

Dear friends in Christ,

This saying is hard; who can accept it? While these words from this Sunday's Gospel refer to the difficulty of belief in the doctrine of the Blessed Eucharist, they are also fitting words to reflect our reaction to all we've heard about our beloved Catholic Church in recent weeks. It is hard to accept the news we've heard about Archbishop McCarrick and in the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report. For those of us who rely on the Church and her sacred ministers to provide us with the means of salvation – the Gospel, the Sacraments, the entire Christian life – it is hard to hear and accept that amongst these ranks such evil, sinful and criminal deeds have been done to the most precious and vulnerable of all people: children.

Just as the crowd wanted to know *how* and *why* the Lord Jesus could leave Himself as sacramental food, we want to know how and why such awfulness can exist, continue and seemingly flourish within the Church. Explanations sound like excuses. Answers seem simple: report criminals, protect and listen to those courageous people who come forth, punish those who shield...it all sounds common sense. We will give ourselves headaches trying to figure out why this wasn't done. We are frustrated, of course, but God, Who reads every human heart and is Just Judge, can sort these things out for victims and for perpetrators.

Does this shock you? The crowds were shocked that Jesus would give His Body and Blood as food that leads to eternal life. We are shocked at the horror and pain these repeated experiences cause the whole Church. We are shocked at the courage of the victims who have come forward so that others will not be harmed. We are shocked to hear that healing and reconciliation is possible for victims, even after many decades – were we to deny this we would deny Christ's universal power to save! We are shocked at the failures – in a whole host of ways – of Bishops and Priests throughout the Church.

As a result of this, many of His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him. Some people found the teaching on the Holy Eucharist too much to bear and abandoned the whole enterprise of discipleship. This too may happen (or be a temptation) for those experiencing this most recent unpleasantness. Perhaps we should liken the sexual abuse scandal in the Church to the disease Cancer. It was first diagnosed in the Archdiocese of Boston in the early 2000s. Further testing showed the disease was much more advanced than the first examination showed. Soon it manifested itself across the nation and around the world. The chemotherapy of mandatory reporting, “one strike you're out” for abusers, background checks, independent review boards, the involvement of law enforcement, ongoing training for all children and personnel was begun. The results showed the therapy worked. Cases of recent abuse have plummeted. Cases from the past were increasingly brought forward for more intensive and restorative radiation of pastoral care and often financial remuneration. More recently, however, we've had a recurrence of the old disease. This won't be the last. But once again a new regimen of therapy will come forward to kill this flare-up. In this particular case, His Holiness the Pope will be the lead physician.

Do you also want to leave? It is a natural temptation for any of us to leave the Church because of this mess. When the disciples left the Lord Jesus and walked away from Him, He did not chase them or make deals to bring them back. No gimmicks. He simply let them go. He

respected their freedom and so must we. We can understand why victims would leave. We can understand why ordinary folks would just give up. Why didn't the Lord get all upset when people left? Because He was still their Lord even if they were no longer His disciples. Those of us who remain will continue to offer Mass and the Sacraments for the salvation of the whole world. We will absolve and marry and bury and baptize. We will feed the hungry and reach out in charity to needy faithful and lapsed alike. We will be true to the Lord and our baptismal commitment no matter what. This is our mission.

Our mission is (and has been for the past 16 years especially) to protect children and vulnerable people. More important than any program, procedure or safeguard is our education and empowerment of children. Whether it's bullying, abuse, neglect, or just being made to feel uncomfortable, we've worked hard to empower children and young people to speak up – shout if necessary to be heard. They are trained to approach people they trust to get the help they need; there are people who will listen and take them seriously. Adults are trained as advocates for children: if you see something, say something. Go to law enforcement. Go to social services. But keep going until you get satisfaction! Leaving the Church leaves this important work too.

Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God. After taking in everything the Lord Jesus had said, the reaction of the crowds and their own personal assessment, Peter speaks for the Apostles: where else can we go? With our family, we get frustrated, angry, disappointed, saddened or confused but it's still family. So it is with the Church. Christ established her as His Bride. He is not surprised by our sinfulness. That's why He came as Savior and Redeemer. He knew we would cause problems we could not fix. And that's really the heart of the matter: the problem of sin cannot be fixed – it can only be redeemed. What makes this experience so painful is that it's self-inflicted. This is not outsiders persecuting Catholics; it's Catholics defiling the Church from within. We are one Body of Christ through Baptism. We share successes, joys, guilt and shame. We might not have done the deeds, but our family name is now sullied before God and men.

We remain to receive Jesus in Holy Communion, to have our sins absolved, to hear the Gospel proclaimed, to pray and worship God as His people, to evangelize to the ends of the earth through words and deeds. We remain because we realize there is nowhere else to go and still be near the Eucharistic Lord. Victims need us to remain. The world needs us to remain. God needs us to remain. And so with all our feelings, thoughts and emotions we go on together. Father Jorge and I offer these reflections with an assurance of closeness to you. We love the Priesthood and grieve at how it has been perverted. Help us with your prayers, to be good and holy Priests.

Begging God's continued blessings on you, we are

Sincerely in Christ,

Father Keith A. Woods
Pastor

Father Jorge E. Ubau
Parochial Vicar