



August 15, 2018

A VERY PERSONAL REFLECTION ON SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE CHURCH

My dearest Brothers and Sisters of St. Mary's,

I have agonized on how even to begin this letter, but I knew it had to be written. I am extremely grateful to the good parishioners who have encouraged me to speak. This letter is a way for me to reach as many of you as possible. I absolutely need to speak about the recent, terrible reports of more sexual abuse by Catholic clergy. You'll notice that I've chosen to speak from the heart – to speak on what I feel about all this.

I was ordained in June of 2001. Within a few months came the terrifying, catastrophic events of September 11th that year. Here I was, a new priest trying to help people struggle with tragedy and the meaninglessness of the evil that was done. If there was one, tiny hopeful thing it was that, as a priest, I could offer comfort, insight and help for the hurting People of God.

Then came another date that I will always remember: January 6, 2002. It was this day that the Boston Globe published their first story of many on the unbelievable number of innocent children sexually abused by priests; and, to make matters even worse, what appeared to be a cover-up on the part of the hierarchy. Known offenders were shuffled around to other parishes where they abused more innocent children. Even in Mt. Pleasant/Charleston, where I was assigned at the time, it made everything different. It came up in conversation over and over, and there was nothing that I could say to help. I saw and felt people's rightful anger. If I'm honest, even though I was still a "young priest," I stayed away from youth ministry so people would have no questions.

Time went on and it seemed the whole Church, including the incredible Catholic faithful, wanted to put it behind them. After all, we learned from it, right? The Church in the U.S. issued the Dallas Charter in June of 2002, which strictly outlined how to deal with priests who abuse. We instituted programs like VIRTUS (now Safe Haven) and did thorough background screenings of all seminarians, priests, employees, and even volunteers who might have any contact with children or vulnerable adults. Our own Diocese of Charleston went through an honest assessment of the past and revealed all the skeletons lurking in the closet. Shedding light and being upfront and honest, we thought, would heal. It seemed that, even while the Church in other countries was coming to terms with the breadth of the scandal, we were going to move on.

I don't recount the above for any sympathy whatsoever. I just want you to know that I, too, was personally appalled and deeply affected by what happened.

Three recent reports have brought everything back anew and, if I dare say, shed light on things that were never dealt with, not the least of which is the culpability of our bishops. The huge scandal in Chile of another bishop covering up abuse began to remind everyone that it is not over. Back in the U.S., while the Dallas Charter had laid out rigorous guidelines on how to deal with priests who abuse, the Charter did not deal with bishops, which was considered a matter for the Holy See. Then it was revealed that former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick himself had abused seminarians. Within a few days, I read with tears that he abused a young man he had baptized. And then this past week, an 887-page report was released on six Pennsylvania dioceses covering 70 years and implicated more than 300 abusive priests with over 1,000 (probably many more) victims. It just seems to get worse the more I read.

The word “scandal” comes from a Greek word that literally means “stumbling block.” This scandal has indeed been a stumbling block for many good, faith-filled Catholics, and for others who might have considered the Catholic faith. It has been pointed out that “it’s a very small percentage of priests,” “most abuse happens with family members and close friends,” “most priests are very faithful,” and “almost all these allegations were decades ago,” but I don’t think you, the People of God, want to hear these things, certainly not as excuses. Why did any of them happen at all?

What I do want you to know is that I am horrified and dismayed by what I read. It is unfathomable to me as a priest to think that *any* of my brother priests, no matter how “small” a percentage, could think to hurt anyone, child or adult. The only acceptable percentage of errant clergy in this grave matter should be 0%. Yes, we are all sinners, but this goes beyond simply striving to be holy and missing the mark.

Once on an unrelated subject, but which can easily be applied to this, I was told, “Father, I know this is not your fault, but it is your problem.” I have a few ideas on how I/we can move forward, but I’m open to your ideas. I want you to love your Church. I want you to feel that you can come, be nourished with the Bread of Life – Jesus Christ, and that you and your children are not only safe but loved and valued above all things.

Above all, even though it will be painful, I firmly believe that the truth will set us free (John 8:32). Light must be shed on all of it if we hope to truly heal and move forward. Accountability must be for everyone – priests, laity, *and* bishops this time. I know that Bishop Guglielmone will be issuing his own statement, perhaps even by this weekend. Like you, I look forward to hearing his perspective. In the meantime, I plan to personally fast and pray weekly for the healing of all these victims. I will fast and pray for the healing of our whole Church, so that she may become – through penance for the sins of her priests and bishops – a true beacon of the light and hope of Jesus Christ for this world in desperate need of His unselfish love.

Yours truly in Christ,

Rev. Gregory B. Wilson
Pastor