

Homily - 4th Sunday of Easter C (Vocation Sunday)

Today we join the whole Church to celebrate World Day of Prayer for Vocations. This homily is presented in the light of the Clerical Sex Abuse scandals that have battered the Church in recent times. In this regard, in order to attract more vocations, we need to put our house in order. If one owns a house with a leaky roof, one does not simply ignore it and continue stocking it with new furnishings. Rather the person will fix the roof first before acquiring more furnishings.

In the light of our Gospel passage (John 10:27-30), who are we called to be? We are called to be in communion with God through Christ our Lord. Notice that, of all the animals and beasts created by God (Lion, Tiger, Chimpanzee, Gorilla, Wolf, etc), Jesus chose to describe his followers as “Sheep”. Why? The sheep, admittedly, is a very obedient and docile animal. A herd of sheep shows little signs of individualism. They are very social; love to live in community, nearly always grazing together. They are largely very accommodating of each other. We can say that their maxim is “together we stand, divided we fall”. Whether we like it or not, each one of us has been tainted through the abuse crises. “If oil touches one finger, it will stain the rest.” This is akin to what St. Paul tried to communicate in his discourse on the Church as the body of Christ, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1Cor. 12:26).

Many people react differently to the abuse scandal both from inside and outside the Church. The reaction outside the Church, understandably, is very hard-hitting. The world and especially the media have their own approaches and we should not blame them at all. The media, using their marketing model strategy, are only interested in “what makes news”. That a bishop gives help to an orphan is wonderful but cannot sell. “The bishop sexually touched a lady”. Great! This will make news; it will sell big time. Our own perspective as people of faith is quite different. We are the people of the Lord, the flock of Christ. Jesus declares, “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me....” How did Jesus teach us to respond as distinct from the response of the media or people of the world?

First, should we become like the Pharisee and display “a holier-than-thou attitude (cf. Luke 18:9)? Not at all! The Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector [*or this or that pedophilic priest*]” (Luke 18:11). Jesus specifically cautioned against such attitude. I was surprised when even a priest who should know better was attacking the pope suggesting he should resign. What a show of self-righteousness! This is not the right way people of faith are required to respond.

Second, should we get mad and stop going to Church? Not at all! Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice... they follow me.... No one can take them out of my hand.” Neither the culprits of the crime, nor the power of the media, nor the force of popular opinion, should make anyone fall away. That Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus did not imply that the Church ceased to exist. Christ’s sheep will continue to follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd, in his Church.

Third, should we join the world and the media to persecute the Church and attempt to stamp it out of existence? Not at all! How can people, for the sins and failings of an insignificant minority of our priests, seek to destroy the Church? What about the good done by the larger majority of Catholic priests? Paul and Barnabas, in our First Reading (Acts 13:14, 43-52),

experienced such displaced aggression. Some Jews were “filled with jealousy... contradicted what Paul said.... incited the women of prominence... and the leading men of the city... against Paul and Barnabas and expelled them from their territory.” What a lesson! Beloved, let no one use you to tear down the Church Jesus founded on the rock, Peter. Jesus has declared, “The powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

What, then, should be the proper way to respond as people of faith? First, we must turn to the Lord for guidance and direction. We need the Lord’s intervention, for “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps 127:1). Communal holy hours and adorations of the Lord, fasting and prayer and recourse to the maternal solicitude of the Virgin Mary are important.

Second, we must acknowledge sincerely and humbly that child abuse is a heinous crime an untold sickness that brings unspeakable hardship to the victims. We, nevertheless, do this in a humble manner. Yes, one could get mad and say, “This shouldn’t have happened in the first place.” Wait a minute! Would that not imply denying the reality of evil in the world? Somehow, God allows evil to exist. He could have prevented evil from existing altogether; but he did not.

Third, we must acknowledge that mistakes have been made in the handling of this matter. But, who is beyond mistakes? Let us remember that, until very recently, it was believed that pedophilia was curable. Records are there to show that some bishops did send those sick priests to therapists. If the prevailing idea were that it could not be cured, the therapists would have said so then. Certainly, some bishops tried to cover up, but not all. Some did not understand the complexity of the evil.

Fourth, as people of faith, let us not forget the injunction of Scripture: “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1). Jesus says we should handle the sinner gently, not rashly, mindful of our own weaknesses and sins. “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone....” (John 8:7). The Letter to the Hebrews says the priest is “to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness” (Heb 5:1-2). That one is not a pedophile does not imply one does not commit other sins.

A very crucial point to note is that this problem is not merely a Catholic Church problem. Statistics show that while 1.7% of Catholic priests are pedophiles, 10% of Protestant ministers are pedophiles. So it has nothing to do with celibacy. It happens in schools, hospitals, organizations, churches of different denominations, and even in families. Just today, the Boy Scouts of America were fined \$20 M over an abuse case that happened in the 1980s. The news concluded on the note that five more cases are still pending.

Finally, as people of faith, let us pray for the healing of all the victims, spiritually, mentally and morally. Let us pray, also, for the repentance and forgiveness of the sins of pedophilic priests. That is what the Gospels teach us to do. Let us constructively contribute our quota toward the enactment of civil and ecclesial laws that will avert this outrageous crime and keep our children safe. Thus, having put our house in order, vocations to the priesthood and the religious life will once again be very attractive to our young people through Christ, our Lord. Amen.