

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Though we knew it was coming, the release of the Grand Jury Report on the sexual abuse of children by priests throughout six counties in Pennsylvania was shocking beyond belief. Feelings of shame, disgrace, disgust, revulsion, anger, and rage overwhelmed most of us. Once again, we Catholics found our Church to be an abomination before God and man. Whose faith is left unshaken?

Reading this report, I was overwhelmed with an awareness of the pain suffered by the people who were abused as children. They had been robbed of their youth, their innocence, their trust, and even their human dignity. The fact that this suffering was inflicted to satisfy the demented, distorted lust of depraved men whom they and their families trusted—my brother priests—consumed me with shame to the very core of my being. Add to that the disgrace that so many could not get a fair hearing or were bought off into silence by many of our bishops and church leaders is unbearable to even consider.

Fifty-six years ago, when I left home to go to the Seminary to discern a call to the priesthood in the Catholic Church was considered an honor. To become a priest would be a great honor, a humbling privilege to aspire to. Recognizing that these terrible sins, these horrific crimes spilled over on me and stained all of us priests filled me with a sense of shame. All of a sudden the terrible reality that I never thought could ever happen, I realized that I was ashamed to be a Catholic priest. And I proclaimed that realization before Mass on Wednesday evening and again at Mass on Friday morning.

Then, I suggested that something radical had to change in our Church. Somehow we had to make reparation for the evil that was inflicted on the lives of those abused as children; the evil inflicted on the faith of God's people; the evil inflicted on all the bishops and priests of the church. But what could we do? God alone has the power to heal those who were abused, to heal the Church, the people, the bishops, and the priests. God alone has the power to redeem us, and he has shown that he wants to in the saving work of Christ's suffering, dying, and rising.

Then, God who gives you what you need when you don't even know that you need it stepped in—into my life anyway.

I got a call from a man named Bob a couple of weeks ago. Bob seriously ill himself with diabetes and COPD, asked me to come pray for him and his wife, Becky, who was in hospice care and dying of cancer. Bob, who is not a member of the parish, though he has family that is, had met me a couple of times and taken a liking to me, I suppose. So, I visited Becky and Bob, prayed with them and then gave absolution, communion, and anointed them with the Sacrament of the Sick.

Then, on Friday afternoon, when I got home after a long day that was hot and sticky, I was looking forward to a happy nappy in my cool, air-conditioned room. I was informed that again Bob had called and was upset. I immediately returned his call. Bob was crying. Becky was dying. I asked him how he was and Bob said, "I'll be better as soon as you get here."

I had no intention of going back out and I certainly had no desire, but, with some reluctance, I knew I had to go. I didn't take time to dress properly. Out I went in shorts and my sweaty tee shirt and drove about forty minutes to their home. When I arrived, I knocked and let myself in because Bob is barely ambulatory and Becky, of course, was bed-ridden. Bob's only remark on my attire was, "Where's your Phillies cap?"

Again, we prayed with Becky, and I talked with Bob about surrendering her and himself to the will of God, which was better than anything that he could ever hope for them. We prayed some more and I gave Bob Communion and blessed him with the Lord's peace. Finally, he relaxed and seemed to doze off. I let myself out quietly and drove home.

On the way, about five miles from home, I looked to my left and saw a horse down in a field with another horse still standing that had been pulling a large threshing machine. An Amish man and young boy were standing there, looking helpless. I thought, "What a shame." The horse was obviously overcome by the heat of the day. I felt bad but what could I do? As I drove on, I found myself passing Musser's Super Market in Buck. The light bulb went off. "Get water". I went into Musser's, bought four five-gallon jugs of water and a couple of buckets and drove back to the field. I pulled off the road, up into the field where the horse had been down, and was now standing because another couple had stopped and was hauling water from an Amish school house about a hundred yards away.

When I pulled up to the person who I thought was an Amish man, it turned out he was about a 14-year old boy, who stood there with a nine or ten year old boy. I gave the water to the boys who gave it to the horse to drink and poured it over his head and back and, then, I drove on.

Before I even got home, I realized that, for the first time in days, I was happy. I knew that I was greatly blessed to be able to bring comfort and peace into the home and the lives of Becky and Bob only because I am a priest. What a privilege! What a blessing! What a gift! I was born for this. I was called for this! I am humbled by the honor of being a priest to serve God's People in the Name of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, I realized that I am a man who cannot even stand to see an animal suffer. I had to do something for that horse. I had to help those Amish boys. That's simply who I am because of the heart that God has put into me.

No, I cannot undue the harm and evil that has been done to those who were abused as children. I cannot undue the shame that some of my brother-priests and some bishops have brought on the Church. But what I can do in reparation is to be the best priest, the best person I can be to the glory of God.

This wisdom of God, or understanding, if you will came about all because Bob called. You see, it's you, the Holy People of God, who call us to be the best priests that we can be.

However, what's true of me is also true of you. Because of the abomination our Church has become in the eyes of God and man, people will mock you and challenge you because you are a Catholic. What I say to you, accept the shame, own the disgrace, and then be the best person that you can be. Walk that extra mile with a neighbor. Reach out in love and concern to someone you know who is struggling. Forgive those who speak harshly or unkindly toward you.

Jesus showed us the way. He was a man without guilt, yet he accepted the guilt of all and was nailed to the Cross. He never did a shameful thing in his life, yet was hung like a criminal on the Cross of Calvary. He looked down from that Cross on those who reviled him and mocked him and spat on him and prayed, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

St. Paul tells us today how we will get through this: "Brothers and Sisters: Watch carefully how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, making the most of the opportunity, because the days are evil...be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father." That tells me that we need each other; we need to be together praising God, every week, not just every now and then, not just when it's convenient. That tells me that I need you, all of you, so that I can be the priest to you that you need me to be.

And this, this, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, is the best part. We Catholics above all the people on the earth profess and believe what Jesus says to us today. This is what makes us Catholics: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever."

In a few moments, I will have the unique privilege to stand at this altar, not because I am so good or holy or without sin. Rather, it is because He has called me, in all my human weakness, through His Church, in all its human imperfection, to ordination into the priesthood of Jesus Christ, to do this. Make Him, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, truly present to you, His Holy People, that He might offer Himself yet again for the forgiveness of all of our sins.

Then, a few minutes later, you will eat of the bread that is His flesh given for the sake of the world and drink of the wine that is His blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. His flesh will meld with your flesh; his blood will flow through your veins; his heart will beat in your hearts. That's what it means to be Catholic. And that's nothing to be ashamed of.

Then, transformed by this Eucharistic Presence of Christ within us, He will use our hands to reach out in love and caring to those in need; He will use our feet to carry Him to those who are struggling; He will speak words of comfort and peace and compassion that come forth from our mouths; He will cry for those who are suffering pain and loss with tears that flow from our eyes; He will proclaim truth and justice and righteousness with the courage He stirs up within us. This is what St. Paul meant when he said, "Now, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." That's what it means to live as a Catholic. And that's nothing to be ashamed of.

Don't you see? Can't you see, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ? It is through us that Christ will redeem His Church; it is through us that He will redeem the world.

Becky went home to God on Friday night. Only because I am a priest, I am blessed to have been asked to officiate at her Funeral Service next Friday. That's nothing to be ashamed of.

Thank God Bob called. Pray for Becky. Pray for Bob. Pray for those abused as children. Pray for the Church, for the Bishops, for the priests, for the faith of the Holy People of God, and please, please pray for me.