

## LORD, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life.” Jesus’ words of life have been met by murmurs, grumbling, and finally, many disciples leaving him. Yet Peter, speaking for the twelve, makes his statement of faith: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the word of everlasting life.”

I’m tired, my brothers and sisters. 1993. 2002. 2018. Each of these years mark a stage in the clergy sex-abuse crisis. I have been a priest and member of the Church through them all.

Because of the nature of the crimes, I cannot doubt that more revelations are to come. For the isolation of being a victim has been breached, and pain long-hidden has become a solidarity of “no more”.

In my life as a priest, I have known many victims. For 35 years folks have shared their trauma at the hands of uncles, aunts, father, mother, babysitter, older sibling, scout leader, priests, ministers, coach, doctor... The reality of abuse – physical, psychological, and yes, sexual – is a human problem of large proportions, of frightening frequency. The reality of abuse raises for me – and I would imagine for you – the specter that human beings are more flawed than we can imagine. The reality of abuse begs the question: we are told in the Book of Genesis “we are created good...indeed, very good”. Really?

Sadly, I have known perpetrators of abuse among my brother priests.

- A priest classmate and scout leader...
- A seminary upper classman from Pittsburg who is on the list of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report...
- A deceased priest of our Archdioceses who served at my home parish, whose family I served as priest in one of my assignments...
- A defrocked priest of our Archdiocese with whom I served in my very early years in ministry. He served in multiple parishes, including my home parish and a parish I would later serve as pastor. He was a serial perpetrator who was sent away to be “cured” (a belief of modern psychiatry then). Until psychiatry came to realize all too late that pedophiles and ephebophiles (those who prey on teenagers) CANNOT be cured.

I have known victims personally.

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- From my home parish, a young man who came to me to speak about this and who to this day struggles.
- Another was an Eagle Scout, shamed by what happened to him.
- Another was a musician whose marriage crumbled under the weight of his being a victim.
- Another was a middle-aged woman who was molested a number of times by the janitor at her grade school.
- Another was an older woman who shared with me the fact that as a young girl her pastor molested her repeatedly.
- And I have known the parents, siblings, and extended families of these same folks, at times walking with them through their pain, their disillusionment, their slow progress to forgive but not forget.

I have known bishops who moved abusers around. I only came to know of their actions after their deaths and the revelations of 1993, and my personal experience noted earlier.

And I mourned.

How can I stay in the Church with such knowledge, such experience? Perhaps you have asked yourself the same in the past, and more immediately, in our present...

But I have stayed. And I will stay. Not to protect my “job”, as some in our society might cynically think. I stay because I love the Church of Jesus Christ which is Roman Catholic. I love the Lord, Jesus Christ. I love the people who are the Church in that same Christ. I embrace the truth within the Church; and I lament and abhor the sin and brokenness of some of its ministers, ordained and lay who have hurt and damaged members of the body of the Church.

The findings of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury were painful to read; some of the lurid details were repulsive and revealed evil that stunned and revolted me. I can only imagine they brought forth the same in you.

To read of bishops who in an era past (remember, the report covered 70 years!)... to read of bishops who in an era past defended the institution of the Church and the priesthood and, apparently more than not, had little or no interaction with the victims of the crimes or their families, stuns us!

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Placed in historical context, they did the same as leaders of other institutions – school districts, scouting organizations, other churches, corporations, fraternal organizations.

But they were all wrong in following such a practice.

Their seeming lack of compassion for the victims and their families requires repentance and penance by their institutions. Their contributing to crimes needs to be and is being named. And in the case of any leaders yet alive, any such crime needs to be adjudicated according to law. And if they are yet in office, it would be best for them to resign and begin their own journey of repentance and penance.

The Church faces the shame now of bishops and cardinal archbishops who are being revealed as not just complicit in silence, but of being perpetrators of abusive behaviors with children, teens, and young adults. Archbishop McCarrick is not the first to be found out for sexual misconduct. Others have been removed or asked to resign before him (we have such short memories).

But in the case of Archbishop McCarrick, his behavior over so many years is appalling. This is a man whose power over seminarians and young priests was unimaginable to the common person. He betrayed on so many levels the Gospel values he was supposed to uphold and defend. His actions denigrated the human dignity of his victims.

And though he served the Church in outstanding ways over many years, his betrayal of trust hurt the Church, damaged the Church and her mission, and so he was removed from any public ministry, and stripped of his being a cardinal.

The Church and her mission have been damaged badly. We have suffered a loss of credibility.

Not just around the reality of past abuse by our own and the hiding of this abuse. But the loss of our credibility goes much deeper. Our teaching on sexual morality at all levels has come into question. Our credibility to speak and challenge our culture and world on immigration, refugees, poverty and imbalance of wealth, the death penalty, human trafficking, respect for LBGTQ people as human beings. Yes, some

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are scoffing at the Church. Others are dismissing any credibility they once saw in the Church.

Our voice in the public forum has been diminished. And it is reduced even among our own people.

The truth of the Gospel which we are to preach; the truth that the Church has brought to light, taught, even defended with her life over the centuries – has all become questioned and at times, dismissed. Not just because of relativism, modernism, and individualism – but because of our failures to love, because of the sins and crimes of a minority of once trusted individuals.

Many folks have come to me, written to me, called me, offering their insights into what we are experiencing, what needs to be done. They have offered reassurance after reassurance that this is not my fault, and that they love me, my brother priests and their Archbishop. I am thankful for these sentiments and prayers; please keep them coming for me, my brothers, and our Archbishop. Of the bishops I must now speak.

I trust Pope Francis to lead the universal Church in conversion of any abusive behaviors and in a conversion of the culture of silence yet present in some dioceses or nations of the world (such as Chile and Ireland, which he visited this weekend). We have seen him lead the way, even to admitting his own mistakes in Chile. We need to pray for him to hold his resolve, even when he faces hostility to the changes he will implement.

I trust the bishops – especially Cardinal Tobin, Archbishop Etienne of Anchorage (one of our own from Tell City), Bishop Doherty of Lafayette, Bishop Hying of Gary and Archbishop Thompson. I trust them to lead the hierarchy of the Church in the United States to constructive, just and transparent change among the bishops. I know each of these men; they have given me reason to trust. They are in my prayers.

I trust the Papal Nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, who is working with our bishops toward the needed changes.

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And I trust that the Church in the United States, though somewhat handicapped by these revelations and hard decisions on other issues, will continue to minister faithfully in the many marvelous and generous ways it has done for so long.

Finally, I trust you, my brothers and sisters, to do what you can do to help bring us through this scandal, this sadness. What is it that you can do?

- Respectfully urge our bishops to needed reforms, and tell them you are praying for them to do what is right and good.
- Pray for the victims yet alive and those deceased. Pray for their families and friends who yet suffer from the effects of any form of abuse their loved ones endured.
- Pray for the enemies of the Church who rail – not without cause, mind you – about our failings but yet ignore larger questions, and the good that the Church does do.
- Be cautious about what you read on social media, especially when it is loud, strident, condemnatory, and abusive in nature. These loud voices can foster some very bad things in our hearts.
- Pay attention to the balanced voices, the ones who speak respectfully on social media, ask their questions, speak of their feelings, and wonder about the future and continue to pray.
- Recall that few accusations of present day abuse are being recorded since the 2002 Dallas Charter, and that any which have come to light have been handled according to the Charter. And, that if there is just one that has not been rightly handled, it will be laid bare and those responsible will be disciplined.
- Recall that those being admitted to the seminary and religious life today are much more carefully screened and meticulously formed as healthy psycho-sexual human beings.
- Pray that other institutions in our country and world will take up more transparent processes against abuse of any kind, and see to the needs of the victims first.
- Decide to explore Safe and Sacred learning for yourself through our Archdiocesan program. Learn how to be aware of abusive behaviors toward children, teens, young adults and the elderly. This is Life Issue that needs to be more present to us all.

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“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life.” From whom did we first hear these words of Peter? The Church.

We first heard them proclaimed by the Church gathered in a place like this to praise God in the Eucharist.

We first heard them proclaimed because the Church, our faith ancestors, took the time to write them down. John wrote to the people of his community because they were facing their own questions about Jesus, the Eucharist, indeed, the very nature of the body of believers. He wrote down their shared memories of what Jesus did and said, and the Church preserved them!

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Hold onto these words of the Lord, of the Church. They are ours; they help make us what we are.