

Message Regarding Scandal in the Church

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Aug. 22, 2018

My heart has been weighed down lately with scandalous news about Cardinal McCarrick and the many reports of abuse of children by clergy in the Grand Jury report in Pennsylvania. It sickens me. Recently our own Archbishop has sent out a letter in which he states how, like you, he “was shocked, angered, and discouraged” by the recent events as well. Also our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has written to the people of God addressing this terrible situation. Archbishop Sample urges us to read the Holy Father’s words, in which he calls out those responsible, and also for conversion, penance and prayer.

Archbishop Sample, Bishop Cary, and Bishop Barron have all made similar suggestions that, in collaboration with Pope Francis, we should appoint an independent commission composed mostly of lay men and women of impeccable reputation and significant investigative experience to track down the truth wherever it leads. Empowered (presumably by the Holy Father) to obtain testimony from bishops and documents from chanceries, the commission would make a public report to the body of bishops of their findings and recommendations. This would be an antidote to any clerical corruption (whether it be episcopal, presbyteral, or diaconal).

I know that, like me, all of these events weigh heavily on your hearts. These men, who did these terrible things, were meant to emulate our Lord, they were meant to make themselves a living sacrifice for the Lord, for the life of the world, but instead they have sacrificed the innocence of children. They have used these most vulnerable for their own wicked ends. It is scandalous. And it highlights an institutional failure for the Church.

Often young children don’t distinguish between the man, the priest, and the One who the priest represents, Our Lord Jesus Christ. I remember one time, when I was at St. Louis Church, one of our young parishioners would help her grandmother set up for Mass. She was probably five or six years old, and in all earnestness walked by me and waved to me and said, “Hi, Jesus!” and then she walked on.

It was one of those moments when the weight of the responsibility of the priesthood was impressed upon me. And it sickens me to think of the emotional and spiritual damage that is done to a young soul when that trust is abused and betrayed. It is absolutely diabolical.

And on a more personal level: Sometimes whether the feeling is real or imagined, I can find myself feeling self-conscious about wearing my collar,

wondering what kind of judgments people are making about me, just because I'm a priest.

I know that it is gut-wrenching for you to hear of this scandal in the Church. It is gut-wrenching for me as well. If the leadership of the Church doesn't clean up the Church, then the Lord will and it will be painful.

These things are terrible, but I ask you and implore you, to keep the distinction in your mind between the evil that these men have done and the mission of the Church, what the Church is about.

The Church is still the beloved Bride of Christ. The Church is still about spreading the kingdom of God. The Church is still about being the instrument of Salvation for the world. The fact that these men have done these horrendous things does not change the Church's mission, though it does undermine the credibility of the Church and her ability to carry out that mission.

Archbishop Sample wrote in his recent letter that the "Archdiocese renews its commitment to address swiftly, justly and transparently all improper sexual behavior by ministers and those in positions of authority in the Church. We also pledge our continued support and care for the victims of abuse." Please know that we do have in place solid and extensive policies and concrete procedures in our Archdiocese to help protect children, young people and vulnerable adults from sexual abuse. In addition, we do have an archdiocesan office for Child Protection and Victim Assistance that helps us pastorally care for those who have been abused. The Archbishop also has personally invited and urged, in his letter, anyone who has been abused by a member of the clergy, religious, or lay employee or volunteer to please come forward with your complaint to the Office of Victim Assistance or to your local law enforcement officials.

Here are some other suggestions of how we might respond as a people of faith. Speak up! Don't be silent! If you know something, then say something. Fast and pray for the Church! We've been through our own time of suffering in our own archdiocese so we ought to pray for those folks who must be hurting terribly right now, affected most closely by these latest revelations. Let us continue to pray the St. Michael the Archangel prayer for the protection of the Church. Spend some time interceding before the Blessed Sacrament. Live your lives in such a way that you are wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Be holy!

May we always be prudent, and keep our childlike trust in God's grace that despite all that is happening, that Church is still our mother. She is still the means to our salvation. She is still the one that feeds us, nourishes us.

Yours in Christ,
Fr. Ron Nelson