

One of the things that is causing questions and confusion among Catholics is the recent incidents of sexual abuse of minors by clergy. Over the past two years we have all been reading and hearing about this crisis in the media. There it has been covered with varying degrees of accuracy. Jesus words in today's Gospel about leading little ones astray which is to say scandalizing others and questions many have asked about this situation lead me to speak about it today.

It seems to me that there are two issues in this crisis. The first is what was done. It is labeled "pedophilia", sexual abuse of pre-pubescent children, despite the fact that most of the cases and allegations against the priests in question actually involve teenagers. I prefer to use the term then "the sexual abuse of minors" to describe what has happened.

Pope John Paul II has called this abuse a "crime" and a "sin". I agree with him. It is a crime because human society has seen it to be so offensive to the human person and human society that they have made laws against it. Those who break such laws must take responsibility for it. You may be aware that here in Connecticut we who are clergy, pastoral ministers, teachers or medical professionals are "mandated reporters". This means that we must under penalty of law report any cases of physical, sexual or psychological child abuse within 24 hours to the civil authorities. I want to assure you that here at Sacred Heart we take this very seriously. We will report any such situations we discover for the protection of our children.

Sexual abuse of minor children is also a sin because it goes against the way God wants us to live. It offends the dignity of the human person and the sacred gift of human sexuality with which God has gifted each of us. It wounds and takes advantage of one who is vulnerable. In our tradition we believe that all sin can be forgiven if the sinner is sincerely sorry, repents and take serious steps to change his/her sinful behavior. Forgiveness is even possible for those who sexually abuse children under these conditions.

Pope John Paul however left out one thing I would add to the description of sexual abuse of children. In addition to being a crime and a sin, it is also a serious and mysterious mental illness. The Church along with the rest of society are learning more about what this mental illness is (indeed what mental illness is at all) and how it operates especially in the past 30 years or so. Serious mental illness needs serious psychological treatment. The abuser has broken appropriate human boundaries in relationships. They need

treatment and support and they need to be held accountable for their behavior. They may be forgiven if they are sorry, repent and work for change. They may still have gifts to offer to the community, but that can never be within a ministry that gives them access to children for, like alcoholism, pedophilia cannot be cured.

The sexual abuse of minor children is indeed a very complex crime, sin and mental illness. It is not given to the simplistic solutions that we read of in the letters to the editor or hear in TV sound bites. And priests, though called in a particular way to serve and lead others to holiness, are still human persons. Sometimes as a result of inappropriately exalted ideas about the person and status of priests we can forget that they are subject to crime, sin and mental illness like anyone else.

The second issue in this crisis is how some Church leaders handled the sexual abuse of minor children by some priests. Some kept silent sometimes out of respect for the victims who did not want to be publicly named. Giving them the benefit of the doubt some Church leaders actually believed they were serving the best interests of the Church, the priests and the victims. In hindsight we now know that this was a grave mistake. Such a response actually served the best interests of no one. In some cases it has been shown that Church leaders knew that certain priests were child abusers and they transferred them from parish to parish in response. This is a sin of the highest order because they failed to do what Jesus would have done. As a church we are called to act as Jesus would act. We are to take our queues from Jesus rather than from lawyers or insurance companies. Jesus and the solid teaching of the Church call us to have a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. And who is more vulnerable than a child who has been taken advantage of?

How could they do this? That is a very legitimate question for us to ask. It is difficult to answer but one image has been helpful for me in trying to understand such behavior. It is the image of the dysfunctional family. Dysfunctional families are families who live with pain and they never treat it but get used to living with it. Dad is an alcoholic; Mom is verbally or physically abusive; a family member is a substance abuser; there is ongoing infidelity in the marriage etc. and no one talks about it. Everyone knows about it and it negatively affects the family and its members. It is the proverbial elephant in the room. The family accommodates to the painful activity and acts like this is a normal way to live. But living this way is not

normal and it ultimately corrodes family life and relationships and scars family members. In some ways the Church is like a dysfunctional family. In some instances the Church seems to have gotten used to operating in a certain way over the ages and we think that is normal for us. Bishops and priests make all decisions. Much of the decision-making process is secret. There is a certain sense of entitlement as if we are different because we are the Church and therefore do not have to act like everyone else is expected to act. We need to protect our own and avoid scandal for the Church at all costs. We may even view those who raise questions or bring difficult situations to our attention as our enemies.

I was with my priests support group recently and one of them noted that if only those bishops and Church leaders had followed the teaching of Vatican II structures would have been in place to help us avoid this situation. There might have been a review board made up of more than priests to help the bishops in question make decisions about priests who abuse minor children. There might have been parents on those boards who would have been more attentive and sensitive to the needs of children than a group of priests who are not parents. There might have been lay professionals on that board who had studied this crime, sin and mental illness and would have been better equipped to recommend appropriate measures for the perpetrators. Such boards might also have advised the bishops better about their civic accountability in such matters.

This crisis situation reminds us again that the Church needs to change the way it operates. I believe that this is a time of great, if very painful, purification. It is somewhat like the Reformation in that way. Crisis always holds the opportunity for change and growth as the Church did in response to the situations that gave rise to the Reformation. I believe that God's Holy Spirit can do and is in fact doing something good in all this pain and struggle. As God's Holy Spirit, always with the Church, moved the Church to serious even structural change throughout history that same Holy Spirit can do the same thing with us today. The Church can be moved and shaped to be more of a community in which the mind and heart of Jesus prevail, in which the needs of the poor and the vulnerable are given highest priority, in which the gifts of all people are recognized, revered and incorporated into the life and decisions of the Church at all levels and situations. Such change can help to assure that these horrible situations will not be repeated in the future. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is working

hard on this issue as we speak. Let us keep them and our whole Church in prayer so that we may be open to where God's Spirit is leading us.

But what can we do here within Sacred Heart Parish? I suggest several ways in which we can respond to this current crisis in the Church.

I believe that we must be in solidarity with those who suffer from child sexual abuse, with the victims and their families. I realize that some of you may have suffered from physical or sexual abuse in your life and that the recent attention of the media may have stirred that memory and experience in you. I am willing to be helpful to you in any way I can. I am also in contact with mental health professionals to whom I can refer you if your wish.

In accordance with the "Charter for the Protection of Children" we have been mandated by the Archdiocese to do background checks on all staff and volunteers who have regular contact with children. We are doing that to assure you that your children will be safe and secure in our parish programs.

I believe that the Church needs new structures not only to insure that these horrible things do not happen again, but also new structures that call for the participation of diverse people in leadership and decision-making in the Church. The gifts of all need to be recognized, respected and used for the good of the mission of the Church. We will be trying to do just that in our parish. We are restructuring our parish Pastoral Council to enable it to reflect the insights and perspectives of more people of our parish. We had a wonderful Pastoral Leadership Gathering yesterday morning at which we shared our reflections about the blessings and challenges for Sacred Heart Parish. But we also need to be part of movements for such changes in the larger Church too. We love the Church and all people who love the Church want her to grow and be effective in continuing the work of Jesus in the spirit of Jesus.

I believe that we need to be a humble Church. We cannot look at ourselves as better than or above others. We are not here to lord it over others and to tell them what to do. We are called to serve the rest as Jesus reminded his disciples when they had lost sight of that truth. It is a reminder we need to hear again and again as the Church journeys through history.

Some might suggest that the Church can no longer preach and give credible witness to the truths of the Gospel and to the social teaching of the Church. Some would say our voice speaking out for the value of human life and the dignity of all persons, for the needs of the poor and vulnerable, for the values which Jesus taught is no longer credible. We must not back away from this essential part of our preaching of the Gospel now. It is all the more important to recognize that the good work of the Church still needs to continue and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ still needs to be proclaimed. I believe that we also as a Church need to reinvest in the virtue of chastity and that we need to be chaste people. Chastity is the virtue that helps us to appropriately order the expression of and experience of our human sexuality according to our state in life. Whether married or single, divorced or widowed we are as disciples of Jesus called to express our sexuality in certain ways. Chastity is a virtue that our American culture, long given to doing whatever feels good, neither supports nor encourages. We need to witness to and teach our children the true value of being sexual persons and of being chaste in the ways we express our sexuality.

Some people are saying they will leave the Church or at least not contribute to the ministries of the Church any longer. Think about that. Who will suffer as a result of such a boycott? The poor and vulnerable who depend on the charitable ministry of the Church: the elderly, the uneducated, the homeless and hungry etc. We need to assure that the good works of the Church continue and thrive. Stopping such contributions is not an effective response to this crisis.

Some people have expressed their concern about how I was doing with all this. "What's it like to be a priest these days, Father?" I have truthfully felt embarrassed – not embarrassed to be a priest for I truly love this ministry. I am rather been embarrassed for the priesthood and for the Church. I feel betrayed by some of my brother priests who have done this and by some bishops in the Church who handled it so inappropriately. I feel sad about the whole situation and I feel angry about it. But I also feel hopeful for I truly believe that God's Holy Spirit can do make something good from this sad and tragic experience. And it will happen because good people who love God and love the Church remain committed to making the Church better express what Jesus meant us to be. Jesus words speak to this point. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in me." Let us together reaffirm our faith in Jesus Christ!