of Pennsylvania – 42 teachers** lost their licenses to educate due to sexual misconduct. Another point of perspective is this: **in a fifty year period, 2,154 priests served in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. There have been 35 credible allegations of clergy sexual abuse that took place during that time frame**. That's about **1.6%** of priests (again, the **only** acceptable number is zero...) – but this is roughly equivalent to the percentage of child abusers in society at-large as commonly estimated by researchers.

Researchers at the John Jay College of Criminal Studies in New York note that (quote) "Sexual victimization of children is a serious and pervasive issue in society. It is present in families, and it is not uncommon in institutions where adults form mentoring and nurturing relationships with adolescents, including schools and religion, sports and social organizations." (close quote). It's also noted statistically that the vast majority of abusers are married men.

Yes, we have problems in the Church – problems that have yet to be entirely solved. **We priests and bishops have to accept responsibility and ask forgiveness of God and the other members of the Body of**

Christ. But there *has* been *some* progress – that’s a bit of good news in the midst of the storm.

All of us have to be involved as “the People of God” – the Church – in changing our Church community and our society for the better. Learn about Safe Environment Training. If you see something, say something – if you have reason to suspect that abuse is actually happening, call the police.

Most importantly, remember that – as Catholics – we are nourished, strengthened and sustained *as the Body of Christ* by the Eucharist.

In this present storm, Christ is with us in a very real way.

Let’s come together, united in prayer and transparent conversation... open to the Spirit’s guidance and willing to help make our Church all that she is called to be.