

One Priest's Answer to the Scandal

Homily by Father Roger Landry given 2/3/2002 at the Parish Church of Espirito Santo, in Fall River, Massachusetts.

The headlines this past week did not focus on the Patriots' march to the Super Bowl, or on who would QB, Drew or Tom, or even on the president's State of the Union address and his comment that there are many al-Qaida operatives in the U.S. like "ticking time-bombs." None of these was the top story. The headlines were captured by the very sad news that perhaps up to 70 priests in the Archdiocese of Boston have abused young people whom they were consecrated to serve.

It's a huge scandal, one that many people who have long disliked the Church because of one of her moral or doctrinal teachings are using as an issue to attack the Church as a whole, trying to imply that they were right all along.

Many people have come up to me to talk about it. Many others have wanted to, but I think out of respect and of not wanting to bring up what they thought might be bad news, have refrained, but it was obvious to me that it was on their mind. And so, today, I'd like to tackle the issue head-on. You have a right to it. We cannot pretend as if it didn't exist. And I'd like to discuss what our response should be as faithful Catholics to this terrible scandal.

The first thing we need to do is to understand it from the point of view of our faith in the Lord. Before he chose his first disciples, Jesus went up the mountain all night to pray. He had at the time many followers. He talked to his Father in prayer about whom he would choose to be his Twelve Apostles, the Twelve he would himself form intimately, the Twelve whom he would send out to preach the Good News in his name.

He gave them power to cast out demons. He gave them power to cure the sick. They watched him work countless miracles. They themselves in his name worked countless others.

Yet, despite all of that, one of them was a traitor. One who had followed the Lord, who had had his feet washed by the Lord, who had seen him walk on water, raise people from the dead, forgive sinners, betrayed the Lord. The Gospel tells us that he allowed Satan to enter into him and then he sold the Lord for 30 pieces of silver, handing him over by faking a gesture of love. "Judas," Jesus said to him in the garden of Gethsemane, "Would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?" Jesus didn't choose Judas to betray him. He chose him to be like all the others. But Judas was always free, and he used his freedom to allow Satan to enter into him, and he ended up betraying God and getting him crucified and executed.

So right from the first Twelve that Jesus himself chose, one was a terrible traitor. Sometimes God's chosen ones betray him. That's a fact that we have to confront. It's a fact that the early Church confronted. If the scandal caused by Judas were all that the members of the early Church focused on, the Church would have been finished before it even started to grow. Instead, the Church recognized that you don't judge something by those who don't live it, but by those who do. Instead of focusing on the one who betrayed, they focused on the other Eleven, on account of whose work, preaching, miracles, love for Christ, we are here today....

The media almost never focus on the good "Eleven," the ones whom Jesus has chosen who remain faithful, who live lives of quiet holiness. But we, the Church, must keep the

terrible scandal that we've witnessed in its true and full perspective.

Scandal is unfortunately nothing new for the Church. There have been many times in the history of the Church when the Church was much worse off than it is now. The history of the Church is like a cosine curve, with ups and downs throughout the centuries. At each of the times when the Church hit its low point, God raised up tremendous saints to bring the Church back to its real mission. It's almost as if in those times of darkness, the Light of Christ shone ever more brightly. I'd like to focus a little on a couple of saints whom God raised up in these most difficult times, because their wisdom can really guide us during this difficult time.

What should our reaction be then? Two great saints who lived during difficult times can guide us in this our own difficult time.

Once, St. Francis de Sales was asked to address the situation of the scandal caused by some of his brother priests during the 1500s and 1600s. What he said is as important for us today as it was for his listeners then.

He stated, "Those who commit these types of scandals are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder," destroying other people's faith in God by their terrible example. But then he warned his listeners, "But I'm here among you to prevent something far worse for you. While those who give scandal are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder, those who take scandal - who allow scandals to destroy their faith - are guilty of spiritual suicide."

They're guilty, he said, of cutting off their life with Christ, abandoning the source of life in the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. He went among the people in Switzerland trying to prevent their committing spiritual suicide on account of the scandals. I'm here to preach the same thing to you.

Another great saint can help us further. St. Francis of Assisi lived in the 1200s, which was a time of terribly immorality in central Italy. Priests were setting terrible example. Lay immorality was even worse. St. Francis himself while a young man even gave some scandal to others, by his carefree ways.

But eventually he was converted back to the Lord, founded the Franciscans, helped God rebuild his Church and became one of the great saints of all time. Once one of the brothers in the Franciscans asked him a question. The brother was very sensitive to scandals.

"Brother Francis," he said, "What would you do if you knew that the priest celebrating Mass had three concubines on the side?" Francis, without missing a beat, said slowly, "When it came time for holy Communion, I would go to receive the sacred Body of my Lord from the priest's anointed hands."

What was Francis getting at? He was getting at a tremendous truth of the faith and a tremendous gift of the Lord. No matter how sinful a priest is, provided that he has the intention to do what the Church does - at Mass, for example, to change bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, or in confession, no matter how sinful he is personally, to forgive the penitent's sins - Christ himself acts through that minister in the sacraments.

Whether Pope John Paul II celebrates the Mass or whether a priest on death row for a felony celebrates Mass, it is Christ who himself acts and gives us his own body and blood. So what Francis was saying in response to the question of his religious brother that he would receive the sacred Body of his Lord from the priest's anointed hands is that he was not going to let the wickedness or immorality of the priest lead him to commit spiritual suicide.

Christ can still work and does still work even through the most sinful priest. And thank God! If we were always dependent on the priest's personal holiness, we'd be in trouble.

And so, again, I ask, "What should the response of the Church be to these deeds?" There has been a lot of talk about that in the media. Does the Church have to do a better job in making sure no one with any predisposition toward pedophilia gets ordained? Absolutely. But that would not be enough.

Does the Church have to do a better job in handling cases when they are reported? The Church has changed its way of handling these cases, and today they're much better than they were in the 1980s, but they can always be perfected. But even that is not enough. Do we have to do more to support the victims of such abuse? Yes we do, both out of justice and out of love! But not even that is adequate.

Cardinal Law has gotten most of the deans of the medical schools in Boston to work on establishing a center for the prevention of child abuse, which is something that we should all support. But not even that is a sufficient response.

The only adequate response to this terrible scandal, the only fully Catholic response to this scandal - as St. Francis of Assisi recognized in the 1200s, and as countless other saints have recognized in every century - is holiness!

Every crisis that the Church faces, every crisis that the world faces, is a crisis of saints. Holiness is crucial, because it is the real face of the Church. There are always people - a priest meets them regularly, you probably know several of them - who use excuses for why they don't practice the faith, why they slowly commit spiritual suicide. It can be because a nun was mean to them when they were 9. Or because they don't understand the teaching of the Church on a particular issue - as if any of these reasons would truly justify their lack of practice of the faith, as if any of them would be able to convince their consciences not to do what they know they should.

There will doubtless be many people these days - and you will probably meet them - who will say, "Why should I practice the faith, why should I go to Church, since the Church can't be true if God's so-called chosen ones can do the types of things we've been reading about?" This scandal is a huge hanger on which some will try to hang their justification for not practicing the faith. That's why holiness is so important. They need to find in all of us a reason for faith, a reason for hope, a reason for responding with love to the love of the Lord. The beatitudes which we have in today's Gospel are a recipe for holiness. We all need to live them more.

Do priests have to become holier? They sure do. Do religious brothers and sisters have to become holier and give ever greater witness of God and heaven? Absolutely. But all people in the Church do, including lay people! We all have the vocation to be holy and this crisis is a wake-up call.

It's a tough time to be a priest today. It's a tough time to be a Catholic today. But it's also a great time to be a priest and a great time to be a Catholic. Jesus says in the beatitudes we heard today, "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you falsely because of me. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward in heaven is great."

It's a great time to be a Christian, because this is a time in which God really needs us to show off his true face. In olden days in America, the Church was respected. Priests were respected. It's not so any more.

One of the greatest Catholic preachers in American history, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, used to say that he preferred to live in times when the Church has suffered rather than thrived, when the Church had to struggle, when the Church had to go against the culture.

It was a time for real men and real women to stand up and be counted. "Even dead bodies can float downstream," he used to say, pointing that many people can coast when the Church is respected, "but it takes a real man, a real woman, to swim against the current." How true that is! It takes a real man and a real woman to stand up now and swim against the current that is flowing against the Church. It takes a real man and a real woman to recognize that when swimming against the flood of criticism, you're safest when you stay attached to the Rock on whom Christ built his Church. This is one of those times. It's a great time to be a Christian.

This is a time in which all of us need to focus ever more on holiness. We're called to be saints and how much our society here needs to see this beautiful, radiant face of the Church. You're part of the solution, a crucial part of the solution. And as you come forward today to receive from this priest's anointed hands the sacred Body of your Lord, ask him to fill you with a real desire for sanctity, a real desire to show off his true face.

One of the reasons why I'm here in front of you as a priest today is because while I younger, I was under impressed with some of the priests I knew. I would watch them celebrate Mass and almost without any reverence whatsoever drop the Body of the Lord onto the paten, as if they were handling something with little value rather than the Creator and Savior of all, rather than my creator and savior.

I remember saying to the Lord, reiterating my desire to be a priest, "Lord, please let me become a priest, so I can treat you like you deserve!" It gave me a great fire to serve the Lord. Maybe this scandal can allow you to do the same thing.

This scandal can be something that can lead you down to the path of spiritual suicide, or it can be something that can inspire you to say, finally, "I want to become a saint, so that the Church can show your true face, O Lord, to the world, so that others might find in you the love and the salvation that I have found."

Jesus is with us, as he promised, until the end of time. He's still in the bark of Peter and will prevent its capsizing. Just as out of Judas' betrayal, he achieved the greatest victory in world history, our salvation through his passion, death and resurrection, so out of this he may bring, and wants to bring, a new rebirth of holiness, a new Acts of the Apostles for the 21st century, with each of us - and that includes you - playing a starring role.

Now's the time for real men and women of the Church to stand up. Now's the time for saints. How do you respond?