

20th Sunday OT – (Year B) – August 19, 2018

PRV 9:1-6; PS 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7; EPH 5:15-20; JN 6:51-58

I was very blessed this past week to meet a heroic woman—a woman who was **abused by a Catholic priest when she was a teenager**—and who, after far too many hellish years of trying to make sense of what happened to her, had her **terror reawakened**...and her **wounds reopened**...by this week's revelations of *diabolical* clerical sex abuse and episcopal cover-up.

There's a **terrible**—and I do mean *terrible irony*—to her heroism because, despite having been robbed of her innocence by a **pervert in a collar**—*faking genuine priesthood*—**this woman has remained faithful to the Catholic Church.**

Meanwhile, the *fiend* who **preyed** on *her* flesh, instead of **prostrating** himself before the **flesh** of *Christ* in the Holy Eucharist, had **long before betrayed the Church** he vowed to **serve**...and the **Savior** he promised to *personify*.

Her faithfulness turned out to be, in fact, the **very answer** to a dilemma I was carrying in my heart, and which I shared with **her** when we sat down to talk three days ago. Thinking of both the scandal in **general**, and her situation in **particular**, I confessed to her:

“I am at a complete loss for words—I don't yet know what to say or do. I trust the Holy Spirit to lead me, but right now, I'm not hearing *anything*.”

She responded:

“Father, I'm so glad to hear you *say that*. I needed to *know that*, because the *silence from the pulpit is deafening*.”

Now, three days later, I see clearly that Jesus had arranged our conversation, because she needed a priest to love her as a **spiritual father**; and I needed to learn—**from her**—what *real courage in the spiritual life* looks like. It was, in fact, in the course of **that** conversation on *Thursday*, that the Lord began to show me—*through her*—what to say **today**.

In our **2nd Reading** from **Ephesians** today, St. Paul writes:

Watch carefully then how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, making the most of the opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord. (Eph 5:15-17)

As we tried to understand—**together**—*what is the will of the Lord* in the midst of these evil days—**two things occurred to me**...both of which I shared with her.

The **first** is this:

No matter what anyone says—whether those outside or inside the Church—the **wolves in shepherd’s clothing** who devoured the flesh of the innocent—*are not the Church*. We must not listen to the **Devil** when he strives to convince us that these **carnivores**—who were **utterly unfaithful** to their vows—**are** the Church.

They are not!

The Church is the *Body of Christ* (cf. Col 1:24). The Church is the *household of God* (cf. 1 Tim 3:15). The Church is **the family of Jesus** (cf. Mt 12:50).

Jesus himself said, in the **Gospel of Matthew**:

...whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother. (Mt 12:50)

And whoever **deliberately defies** the will of his Father—**Our** Father—has **amputated** himself from the Body of Christ...**evicted** himself from the household of God...and **abandoned** the family of Jesus. The *offending priests* and *complicit bishops* are no more the *Church*...than **Judas Iscariot** is the Church...no matter **what** color the piping on their cassocks.

The Church is Jesus—and it is **those who remain faithful** to him. *“He is the head”* (cf. Eph 5:23), *“we are the members”* (cf. Rom 12:5). And those victims who have suffered **so very deeply** at that hands of the false shepherds...those victims are **so very dear to Jesus’s heart** because *they have shared in Christ’s Passion* in a way that those of us who have not been abused cannot even *pretend* to imagine.

If **Jesus** is the *head*...and **we** are the *members* of his Body...then we quite rightly may say that the **abuse victims** are his **heart**...his *suffering heart*.

The **second thing** that occurred to me during our conversation is this:

The only way for the Church to emerge victorious from this **white-hot crucible of rot** is for every single member of the Body of Christ—**clergy** and **laity** alike—to make the **pursuit of personal holiness** the **highest priority** in our lives. Not holiness as a lofty **ideal**. Not holiness as some pie-in-the-sky **concept**. But holiness as a *way of life*.

Let us be clear, however. Focusing here, today, on our need for personal holiness, does **not** preclude our just demands for real **accountability for bishops**. We must insist that our bishops root out the **corruption in their ranks** and give the rest of us the means to report **episcopal misconduct** to someone *other* than the **perpetrator** himself or his **protectors**.

Like you, my brothers and sisters, I will be watching to see if the bishops are willing to make **real** and **substantial** change in the **culture** that enabled predators to thrive, **even in their own ranks**. And I will speak up, **with you**, if their proposals fall short.

So many of us are **angry, confused, sick to our stomachs**, and **humiliated** that it's hard to even know what to **do**, what to **say**, or what to **think**. I've met grown men and women this week who have **never been abused by clergy**, but who were nevertheless reduced to **tears** because, in some cases, they converted to Catholicism amidst **great resistance from family and friends**, and those family members and friends who opposed them **then**, are *now* saying, "**I told you so**." Their hearts are being pierced by the *sword of humiliation*. **They, too, are close to Jesus in their suffering**.

This diabolical attack which the devil unleashed on the **Church** in general, and the **abuse victims** in particular, with the willing cooperation of *spineless, depraved clergy*, was a devastating blow. His **second wave of attack** is to get the rest of us to **throw in the towel**—to **turn our back on the Church**, like the unfaithful Apostles turned their back on Jesus in his moment of greatest suffering.

Satan is counting on our discouragement!

But if we **cut and run**—while people like this heroic woman *remain* in the very Church where their innocence was stolen from them—then we hand the devil a *second* victory by **abandoning the abuse victims a second time**. They were abandoned once by the ravenous wolves pretending to be Jesus, and by self-serving bishops who **circled the wagons** instead of **sheltering the victims**. Let them not be abandoned a second time...this time by *you*...and by *me*.

Now, I want to issue a challenge to my brother priests.

Fathers...now is *not* the time to stop wearing our **collars** in public because of a possible backlash.

And for my brother priests who do *not* regularly wear your collar in public, it's time to *man up*...and *suit up*.

Yes, we might be publicly humiliated. Yes, we might suffer from looks of **mistrust** and **disgust**. Priests are **ordained to offer sacrifice** to God for the salvation of his people, *are we not?* **Fathers:** never forget that **you and I can offer up any and all such personal suffering** as a sacrifice to God the Father—**for the victims**—just as Jesus offered his sufferings to his Father—for the salvation of **those he loved**.

Our **deliberate, voluntary solidarity** with the victims of abuse is **an act of fatherly love** from *faithful* priests willing to **suffer with** them, instead of paying them **lip service**. Besides, any sufferings we **might** experience because of the collar **pale in comparison** to the hell that the abuse victims have **already** suffered at the hands of those who pretended to be *their spiritual fathers*...and *our spiritual brothers*.

Those who were **first**...sexually abused by priests and **then**...abandoned by bishops had no choice in their suffering. **We do!** And since “**compassion**” means “**to suffer with**”, we can *choose* to imitate **Christ**, share in the *victims’ suffering*, and thus grow more and more into the *holy priests the people of God deserve*. **Holiness** itself—our **personal** holiness—will be *our* definitive answer to the *unholy hell* unleashed by our *faithless brothers* who indulged **their own flesh** while betraying the *Word-Made-Flesh*...and his “*little ones*” (cf. Mt 18:6).

St. Paul wrote to the **Corinthians** words that we can speak to the abuse victims:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God. For as Christ's sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow. If we are afflicted, it is for your encouragement and salvation... (2 Cor 1:3-6).

I also wish, now, to speak directly to you, my lay brothers and sisters.

Please do not hide your Catholicism or abandon the Church...*even when it hurts*. Now is not the time to **hunker down...hide...or run away**. God is *purifying* the Church—a purification that is *long overdue*. Jesus promised that the *“gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church”* (cf. Mt 16:18). But he never promised that believers would not fall away.

If we are to be part of the victorious Church that **will** emerge from this **painful** but *necessary* purification—a Church much **purer** and much more **faithful** than before—then we must embrace the Cross, as Jesus did, for the sake of those in most need of his love and mercy—the abuse victims.

In 1970, **Fr. Joseph Ratzinger**—35 years before being elected Pope—predicted what the Church would look like in the year 2000. His words seem even more fitting in **2018** than they were when he spoke them **nearly five decades** ago:

“From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge—a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges. In contrast to an earlier age, it will be seen much more as a voluntary society, entered only by free decision. As a small society, it will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members.”

<https://aleteia.org/2016/06/13/when-cardinal-joseph-ratzinger-predicted-the-future-of-the-church/>

Throughout the history of the Church, the greatest Saints have emerged in the Church during her greatest trials. **Fr. Ratzinger** spoke of this as well:

“The future of the Church, once again as always, will be reshaped by saints, by men, that is...who see more than others see, because their lives embrace a wider reality. Unselfishness, which makes men free, is attained only through the patience of small daily acts of self-denial. By this daily passion, which alone reveals to a man in how many ways he is enslaved by his own ego, by this daily passion and by it alone, a man’s eyes are slowly opened. He sees only to the extent that he has lived and suffered.”

same as above

I want to end by speaking now directly to the abuse victims.

No one knows suffering like *you* do.

No one...that is...except **Jesus!**

And precisely **because** of your *particular* agony, he is **closer** to you than you know.

Nevertheless, **in the name of the Catholic Church**, I want to tell you how utterly **sorry**, how utterly **heartbroken**, and how utterly *ashamed* I am for all you have endured.

You did not sin...and yet you suffer because of the sins of others.

In **that**...you are *just like Jesus*.

I beg your forgiveness in the name of the Church.

If you are not **“there”** yet—not yet ready to forgive—*we will wait* until you are ready. God knows you have had to wait far too long for the **truth** to come out...and the **healing** to begin.

And I not only promise you my **personal prayers**.

At this Mass, I will carry each of you in my heart to this altar—and when I break the host and place a particle of **Jesus’ Body** into **His Precious Blood** in the chalice, I will place *each of you* into his **Sacred Heart**.

Your place of **healing**...your place of **safety**...your true **home**.