

5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER – C (May 2, 2010)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

Even though we continue our Easter season celebration of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, our readings today give us at least a hint of the Cross as well. In the first reading, Paul and Barnabas reminded the other disciples that "it is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God", while the gospel begins with a brief reference to that shadowy and tragic figure of Judas—the one who betrayed Jesus. It is hard to avoid thinking about betrayal and the cross when considering the renewed focus on priest and religious sexual abuse of children, especially as it has become known in Ireland and other places in Europe. We are all too aware of this scandal in our own country; it was in 2002 when this issue exploded into public consciousness. But the stakes seem even higher now on a more worldwide level; charges of negligence have even been raised against Pope Benedict when, before his election as pope, he served the Church under Pope John Paul II. Unsavory as this topic is, we have to confront it once again.

The first thing that must be said: this scandal is all too real, it is ugly, and it involves one of the most grievous sins imaginable—the abuse of innocent youngsters by those who were ordained or consecrated to the service of God and the Church. We can complain all we want about media bias against the Catholic Church, and there is no doubt whatsoever about the existence of that bias. But there is no denying the reality of the scandal and its horrific nature. For the last couple of years I have been the priest representative on our Archdiocesan Review Board for Sexual Abuse of Minors by Clergy and Other Church Personnel. This Board's main tasks are to review and revise archdiocesan policies in this area, review allegations of sexual abuse and make recommendations to the archbishop regarding fitness for ministry in specific cases. This means that at times we hear or read statements from victims what a particular priest or religious did to them when they were minors. All I can say is that it is positively sickening to learn about these unspeakable evils.

And what the Church in the United States has learned over the last several years, the Church in Ireland and the rest of Europe is now learning for themselves: some bishops (not all by any means, but some) were woefully lacking in responding to this abuse when they learned of it. Whether they sincerely relied on faulty psychological advice or simply because they wanted to avoid public scandal, some bishops did little or nothing. In his recent letter to the Church in Ireland, Pope Benedict specifically addressed the bishops there in the strongest papal language I have ever seen: "It cannot be denied that some of you and your predecessors failed, at times grievously, to apply... canon law to the crime of child abuse. Serious mistakes were made in responding to allegations... grave errors of judgment were made and failures of leadership occurred. All this has seriously undermined your credibility and effectiveness." The Holy Father's words are all too true.

So where are we now and how do we respond? In the highly-charged emotional atmosphere surrounding this issue, we need to keep in mind a few realities. First of all, some are charging the pope himself with being less than diligent in his treatment of these cases when he was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Pope John Paul II. The facts are: prior to 2001, the Vatican was rarely involved in handling cases of priests accused of sexual abuse. That was because it was the local bishop's responsibility to deal with those cases and accusations; and as we have learned all too well, some of those bishops did little or nothing that was necessary in response to those claims. In 2001, Pope John Paul gave to the office of Cardinal Ratzinger (he who is now Pope Benedict) the responsibility of handling these cases. Since 2001 and up to his election as pope in 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger presided over those cases and established strict new norms. And as pope, he has certainly been in the forefront in responding to the crisis; we recall, for example, his personal outreach to abuse victims in his visit to the United States in 2008 and his very recent visit to the island nation of Malta.

But what about the larger issue here: how do we approach or think about the Church—is she truly the Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ, or is it just an empty, hypocritical shell? In the aftermath of this scandal many have left the Church, disgusted with what has come to light. On one level, that is an emotional, a visceral response that is not difficult to understand. But we also need to think, to keep some perspective in mind here as well and not let our emotions take complete control. For one thing, we need to remember that while the Church is surely of divine origin (specifically established by Jesus Christ himself), it also has its human element. And that human dimension has always been a problem and a source of scandal to greater or lesser degree. That started with the apostles themselves: Peter who three times denied even knowing Jesus, Judas who betrayed Jesus for a few coins, and the others who showed their “less-than-perfection” in a variety of ways. Later on in Church history, some of the bishops and popes (e.g. in the 10th and 16th centuries) were rather pathetic examples of immorality and lack of holiness in a variety of ways and caused great scandal and confusion in their own times.

It is a sad reality that sin and corruption have been present in the Church from the beginning; there is hardly anything new there. But who ever said that the Church in its human dimension would ever be perfect or sinless? Yes, Jesus’ call to perfection was crystal clear—but who in this earthly life (other than Jesus and his Blessed Mother) has ever fully lived it? Vatican II reminds us of this in saying that in the model of Mary the Church has reached that perfection while the rest of us who are “followers of Christ still strive to increase in holiness by conquering sin.” The Church is not a museum of faultless saints; rather, it is a hospital for sinners who need the merciful healing of God that comes through the risen Christ and especially the sacraments he entrusted to his Church. And that hospital is for every single one of us—we all must rely on the loving mercy of God, no matter how more or less serious our sins may be. After all, when we each face the judgment seat of God at the moment of death, we will each have to answer for how we have lived our own lives. We will not have the luxury of saying: “But Lord, the sins of those abusers were so much worse than mine!” Make no mistake: they will surely have to answer to the Lord for their horrible crimes. But we will each have to answer for our own sins, and we will not be allowed to pass the buck.

No, we cannot ignore the scandal of sin in the Church—in her leaders and in us who are her members. However, we can no less ignore the goodness, beauty and truth to be found in the Church—all of which exist and are shown in so many ways when we seek and respond to the grace that God always makes available to us. If the believing Catholic must acknowledge the scandal of sin in the Church, the anti-Catholic or atheist must likewise acknowledge the saints and all the works of love, justice and mercy that have been done by them and others precisely because of their and our faith. One fairly recent convert to the faith put it this way: “The Catholic Church is more than this scandal. I, for one, want to help serve with a church that has done more to help the sick, poor, hungry, suffering and forgotten than any other group in recorded human history.” In the current issue of the Witness is this powerful testimony of someone else newly-confirmed: “I did not join the Catholic Church because of its clergy; I joined because I believe it’s the true...Church founded by Christ and handed over to St. Peter....The traditions, the doctrines and the mission of the Catholic Church remain the same and have remained the same since Christ, in his grace, first instituted it.” These two folks nailed it. They know that the Church includes sinners, but that the Church is so much more—infinately more—than the sins of her members and even of her leaders.

So: can we live with a sometimes messy Church or do we leave her, a church that will sustain and strengthen us one day but then scandalize and disgust us the next when we learn of the sins and crimes of those who abuse their authority? You might as well ask if we leave our family when a spouse, parent or child hurts us, or if you ever leave yourself (so to speak) when you get angry at yourself. Maybe the better question is: could Jesus live with a sometimes messy Church? That is very easy to answer: yes, he could; yes, he did; yes, he does. And therein lies our hope. In coming into our world as man, the Son of God did not make us perfect or sinless; he did not take away our free will or our capacity to mess

things up big time. Moreover, Jesus immersed himself in our human messiness—that is precisely what led to his betrayal by Judas, his arrest, torture and execution. And it is precisely through this Paschal Mystery that Jesus gives us through his death and resurrection the possibility to receive his grace and forgiveness and to rise above our sinfulness—but he will not force us to do so.

In our second reading from Revelation, the risen Christ on the heavenly throne said: “Behold, I make all things new.” Do we desire that newness in ourselves? That is where renewal in the Church has always begun, and it is where it needs to begin again now—in ourselves. As we pray and work for justice and healing for all victims of abuse and as we pray for all needed conversion of their abusers, let us remember to pray and work for our own repentance and conversion so that Jesus, our risen Savior, may use us in his work of ongoing renewal.