

From Father Pat

Dear parishioners, I wrote these thoughts in the days when the details of abuse by clergy were being revealed in Pennsylvania. Now that I have had an opportunity to offer some reflections at all the Masses, I want to also offer a version of those reflections in the bulletin as well. If you have any questions, concerns, suggestions or needs, please do not hesitate to share them with me.

Once again... ..the Church is being rocked by another very public exposure of its history of child abuse. The news from Pennsylvania is both old and new. For twenty years now, we who are trying to be faithful to the Church have had to accept that deeply evil actions were committed by some members of our Church. The acts of abuse from the past have been known for some time. So, in one way, the revelations in Pennsylvania could be thought of as old news. However, the fact is that we must never stop acknowledging and confronting the reality that these evils took place. We must never stop giving the victims the whole-hearted support and the recognition they deserve. We should never stop doing penance for the sins of the past.

So, it is cold comfort to think of this as “old news”.

And in fact, the recent revelations are also “new” news. The results of the actions of the court in Pennsylvania have cast a cold, glaring light on the extent of the calculating and dishonorable ways that these sins, these evils were covered up. It is a story of shame and deceit. So once again the Church is being broken. Dare I say, it is a necessary broken-ness? We somehow have to acknowledge that we are broken. It is true that new safeguards are in place. Many people have made a sincere commitment to a new and earnest level of responsibility. Perhaps the abuse of children will no longer be such a threat. However, can we dare say that this evil is all in the past? That we have put all this behind us? Or rather, do we need to be willing to ask some deeper questions?

While individuals had their own disturbing reasons for doing what they did, the underlying issue is that of power. The cover-ups were efforts to protect the “power” or “prestige” of the Church. Power, and how it is used, is always going to be a source of temptation. For the Church, True Power must mean the power to transform people’s lives for the good. But there is also a false sense of power. This false use of power comes when Church leaders feel that they must protect a false sense of the Church’s perfection. There will always be a temptation to use power for one’s own satisfaction, to control others for one’s own sake. When power is misused, it is often expressed in deviant sexual practices. So we need healthy attitudes toward sexuality and toward gender roles in the Church and in society.

A friend just wrote me the other day. “I love God. I love what I know of God and what I experience of God in the Church. I want to love the Church, too. But how can we love God in and through our Catholic faith when we are so disillusioned and sickened by these horrible sins against children and the corruption that led to the cover-ups?”

The church is the true, living Body of Christ in the world. That is a form of perfection. But there is also sin in the Church. It is a false form of perfection to cover up sin in the Church. It is a false and futile form of perfection for any member to try to protect the Church's prestige or power by covering up sin. When someone in the church sins, the sacramental reality of Christ's true presence is not negated but Christ and His Church are bloodied and broken, just as His own body bled and was broken on the cross by sin. On Calvary, Christ freely chose to be broken. Today the abuse is imposed on Him. The only way that the Church is perfect is to be the broken body of Christ in the world. And Christ will not be overcome.

So, it is my personal conviction that the Church must always think of itself as, in a way, broken. We must expect our leaders to be broken. Not in the way of sin. Not in a way that somehow enables sin. And not in a way that keeps us from proclaiming the good news and doing heroic acts of service. But in the way that keeps us humble about the great responsibility and the true power that is entrusted to us to be the Body of Christ in the world.