

August 17, 2018

Dear Parishioners & Friends of St. Lawrence ~

For those who treasure their faith in Jesus, and who love the Church that is his Body, these past several days have been heartbreaking ones. I myself first heard about the PA Grand Jury's report on the sexual abuse of some 1,000 children and young people by more than 300 priests over the course of 6-7 decades while making my way through the Baltimore airport on my way home from vacation. If I can borrow a phrase from Cardinal Dolan, it felt like "a kick in the gut." We who look to the Catholic Church as our spiritual home likely feel a combination of bewilderment, anger, disgust, disillusionment, and profound sadness at hearing that men who had consecrated their lives to the service of God's people as priests and religious, could betray that trust in such a malevolent and destructive way. Pope Francis has been quoted as saying that the reported abuse is both "criminal" and "reprehensible," and so it is.

I've found myself thinking and feeling many things these past few days. I feel a great sadness to think of the extraordinary harm done to children and teens—many of whom have never been emotionally or psychologically healthy and at peace since the time they were violated, which may have been decades ago. We all need to pray, first and foremost, for these victims and their families, that God will grant them the grace and help they need to find healing, and peace that will last. I feel frustrated (and rather weary, to be honest) that the Church is subject to yet another maelstrom of criticism (some of it more than justified), ridicule, and scorn—largely because the sinfulness and sickness of some of its shepherds were allowed to wreak such terrible havoc without being openly and decisively confronted. I feel angry that the media, which too often doesn't do its homework thoroughly enough and which instinctively goes after what's most salacious, is hammering the Church once again, and has very likely misread and misinterpreted the decisions of our Bishop, John Barres, during the time he was the Bishop of Allentown, PA.**

I also feel disheartened in knowing what most "people on the street" have no clue about: that for the past 15-16 years, the Church here in the United States has gone to great lengths to establish programs and protocols for the protection of children, young people, and indeed all vulnerable persons. Any of you who are employed or volunteer here at St. Lawrence in any capacity are well aware of the background checks, the VIRTUS session, and the code of conduct required of you in order to participate as an employee or minister in parish life.

Without having visited the Seminary in Dunwoodie, N.Y., in some time, I certainly presume that the care taken in screening potential candidates for the priesthood is more

assiduous than ever before. *We've been working so hard.* And the PA report in one fell swoop seems to undermine all that earnest effort on the part of so many—in our Diocese and across the country.

It's been a punishing week for the Catholic Church, for Bishop Barres, for the hundreds of priests and religious in our Diocese and the thousands around the country who are striving to live their vocation with integrity, prayerfulness, unselfishness and chastity. Without question it must also have been an especially painful week for those who were victimized in any way, and no matter how long ago . . . some wounds are so egregious that they never completely heal, and news of this sort is bound to tear them open again for the abused, and for their loved ones.

All that being said, I choose to believe with St. Lawrence and all the holy men and women of every age that *the Church is the beloved family of God*, cherished and delighted in despite the frailty of its members. We are as human a community as any other, except for the marvelous fact that the Spirit of God is alive in the midst of his people, as our constant Companion, Advocate, and Guide. God will never abandon us—no matter how often or how painfully we may stumble. That, of course, is the Good News at the heart of all Jesus proclaimed: that in spite of our sinfulness, weakness, and imperfection, God chooses *this people* as his Bride; opens his arms to forgive our sins; and walks alongside us as we make our pilgrim way to our true home.

Let us hold fast to the virtue of hope, trusting that even the fiercest of storms—whether precipitated from without or within the Church—cannot undo God's love for his people, or cause him to leave us orphaned. Let us give our hearts to prayer, *especially* for those who have been abused in any way and their families . . . *and* even for those guilty of such crimes. Let us trust that the Lord is holding us by the hand, perhaps even more tightly at this time, and promising never to let go.

Wishing you all God's peace,

Father Brian

** The Diocese has issued a statement correcting the inaccuracies in the Grand Jury's report and its mischaracterization of Bishop Barres' administrative decisions while in Allentown. Please go to www.drvc.org for the complete text.