

Ordinary 20 Sunday -B -2018 (Fr. Mark Starr)

Proverbs 9:1–6

Psalm 34:2–7

Ephesians 5:15–20

John 6:51–58

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians from our second reading today we read: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5). How stinging these words must be to the Church in the United States today, given the events of the last several weeks here in our country.

Sadly, scandals of inappropriate behavior among clergy and associated cover-ups are making the headlines of our news once again. A Cardinal archbishop for the first time in almost a century has resigned from the college of cardinals. Subsequent reports after an initial accusation show systematic abuse of position and power over many under his ecclesial authority. The District Attorney for the state of Pennsylvania, this week, released a grand jury report of six of eight dioceses in the state after a two-year investigation into the handling of clerical abuse involving minors. The two other dioceses in Pennsylvania had already been investigated with publicized reports of horrendous crimes and lack of pastoral care and oversight. And unfortunately, we are not alone on these shores. Scandals involving sexual abuse by clerics have erupted in Guam,

Australia and most recently Chile, where all bishops recently submitted their resignations to the Holy Father, a few of which he has already accepted.

Unfortunately, all too often, the avoidance of scandal and the preservation of church assets have taken precedence over the pastoral care of survivors of unspeakable crimes committed against them. I along with my brother priests are heartbroken, angered and saddened over the horrific sins committed against so many. Many survivors were ignored or worse yet, made to feel it was their fault – it was not. We are proud of those who have stepped forward. We acknowledge your courage, we hear you and commit to the cleansing of our Church.

Unfortunately, what the American Church may have considered was mostly a problem that was dealt with sixteen years ago with the implementation of the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Young People, has now reared its ugly head again. As you know, Archbishop Wilton Gregory, then bishop Gregory of Belleville, at that time was president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. He assured the American Church that we would implement protection measures and oversight as well as chartering an investigation into the failures that led to the abuse scandal of 2002. And to be fair, the most recent revelations involve behavior and failures from many years ago, that pre-date the Dallas Charter; our Youth Protection procedures are working. However, that does not

negate the gravity of the sins committed against many. Today, all candidates for entrance into our seminary formation programs are given extensive psychological evaluations. It is a rigorous process to be accepted into the priestly formation program today, as it should be.

While I am not here to analyze the balance of work that must be completed, there are two areas which I believe need additional reform by Church leadership. First, the transparency of all dioceses with respect to “credible substantiated” accusations made in the past so that we do not continue to re-visit **OR ignore** the sins of the past. Second, the implementation of oversight panels among the bishops themselves, which must include outside lay panels to bring about real reform among the ranks and to break a culture of secrecy and cover-up; they cannot rely solely within their ranks to effectively self-govern themselves.

I cannot tell you how much the recent revelations have come to bear down on myself and my brother priests – we are all experiencing a myriad of emotions: anger, sadness and remorse. I have many priest friends in Pennsylvania and I grieve with them. I personally visited Archbishop Gregory about a week ago and assured him I grieved with him and for him as issues that he felt were dealt with sixteen years ago have come to light again. I can see the toll it has taken on him,

and I know his brother bishops as well. Archbishop Gregory called a Holy Hour this past Thursday at the Chancery inviting all priests of the Archdiocese to spend an hour in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament or if they were not able to attend, to do so at their respective parishes, to pray for the many survivors of abuse.

I would like to quote a portion of Archbishop Gregory's homily at the priesthood ordination Mass this June, a few short weeks ago:

Organized religions once were unquestioned sources of assurance and confidence in the face of such life challenges. They still are for many people. Although for many others – especially for our young – religion has become only another once respected institution that has lost its luster. So many religious leaders have disappointed, betrayed, and scandalized their faithful that organized religion itself is in serious need of rebuilding and renewal. No individual faith tradition can claim an exemption from the skepticism that is so prevalent and every public embarrassment for one faith tradition manages to impact all others. You young men are being ordained at a moment when people are clearly looking for faith witnesses to the living Christ and can never be achieved by brashly portraying yourselves as experts or saviors. Jesus alone is Savior for us all. Clergy today are summoned to be humble credible men of faith. We ask that you

not try to defend or to attempt to explain away the defects of organized religion, but always simply point to the One who is the very foundation of faith for all ages (Archbishop Gregory Priesthood Ordination Mass Homily June 16, 2018).

I remember the first time I placed a clerical collar around my neck and looking in the mirror. I said then, as I do every day, “Lord I am not worthy to place this collar on. Let me always honor you in all that I do.” Have I always been perfect? No, I am a man who needs grace as much as any other, relying on the Lord Jesus Christ for my strength. [Many times, at Mass, when washing my hands at the preparation, when I pray the prayer, loud enough for the servers to hear me: “Lord wash away my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin,” I will ask the servers: “Does Father have sins?” I usually get a smile and I assure them I do.] Many times, I pray the Act of Contrition before Mass knowing I am not worthy, but with His grace and relying on the Holy Spirit, I daily strive to emulate Jesus Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist and all sacraments in my task as shepherd of the souls of Acworth. You have every right to expect that all clerics live upright moral lives and preach **more** with their **lives** than with words.

When I entered seminary in 2006, some asked: “Why are you doing this?” The answer then is the same answer as it is today: “That I may be an instrument

to draw people to that encounter with the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ.” There is no other answer. And while wearing the collar today in public may create some feelings of shame as some will stare and I wonder if they are thinking: “Is he one of those?”, I do not give up hope that in spite of the tragedies and horrific sins of so many in the hierarchy of the Church, the Lord works through all of our imperfections.

To anyone who has ever been abused, whether within or outside the Church, we extend open arms to you to help you to guide you and to provide whatever is necessary to help you heal through your personal violation. That is my commitment as well as our archbishop – that is our **job** as the Church. All faithful have every right to expect their priests to be men of holiness and prayer, whose lives are dedicated in service in the name of Jesus Christ. You have every right to expect when a homily is delivered that the priest or deacon (or bishop) is preaching to themselves first, because we must emulate and give example first by our lives the message we proclaim. I commit to you, my faithful, to try to the best of my ability, with the help of the Holy Spirit to honor you and to lead by example of life. If I have ever not shown you respect, nor shown you the love you expect and deserve, please come to me and let me know of your concerns. I commit to listen to you in a spirit of humility and to honor you and love you and to amend

my life to be more like Jesus Christ in my ministry. That is the very least you can expect, the very least you deserve. I ask for your prayers for all priests, deacons, bishops and religious in these difficult days ahead, that they may honor the Lord in all that they do. I ask for your prayers for all the survivors of these horrific sins committed against them, that they may experience healing and the loving embrace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the intercession of Mary and our patroness, St. Clare of Assisi, may we become one holy spotless bride. Finally, may we all strive together as one family to walk in union with the one who is the center of our faith, the risen Lord Jesus Christ!