

Sept. 15 & 16, 2018
24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

All Saints Parish, Syracuse
Fr. Fred Daley

The Crisis in our Church: Faith Without Action is Dead

Last Wednesday, Father Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll Priest, who for years accompanied the poor in Latin America, witnessed for peace in the School of the Americas in Georgia for many years, a Viet Nam Veteran, a Purple Heart recipient, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, sent me a copy of an Op-Ed he wrote concerning the sexual abuse crisis and cover-up in our Church. I would like to share with you a part of this statement:

As a Catholic priest, I did the unspeakable. I called for the ordination of women in the Church. The Vatican was swift in its response. The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith informed me that I was “causing grave scandal” in the Church and I had 30 days to recant my public support for the ordination of women or I would be expelled from the priesthood.

I told the Vatican that this was not possible. Believing that women and men are created of equal worth and dignity and that both are called by an all-loving God to serve as priests, my conscience would not allow me to recant. In my response, I felt it was also important to make clear that when Catholics hear the word “scandal” they think about the thousands of children who have been raped and abused by Catholic priests – not ordination of women...”

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Sisters and brothers, the on-going news detailing the extensive and brutal sexual abuse of children committed by Catholic priests has left us sickened and ashamed of the church we loved, trusted and have been committed to – many of us – all our lives. We weep and grieve with all who over the decades have been victimized by sexual predators within the faith community and we feel their pain as our own. Sexual abuse is a horrific crime and the horror is so much worse when committed by persons in whom society has placed its trust and confidence. Equally or even more difficult to comprehend is the culture within the Church Hierarchy (the Church’s leadership) that tolerated the abuse, left children and vulnerable adults subject to further abuse and created practices that covered-up the crimes and protected the abusers.

Most recently, with the revelations of abuse and cover-up in western Pennsylvania and elsewhere, it is becoming clear that the Boston scandal, that exploded like a time bomb because of the prophetic work of the Boston Globe in 2002, (portrayed so well in the film Spotlight) was not the exception but was normal operating procedure in the Catholic Church for decades. My guess is that the Attorney General’s investigation of the eight Dioceses of New York State, just announced, will reveal the same pattern of abuse and cover-up; perhaps even in our own Diocese... we shall see.

In the listening sessions that we held in our Parish in the past couple of weeks (summaries of which are available in the back of church) and in other conversations and reading, I take hope in the fact that the laity in the church are demanding action: transformation and accountability. As St. James puts it so well in the 2nd Reading today: “*Faith without action is dead.*” Our Parish with reform groups in the church locally, nationally and globally, demands a call to action!

There is not time in a Homily to touch on the many layers involved in this issue, but a few – clearly not exhaustive – reflections include:

1. Church leadership and the Community of the Church must continue to support victims of clergy abuse in every way possible. While financial compensation is a just thing to do and is long overdue, we must do better than mere money. A recent horror story, shared with me by another priest, involves a victim from the Ogdensburg Diocese – who had been struggling his whole life with depression and drug addiction – received a check from the Independent Reconciliation Compensation Program... overdosed and nearly died. Another priest from the Southern tier shared that he recently presided at the funeral of a victim who took his own life.
2. Abusers must be held accountable for their acts. We support the Children’s Victim Act in NYS that calls for the temporary lifting of the Statue of Limitations so that victims can have their day in court. The NYS Catholic Conference has spent millions in successful attempts to block this legislation for years – fearing that Dioceses will go bankrupt if such legislation goes through. It’s time the Church faces the repercussions of its criminal behavior, regardless of cost.
3. Bishops and Diocesan officials who through the decades covered-up this abuse must be held accountable – if we are to be transformed as a Church. It is part of the hierarchy’s great shame that they have not and often, will not willingly and fully, hear the Gospel’s call to repentance for those crimes and sins until it is delivered to the Chancery by a subpoena or grand jury. Dioceses should disclose all that they know.
4. All leaders of the Church must work to uncover and address the root causes of the sexual abuse crisis beginning with addressing the systemic ills of patriarchy and clericalism that – as Roy Bourgeois points out – are hurting the Church in so many ways. Three-fifths of Catholics throughout the world, do not have weekly Sunday Mass – because of the clergy shortage. There is something quite sick about an institution that would put forced celibacy and an all male priesthood above the Eucharist! Problems associated with clericalism and patriarchy were extensively noted in our listening sessions.
5. The crumbling of this medieval, pyramid structure of the church (Pope-Cardinals-Bishops-Priests-laity... with NO authority) can begin globally and locally right here in our own Diocese, by appointing members of the laity at every level: Seminary Review Committee, Priest Personnel Committee – to work to eradicate abuse and change culture, policies and practices. Do you think priest abusers would have been moved from parish to parish if mothers and fathers were on the Boards making decisions? I think not!

6. This weekend, Dioceses across the Nation have asked that Parishes pray, fast, and do penance in the midst of this crisis. What many have said to me is it's time for the priests and bishops and cardinals – the Hierarchy – to do penance with fasting and prayer – NOT the laity! America Magazine, the Jesuit Weekly, in a recent editorial stated:

“Imagine a publically declared day of fast and penance for bishops and priests, on which bishops and other ecclesial leaders humbly prostrate themselves and listen in silence to the testimony of the Faithful. Imagine a simultaneous Act of Contrition by bishops and priests in their own names and on behalf of their predecessors.”

7. While there is not time in today's Homily to address the issue in detail, it bears noting that contemporary psychological studies conclude that same-sex attraction does *not* make a person (priest or not) more likely to sexually abuse children than their heterosexual counterparts. Abuse of children and vulnerable adults is not an issue of sexual orientation but of pathology – and its denial and cover-up are issues of sin and criminal behavior. The major reason I came out as a gay priest in 2004 was because members of the Hierarchy were scapegoating gay priests as the problem ... just get rid of homosexuals in the clergy, then you've got the problem solved... an ignorant conclusion at best.

8. At the Listening Sessions, I was surprised that many of us are unaware of significant changes that were brought about in the 2002 Dallas Charter of the U.S. Bishops, following the Boston Globe revelations:

Since 2002, in EVERY Diocese in the US, if a priest is accused of sexual abuse, he is immediately suspended (meaning he cannot celebrate the Sacraments including Mass), or present himself or act as a priest by title or dress, etc. The District Attorney's Office would be notified within 24 hours and an official, legal investigation would take place. In addition, a Diocesan Panel – made-up of experts in the field, including lay people – would undertake an independent investigation. If the charge is found to be credible – the abuser is expelled from the priesthood, under a “Zero Tolerance Policy.”

More of us may be familiar with the “Safe Environment” Program in each Diocese which mandates that every employee, in every parish or school or agency, etc. who works with minor children &/or vulnerable adults undergoes a thorough background check, as well as participates in regular training related to understanding the dynamics around sexual abuse. Participants must be recertified regularly. Each Diocese is evaluated annually to determine compliance, etc.

These measures have resulted in a significant reduction in cases of abuse. Most of the cases revealed in Pennsylvania are decades old.

I'd like to end with a powerful story: One of the victims of sexual abuse in our Syracuse Diocese received a check from the Compensation Fund. He sent a check back to the Diocese requesting that a mass be celebrated in every parish in the Diocese for "Local members of the clergy who have abused and for those who have been abused." He donated the remainder of the settlement to Broome County Catholic Charities Food Pantries in Binghamton and Endicott to provide food for those in need. His letter said, in part:

"I pray that this will bring to as many people as possible, some good news, a sense of the importance of loving one another as God loves us, and reminds us of prayer and the values of forgiveness, peace and charity."

Amen!