

A Reflection on recent scandals in the Church and a caution against growing aggressive defensiveness and attitude of scapegoating in the wake of such coverage of clerical abuse.

“THE CHURCH HAS DONE WRONG; WE HOLD OUR HEADS IN SHAME”

I feel compelled to write to you about the state of the Church at present, disgraced as it is by sordid scandals. I am profoundly concerned and disturbed by yet more revelations of what some of my clerical brethren have done and how the Church, which I love deeply, has been complicit in covering up these crimes

Fr AP

Recent scandals have hit the Church and caused much distress, disgust and anger to the vast majority of good, honest, faithful Catholics who worship and live as best they can under God’s love and rule, and to society at large. The Chilean Bishops’ crisis, the former Cardinal of Washington, and the recent report on the Pennsylvania Dioceses have revealed great failings by the Church as an institution and by individual clergy and its leaders. It is right to be angry so long as this anger is righteous and directed at resolving these matters and support the victims of abuse, however, aggressive defensiveness is not the right way to engage with these horrific reports of dreadful crimes. To some, it seems that we are under an attack from all sides but when such horrors are revealed it is as if we the Church are looking in a mirror and cannot recognize the reflection so disfigured do we look. Our parish motto is “Becoming one family in Christ”; that family is the Church, the Body of Christ alive and active in the world. This current reality makes us realize what the scriptures meant by Christ being disfigured, despised and rejected. The Church is being revealed as ugly and sordid by these revelations of crime. It is worse because this disfigurement has come from within which makes it all the more galling, “The things that come from within are what defile” (Mark 7:21), The Gospel for this Sunday.

This is not an orchestrated attack but rather the natural response of a society shocked and dismayed, outraged and angry about such heinous crimes and cover-up. It is shocking to us too and we are angry and hurt because we cannot avoid the fact that, the Church has done wrong. Men and women, who were given spiritual and pastoral positions abused people placed in their care horrendously, especially the most vulnerable in our community, our children. It makes us livid with rage. It can also tempt us to give up and walk away from the Church - which many have – or on the other hand to become defensive, I implore you to do neither of these. As the Body of Christ, we cannot walk away from the victims nor try and gloss our way out of it. As St Peter said in the Gospel last week “Lord, to whom shall we God, you have the message of eternal life...” No, we must face this head on and deal with it. It will do the Catholic Church no favors to go on an aggressively defensive approach to the Pennsylvania report, nor to any scandals facing the church about abuse and clerical cover-up and presumed entitlement. It will look as if we are trying to wriggle out of the horrors of child abuse; that we don't take it seriously; and that the victims are not the priority but rather the "good name of the Church". Whilst as some say it may be debatable as to whether there are some errors of analysis and that some of the facts are revealed in sensationalist ways in this recent report or other reports and cases, these matters should, must and will, no doubt, be

taken up in the formal meetings with the state and legal authorities that follow, rather than be exercised without restraint and prudence in public. To get caught up in these points is to miss the point; the point is this: The Church has done wrong and the victims are suffering.

The Church is under the magnifying glass of public opinion and given the matter at hand rightly so, but we should not enter into any public spat about this...it lacks grace and it will surely backfire, serving no purpose and definitely not help the victims. Remember the Beatitudes... "Blessed are you when people persecute you and heap all kinds of calumny upon you..." We have to be silent in face of such righteous indignation and public condemnation with our heads bowed in shame for the Church has done wrong; we turn the other cheek. At the same time, we must put all our efforts into the support of those who have been the victims of these criminal acts and sort out, once and for all, the way the Church works as an institution. Whilst we may say, as some more nuanced commentators do, that the Church is no worse in these dreadful matters than many other professions and sectors of society, in this matter we must accept that the Church has been hypocritical, saying it is Holy but covering up awful crimes in its ranks...there is no escaping this and we should not be surprised or indignant that we are getting pilloried for it. Because the Church is Holy, the criminal acts of a few people in positions of authority seem all the more revolting and heinous, and they are.

Another reason must be admitted is that the Catholic Church has been arrogant in the past and has presumed entitlement (especially by clerics) above its station in society which has now been shown to have been misused to cover up crimes within its ranks. Pope Francis also tells us that the attitude of clericalism must be rooted out as it creates a false entitlement amongst priests and bishops which runs counter to a truly servant church. At the same time, the laity can be overly deferential to clergy, putting them on pedestals of presumed virtue from which they will surely topple. It creates a modus operandi based on entitlement and power which corrupts. Those who have committed these heinous acts and those who have covered for them should be dealt with by law and removed from office. The Church has handled these matters very poorly in the past, there is no denying this, and it is understandably being condemned for it, for the Church has done wrong. St Paul tells us and our Holy Father Pope Francis is teaching us, what one does affects us all, we are all touched with this sin. We cannot try and hide and claim, as Cain the murderer did, "Am I my brother's keeper?" ... well yes, we are. Action must be taken now without delay.

We must also be careful in the wake of these scandals not to get sidetracked into erroneous scapegoating and blame different groups,; "it's the fault of left-wing liberal priests", or "a gay mafia in the Church", or "it is the right wing conservatives priests who are all about control and the prestige of the Church" or "it's because of the celibacy rule". Such positions are untenable against the facts and only serve to divert us from the horrible truth that these scandals are about the misuse of power and position and the use of sexuality as a weapon. Most importantly such scapegoating again diverts us from caring for those who took the brunt of this, the very young and innocent. Neither should we jump on the bandwagon and exercise our own pet peeves about the Church nor our prejudices; such approaches never help. All this certainly makes our witness to Christ, our proclamation of the Good News, our support of family, the respect for all human life, our work for social justice and the poor, harder to do

all around. The rebuilding of the Church's moral authority will take a very long time and will never be served by trying to explain things away. However, this moment gives us an opportunity to root out the abusers, properly aid the victims and revisit the way the Church is run and to continue putting in place, protocols, measures, and policies to ensure this does not happen again. It will be long and arduous but all challenges should be accepted as opportunities to grow stronger, more honest, more just, and humble. Such practical steps, however, will come to naught if we do not have an attitude change, a conversion of heart, a return to a servant model of churchmanship and action. The Pennsylvania report is very damning and horrendous to read and whilst it can be noted that the majority of the abuse reported happened before 1990, it happened. It was not dealt with properly unlike now. Things have changed; systems, oversight, processes, training, and awareness have been put into effect in all dioceses, not least our own. Catholic dioceses, parishes, and schools now are much safer places for children these days but absolute vigilance and a, “zero tolerance; never again”, approach must be ensured in order to rebuild even a modicum of trust. Pope Francis reminds us of his response to this report that we are talking about crimes not just evil. Evil can sometimes be softened by being perceived of and talked about in the abstract but these crimes are real; callously dealt and horrendously felt. We must deal with all these matters as crimes and work with the statutory authorities at all levels to bring about justice because the Church has done wrong. Public opinion always lags way behind on such matters and history will judge us harshly but it will be worse if we do not deal with this with the utmost rigor. The Church is getting better.

For my part as a priest, I have been very hurt by the abusive actions some of my fellow priests have done and it brings great shame to my vocation. I have in the past been spat at, cussed out and called a, “paedo”, just because I was wearing my Roman collar. Such moments are personally, deeply disconcerting and painful to witness. At times I find it hard to forgive them but we must, but never forget. Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian life and it is hard, sometimes very hard indeed, it is the very essence of the Cross of Christ our Savior. But we must not neglect to bend over backward and tie ourselves in knots, to help the victims of clerical abuse and to ensure all measures are in place so this sort of abuse does not happen again. It is all very hard to bear knowing the Church has done wrong.

In the end, my dear brothers and sisters, aggressive defensive posturing will damage the Church even more and will only dig the hole we are in deeper. What need to heed the guidance of our Holy Father Pope Francis; we must be a penitent Church, a simple church, a poor church; not an arrogant institution only looking to maintain its position, prestige and glory. Our name is mud, we have rotten eggs on our face and blood on our hands. We must bathe ourselves in penitent prayer, humility and service of the poor; support the victims, treasure and protect our children and the vulnerable and maintain a high vigilance against such atrocities in the future.

God forgive us and bless us all at this time, *Aidan Peter CJ* August 31st 2018

**WHAT ARE WE DOING AT SLdM TO ENSURE
THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN AND VULNERABLE ADULTS ?**

- The parish has a Safe-Guarding Committee that meets regularly chaired by Bill LaRocco and made up of senior staff, school representatives and professionals in appropriate fields.
- All who work with children, vulnerable adults and serve in ministries are or are being Virtus trained and fingerprinted.
- There are information pamphlets and concern report forms with instructions at the back of the churches.
- Safeguarding matters are always an agenda item at Parish Pastoral Council meetings.
- Public input on safeguarding topics takes place.
- We have been audited by the Archdiocese on our safeguarding measures and found to be in compliance.
- The Archdiocese is externally, independently audited to assess all its new policies and processes are being followed and are effective.

In response to Pope Francis' call for prayer I am designating the whole of the month of **September as month of prayer and penance** throughout the parish in reparation for the scandals that have devastated so many lives and rocked you, the faithful of the church.
 To this end: At each Mass in September I ask that after we have been graced with gift Holy Communion the whole congregation will kneel and offer this prayer. I ask you to pray it daily at home with your families

Heavenly Father of Justice, Compassion and Mercy
 We kneel before you
 in shame,
 in penitence,
 and in reparation,
 for the abuse perpetrated and covered up by some clergy of your Church.
 Renew in us a determination to be;
 a penitent Church of service,
 a community of love and gentleness,
 a holy people set apart for you glory,
 determined to;
 put things right,
 defend the young,
 and support the abused and broken,
 We ask this in the Name of Jesus you Son,
 and in the cleansing and healing grace of you Holy Spirit
 for ever and ever, Amen.

Fr

Peter CJ Pastor, St Louis de Montfort, Santa Maria August 31st 2018

Aidan