

“...And the Gates of the Netherworld shall not Prevail against it”

Last week I had the chance to write a light hearted article about my fondness for the State Fair. Then after the bulletin went to press, a major news story comes out that brings to light more wrongdoing by clergy in the Church, specifically in the state of Pennsylvania over a number of years.

Needless to say, my guess is one's first reaction when reading what happened there was one of sadness, shock, anger and bewilderment at how something like this could have happened. But my hope is that as people think through the situation, they understand something as well: namely that good will ultimately prevail, and that grace, love and charity are so much more powerful than sin. And that is what we see in our universal Church.

Not too long before I was ordained, then auxiliary Bishop Richard Pates gave each of us a framed quote. It was from Saint John Henry Cardinal Newmann. Part of it states:

Trust the Church of God implicitly, even when your natural judgment would take a different course from hers, and would induce you to question her prudence or her correctness. Recollect what a hard task she has; how she is sure to be criticized and spoken against, whatever she does; recollect how much she needs your loyal and tender devotion. Recollect, too, how long is the experience gained in eighteen hundred years, and what a right she has to claim your assent to principles which have had so extended and so triumphant a trial. Thank her that she has kept the faith safe for so many generations, and do your part in helping her to transmit it to generations after you.

It's a good quote because as members of the Church, when people in the Church make mistakes, and in some cases very serious ones, it can challenge our faith. But my hope is that we also realize that there is no one in the world without sin, and that despite the sinful actions of the few, the good actions of the many ultimately will triumph.

A couple of weeks ago, a grand jury in Pennsylvania released a comprehensive study over a period of many years of the Catholic Church in that state. Sadly, what it found was that there were a number of clergy in that time span that abused children. On top of this, there were some bishops who were silent about the abuse, perhaps fearful of what it would do to the Church if known (which is what also will often occur in family situations of abuse). And so what transpired was a colossal failure to protect minors, and sinful and criminal actions continued.

Pennsylvania is of course not an isolated incident. In our own archdiocese, we emerged from bankruptcy after settling cases stemming from over 50 years ago, and other dioceses around the world are doing the same thing.

When something like this happens, inevitably the faithful may ask “what is going on? How could this happen?” So what can we cling to when those who are meant to guide

us not only let us down, but cause scandal and harm to people? How does one move forward and see the hope, rather than the pain?

As a starting point, we must remember again that Christ Himself founded our Church; every other one broke off from our Church. Our Church is made up of imperfect people however. Jesus Himself was betrayed by the first pope when He was denied. The others were cowardly and long gone by Good Friday. And then there's Paul who became a great leader, but for a while helped kill people who were Christians. These were the founders of our Church and our first bishops. What a way to start. And yet the Holy Spirit helped them, and Jesus saw their potential. This should be something we think seriously about.

Over the years, there have been many, many scandals. Popes and bishops have committed many sins from those sexual in nature to murders, persecutions, you name it. But also through all of this, the Church has thrived, and also grown stronger, and done so much good.

When something occurs like what we have witnessed in Pennsylvania and in other areas, what is important is to continue to trust that God is still there to guide the Church. But what is also important is that those who are impacted by sin must see God in the faithful. The Church has strived to respond to these victims, but we of course know it should have been done much, much sooner. While we cannot change the past, I am glad to see how much the Church has done to reach out to those who have suffered so greatly. Obviously whenever we encounter people who have been impacted by sin, we must do all we can to help them.

A few other things to consider:

1. Abuse most commonly occurs within family situations, and it impacts other religions as well. Within the family there are the same things; use of power, silence, etc. From a *Newsweek* article: "based on the surveys and studies conducted by different denominations over the past 30 years, experts who study child abuse say they see little reason to conclude that sexual abuse is mostly a Catholic issue. "We don't see the Catholic Church as a hotbed of this or a place that has a bigger problem than anyone else," said Ernie Allen, president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. "I can tell you without hesitation that we have seen cases in many religious settings, from traveling evangelists to mainstream ministers to rabbis and others."
2. Of the priests accused, many are dead, and the vast majority of these cases are from many years ago. This is not to diminish the gravity of what happened, but the point is over the past two decades, the Church around the world has made great strides. Years ago there was little psychological profiling or oversight in seminaries of people's backgrounds. Now there is that, along with background checks, safety training to protect minors, steps in place for mandated reporting and so many things. We've come a long way and learned from this. The point is that abuse suspicions are addressed quickly

and there is adequate training and as such what you see is a much better environment today than we had years ago.

3. As a priest, I am impacted too. I deal with the silent stares, people wondering about my orientation, silently thinking "is he one of the bad ones" and all that. But I have no qualms about wearing my Roman collar in public. Even from years ago when you had these predators who were in the priesthood along with the silence of some bishops, there were also many good clergy as well doing their job and serving the Church, and the good far outweighed the criminal predators.

4. My sense is some bishops panicked and were worried that what happened was so bad it would further damage the Church, or that they did not know the full scope of what was going on, or talked themselves into thinking it was not as big of a problem as it was, thinking a predator could be "cured" through therapy. Of course this was wrong and sinful - and we have to call it what it is, sinful and criminal.

5. Again, I'd urge you to look at where we are in 2018. The actions of sexual abuse and silence were awful - but if you look at cases reported over the last decade, you see a *sharp* decline. That data proves this. And that's because the right steps have been taken to ensure that kids are protected.

With this, the situation has made it more difficult to serve as a priest, because you sometimes have to worry about being suspected and as such are reluctant to even hug a child when they run up to you, or if a priest is accused there is this rush to judgment - a priest can be quickly pulled from ministry during an investigation and have no means to defend himself in the court of public opinion, and returning to ministry can be tough as there is gossip, rumors, etc. I know of one man who was forced out of ministry for an incident that happened years ago that was not abuse but an imprudent action (no charges were ever filed) and sometimes as a priest you feel like you walk a tightrope without a net, and wonder if you were accused of something would you be supported by people or your diocese. It is so important to protect children, but there also must be due process as well.

6. I think it would be good for the Church to have a commission made up of clergy and laity to do a comprehensive study on where we were and where we are at. However in many dioceses, this has taken place already. But again, I truly believe where we are at is the silence of some bishops is not there anymore - cases of suspected abuse are quickly turned over to authorities. In our own archdiocese, we have a full time former law enforcement officer on staff who investigates any matters of misconduct and abuse as well.

7. The media has reported on what has happened, but I do not believe they have adequately reported on the response. It is also important to note leaders of other religions have used faith as a weapon too; from extreme Islamic terrorism, to Protestant ministers, etc. Religion is used as a tool by some to corrupt others, take advantage of them, steal from them, etc. But the vast majority of people in ministry across faiths are

there to help people. That being said you cannot get around original sin's effects - people in all religions will sometimes choose to do evil acts, and once one is done, it can form a cycle or habit. However, the Church is also responsible for so much good and that does not get reported.

8. Again, trust Jesus - He knew what He was doing when He made one Church, not multiple ones. He knew what He said when "the gates of hell will not prevail against Her." These were horrible things that happened, no one can deny that. But hearing confessions for 10 years and going to confession for about 33 years now as a penitent, I can assure you people commit all kinds of sins. Bad things happen in people's lives, and families. You can give your money to this Church because we are the Church founded by Jesus Christ. We are a Church that gives education, provides health care and hospitals, and helps people on their faith journey. The charitable activity of the Church and the good work done by the Pope, Bishops and local parishes is truly amazing. That will go unreported.

9. Finally, it cannot be emphasized enough: from this we have learned the importance of protecting people from abuse. But there is so much more work to do. We must continue to reach out to victims and help them in any way. When we suspect something, we must alert the authorities and always err on the side of caution, not telling ourselves a parent maybe just "had a bad day" or "it's none of our business." We need to not only continually examine the Church and ask "are we doing enough" (which I truly believe we are doing so much so in this archdiocese) but also always ask that of ourselves and of our own families. And if we know of someone who has been hurt and has not had justice, or still carries pain within them, we need to reach out to them as well in any way to let them know we care and are there for them to help them in any way.

Yes, with 2000 years of history, a billion members, and an estimated 414,313 priests in the Catholic Church throughout the world, some of those people will do some very evil things. Some of them will betray just as Judas did. Some of them will cause pain. It's okay to be hurt, angry, and frustrated. But if you think the answer to being guaranteed to be free of sinful leaders is found elsewhere in another faith, or in the secular world, that's just not going to happen because original sin's effects are there and always will be there. But so too will be grace and the love of God, which is far more powerful and the people who see this, who far outnumber those who do not. We cannot deny what has happened, but as we look to the future we must also have the hope and trust that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide and strengthen our Church and leaders as we journey forward as the people of God. I hope and pray we have learned as a Church from recent scandals, and pray for all of those impacted, and hope you do too. Don't look to the past at the actions of some and think God abandoned His Church. Rather look to the past and learn from what was done (and not done), and look to the future by trying to ensure the love of God shines through you through your actions, knowing that the Church is there to guide and help you each and every step of the way.

God bless,

Fr. Paul