

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AUGUST 26, 2018

Last Sunday, in a church in Georgia, a man stood up and addressed the priest. He said, "My son is about to receive his first communion. What can I say to him?"

I do not know what the priest responded. And I do not know what I would or could say. The crisis we are undergoing in the church is overwhelming. We are overcome with evil, sinfulness, suffering and betrayal. I have spent a good deal of time this past week reading various commentaries in the religious and secular press, blogs, and descriptions of depravity baseness. I have listened to a few people's anger and resentment.

What can I possibly say? Maybe listening is the best thing I can do.

But, first of all, I am one with the victims in their pain and need for healing. There can be no cover-up. There must be no looking down on victims and telling them they bear blame as people have done. All of us, especially bishops should be ready to listen to those who come forth with stories of abuse.

Some things have to be done. Crimes deserve punishment. Sin may be forgiven but crime must be punished. The abuse of children and vulnerable adults has been a great crime. But the issues have been compounded by cover-up. Our bishops have failed us. A false sense of protecting the church and an old boy's club solidarity have scandalized us. Complete openness on what has transpired in the local church, processes of accountability, recourse to higher authority and follow-through in acknowledging and acting on these failures must be brought about. Actions, not just words, are needed.

But something deeper has to be faced. In his message to the Catholics of the world, Pope Francis has once again denounced clericalism in the church. He has personally tried to change this culture, an attitude, but has faced much resistance. Clericalism is a mind-set of entitlement, superiority, exclusion, and abuse of power. Clericalism has been abetted by misogyny and homophobia. It has been expressed in authoritarian and harsh ways. Clericalism has been institutionalized since the Council of Trent in how our seminaries have been conducted, in the pastor-lay division in the parish, and the passivity of the laity.

Reforms are needed. The US Association of Catholic priests, a band of about 1000 priests that started meeting five years ago to promote the implementation of the Second Vatican Council has been crusading for the renewal of the formation for candidates to the priesthood, for ordination of married men to the priesthood, and women to the diaconate. There are such voices and hopefully these will increase.

Today's gospel is poignantly relevant to us. Jesus addresses the few people who have remained with him after his bread of life discourse. "Do you also want to leave?" Peter answers him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Jesus, the bread of life, pours out his body and blood for us and asks us to do likewise. So many priests and bishops have failed to embrace this Jesus. In a sense they have walked away and chosen power over service.

I need to stand up for justice and the protection of the weak. I need to promote reforms of the church that call for transparency and accountability But I know I must also face the clericalism that I have accepted. I am complicit in all these issues. It is similar to my place in American society and the injustices of our culture. I am a white, educated male. All these have brought privileges. I have imbibed white superiority over blacks, men's superiority over women.

In the same way we have all bought into the system. So many Catholics have been passive and accepted what Father says, not thinking for themselves. Not only that, but they have contributed to coddling priests, ceding them privileges. Priests have easily eaten up a richer lifestyle whereas their real commitment to Christ calls for asceticism and a deep spiritual life of prayer. Celibacy is dangerous without an ascetical and spiritual life supported by friends and intimates. Priests and laity need other in an adult, mature relationship.

Write to the bishops, to priests. Speak up. Invest your time in knowing your faith more deeply. If the future reform of the church is to come from the laity, as many say, they must be an educated, mature laity. Fidelity to the gospel, not to American culture, has to be the center of reform.

There are countless good and holy priests, nuns and lay people throughout the world. There are heroic people ministering to the poor, to the homeless, to refugees – in Gaza, in Iraq, on our American borders. We belong to a universal church. It is the body of Christ. We need to renew this church in the vision of the head, Jesus Christ. The Pope writes to us, “Without the participation of the People of God, the church becomes small elites, creating groups, projects, theological and spiritual approaches and structures without roots, without memory, without faces, without bodies.”

The present crisis could be a watershed in the church, a time of enlightened reform. One church historian has said it is the greatest crisis in the church since the Protestant reformation. It is only in commitment to Jesus that we will avoid cynicism, despair and find healing for our anger and guilt and blame.

Will you also walk away? To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

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