

Crisis in the Catholic Church: Jesus Christ Is Always the Answer

We thought it might be over.

We were wrong.

Like a sucker-punch to the gut, the air was sucked from our lungs and we struggled to breathe recently as horrifying reports came to light through the media about 300 priests in six Pennsylvania dioceses accused of sexually abusing more than 1,000 children over the past several decades. To make the pain even deeper and more incomprehensible – if that is possible – we also learned bishops in those dioceses were covering up the abuse, protecting their brother priests, rather than protecting the innocent sheep of their flocks.

Even as the sickening details of the reports were being made public, social media was already ablaze with comments expressing shock, horror, anger, disillusionment, disgust and helplessness by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. The feelings and expressions were justified, even necessary, to help people deal with the pain and disappointment of the latest revelations of abuse.

I watched as my friends and people I didn't know posted comments on social media. While I was tempted to jump into the fray, I resisted the urge. The Spirit was telling me to be quiet. To reflect. To pause and collect myself. I needed a few days to process, to think and, most importantly, to pray.

As much as I found myself thinking about our priests and bishops, I found my heart focusing on the laity more.

On you.

Don't get me wrong. Our priests and bishops need our prayers right now. They need to right past wrongs and adopt a "zero tolerance" mindset for any type of sexual abuse. Even the slightest hint or suggestion of sexual impropriety needs to be met with the same heavy hand and devastating consequences of abuse itself. No longer can accountability be just a cute buzz word peppered throughout a meaningless policy promulgated by our bishops. Accountability needs to start at the Vatican, weave its way through the magisterium and take root on the ground in our parishes and communities.

It seems our priests have come to a literal fork in the road on this issue. One way leads to the path of righteousness, holiness and total commitment to their vocation. The other leads to pride, sin, weakness and evil. As one of my favorite movie characters, Bagger Vance (Will Smith), is quoted as saying to Junuh (Matt Damon) in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*: "It's time to choose. Time to come out of the shadows." I would say the same to our priests. Some have already chosen well, some may be straddling the fence and some, as we know, have chosen the wrong path. To our priests I would say: our faith teaches us that redemption is available to all, even if you've followed the wrong path. But if you have, there is no longer a place for you as a leader of the faithful in our Church. Period.

But again, as much as I thought about our priests, my heart was hurting more for the laity.

I am a husband. I am a father. I am a deacon. In that order. In all of my vocations, I feel the pain and distress you feel. After taking a few days to reflect process and pray, here are three things that are on my heart that I want you – and all Catholics – to know:

- First, evil and sin exists everywhere, not only in the Catholic Church. Just ask Protestants, the Boy Scouts, the Girls Scouts, teachers, coaches and any organization that is led by human beings. This is not a cop out. It's a fact. Human sin goes back to Adam and Eve and no one is exempt, not Pope Francis, not our bishops, not our priests or any of the clergy, deacons included. Jesus Christ left his Church on earth in the hands of humans, knowing that they would be sinful, but praying that they

would combat their sinfulness by turning to Him and to the Church. Jesus said to Peter, “you are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” This is the same Peter that would later deny knowing Jesus three times! Reality tells us until Christ returns and while the Church on earth continues to exist, there will be sin in the Church. We should not be nonchalant about it, we should not sweep it under the rug and we should never allow it to master our lives. On the contrary, we should fight sin and evil with every fiber of our being. And when we fall, we need to get up, dust ourselves off and keep fighting. And when others fall, we should lift them up and encourage them to do the same. Again, this is more of an awareness and reminder thing. Sin is something that’s not going away in the Church, so we better start understanding that we will ALWAYS have to deal with it. Let’s pray for our priests, for all clergy, and for one another, that we may do our best to live lives of holiness. It’s a lifelong struggle for us all.

- Secondly, we cannot and should not condemn all priests because some have fallen. This is something the media, social media and Catholics and non-Catholics alike are prone to do. The saying, “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water” comes to mind. When we are angry, we can easily make broad, brushstroke statements or assessments such as “all priests are pedophiles or homosexuals.” I know most of you know this is not true. We all know good, holy priests who love God and faithfully serve their congregations. I know such priests and I have great respect for them. We need to pray for them. Because of the despicable actions of some of their brother priests, good priests have targets on their backs. People whisper and give disapproving glances to them in public when they wear their collar. How do I know? Because some priests have told me. For those priests that we know are good and holy, we need to stand up in every way that we can and show them the support they deserve.
- Finally, and this is the most important point I want to share with you, the Church does not belong to men (or women). It belongs to Jesus Christ. Let me write that again. The Church does not belong to men, it belongs to Jesus Christ. Those who are rightly feeling so hurt and disgusted with the Church right now (this includes me) that they are thinking about leaving it (this doesn’t include me), I would ask that you take a deep breath and pause for the moment. This is what concerns me the most – people endangering their own salvation and leaving the Church and the gift of the Eucharist because of the horrible and sinful actions of others. If you are considering leaving the Church, please take time to reflect on this: The Catholic Church is Jesus Christ! It is not Pope Francis, it is not the Saints, it is not you or me or anyone in the Church, whether clergy or laity. No one can or should take away your faith, your love of receiving Christ in the Eucharist or your love of attending Mass and being part of a larger faith community. Don’t let anyone ever, ever take that away from you! Let the priests who have strayed and sinned work out their own salvation. They are NOT the Church. Jesus Christ IS the Church.

Jesus Christ is The Answer. He is and always will be. He’s the answer for all of us. My prayer is that rather than seeing yet another mass exodus of Catholic faithful because of the latest sexual abuse revelations, that instead church doors will be flung wide open and pews will be filled with lovers of Jesus Christ who put all of their trust in Him.

We are sinners. But we are also lovers of Jesus Christ. We need Him now more than ever, to send the Spirit of love and mercy into the hearts of all the faithful that we might all strive to know him more.

During this difficult time in the Church, I am reminded of the answer to the old Baltimore Catechism question; “Why did God make me?” And that answer is: “God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in Heaven.”

Nothing should ever change that. Nothing.