

Points of Light in the Messiness

The past month has been a very difficult and sad one for our Church, and for every Catholic. We have found ourselves once again embroiled in the horror and tragedy of sexual abuse perpetrated and hidden by clergy at all levels. And there is more to come... New York, New Jersey, Lincoln... we will be living with this horror and tragedy for a while as Diocese after Diocese turns over their records.

The apologies that have been given are the equivalent of a politician's offer of "thoughts and prayers" after a senseless tragedy. It comforts few and accomplishes nothing. The unsatisfactory response remains a tremendous stumbling block to moving forward.

How do we overcome this disconnect that we feel with the Church that we love? How do we deal with the pain and the betrayal that so many are feeling? As we wrestle with our confusion, despair and anger we search for a way forward... a way that encourages and reassures us about the future of Christ's Church... Our Church.

Messiness

Today's readings remind us that if sin is messy, Redemption involves some messiness and discomfort too. Isaiah describes a post-Eden world, crippled and thirsting for relief due to sin. He points to a sign of relief... the crippled being healed, and the land becoming bounteous once again.

St. James reminds us that our dignity is not superficial. And as believers, we are called to acknowledge that dignity with everyone we encounter. Especially in those who are hurting, confused, disenfranchised, and angry.

We are reminded that the Lord wants to heal us from our infirmities. He wants to restore our dignity... the dignity of His people... the dignity of His Church. He wants to touch us and heal us, especially the most wounded among us.

We need to focus on Christ, we need set our sights on holiness... we need to live holiness... then we must demand holiness from those around us. And to do that we need to let Jesus touch our hearts.

Think of this... In the Catholic Church, we experience God's healing touch in a most intimate and personal way. We can experience the presence and loving touch of God every day if we want to, when we receive him in Holy Communion. Jesus comes into us and fills our hearts making us more like him. It is only through him that the mess we our living in, can be used for the good and the purification of the Church.

Anchoring our hope

I would like to offer two observation on a posture that might allow us to move forward in this difficult time. Some of this has come from learning hard lessons and not meeting people where they are. Some has come with the insight of God's grace.

The truth is that defending or explaining the abuse by talking about the steps that have been taken since 2002 is not solving anything. It just makes people angry and most people don't want to hear it. The truth is they think this is just providing cover for people they see as responsible. Citing statistics and describing programs seems hollow and people don't trust them.

What we really need to do is listen... Listening opens one heart to another... we need to get where the other is coming from. We need to get messy... to face and embrace the mess... to own the mess even if we did nothing wrong. Then we need to walk with others through the mess.

Points of light – Moments of Grace

Let me start with conversations that I have had with some students. Most seem receptive to dialogue about the sexual abuse crisis in the Church. One conversation in particular stands out. I met a former student for coffee the week the findings were released. This student wanted to share that they had been offered a position in a prestigious Catholic Studies program at a prominent Catholic University. I was excited for this student, but very surprised. This person always impressed me as somebody who struggled with the Church. In theology class this student seemed to be very skeptical if not antagonistic, and I thought that the choice of the university had more to do with the prestige of the school than the fact that it was Catholic. I was surprised at how objective and open our conversation around the Grand Jury report was. Especially in light of the fact that this student's parents had spent years as advocates for victims of clergy sexual abuse. If anybody had seen the pain that the victims experience this person had... The parents were walking with victims in the mess, and that journey had taken its own toll on their faith. Yet this young person was becoming a spark in the darkness.

Our priests were amazing. Instead of simply reading the Bishop's letter, our priests took a stand. They invited those hurting to come forward with the promise that they would be heard. The pastor spoke at every Mass. The lines to speak to the priests over the last several Sundays have been long. They have met with people, they have comforted them, they have encouraged them, they have journeyed with many and they have tried to be their voice.

RCIA classes are filling up, as are Baptism prep classes and Marriage prep. I have had the opportunity to catechize people who want their children Baptized Catholic, who want to marry in the Catholic Church and who want to join the Catholic Church. In the midst of the messiness these people are still seeking the truth and drawing closer to Christ. My own parish is an amazing witness to faith and a support for the clergy... And a beacon of the light of faith in this troubled time. And all of them are well aware of how bad

the mess is... but they feel they are called to the Catholic Church, and instead of abandoning her they want to make her better.

Finally, I had the privilege to hear Fr. Guency's witness talk on his journey to the priesthood. I was struck by the support and strength of the family of faith in this tiny village in the center of Haiti. His mother and father, and six siblings built their life around the Church. That faith was strengthened by the love and support of the village community (about 1000 people) who also centered their life on the Church. They did not have a great deal materially and they lived very simple lives, but each life was interwoven with the others in the village and anchored to the Catholic Church at the center of the village. It reminded me that I live in a village of faith as well. It reminded me that The Catholic Church is my family... in good times and in bad, through thick and thin.

Questions and a call to action

Can Jesus help us to restore our voice... the voice of the faithful? Can Jesus open us to a new perception of God's grace, so that we can give voice to a new awareness and a new vigor? I think today's Gospel speaks to these questions.

The miracle in today's Gospel shows the beautiful way that Jesus treats people. He took the deaf man aside from the crowd, off by himself. He avoids the embarrassment and spectacle of the crowd by respecting where this man was coming from. He shows an incredibly tender consideration for the feelings of a man for whom life was very difficult.

We all know people who are suffering like that man. We are called to do what Jesus did... To take them aside... To listen to the pain, the anger, and the hurt... To encounter those who struggle person-to-person, and person-by-person... To walk with them... To hear them... To feel what they feel!

Jesus did not tell the deaf man or anyone who ever needed his help because they were suffering, what to think or feel about their suffering... He wanted

to know what they were thinking... What they were feeling... He invited them to share themselves with him... And then he touched them... he comforted them.

Conclusion

One of the highlights of today's Gospel is easy to overlook... The entire crowd found their voice when they heard the healed man speak.

Those hurting must speak... and they must be heard. They must find their voice... And if they cannot find their voice, we must be their voice. We must be the force of change in our Church. We must live the Gospel message publicly with passion... And we must encourage our clergy and our fellow Catholics to do the same. This is our family, and we must call our family to holiness. We must make a commitment to do as Jesus did... and then we must do that. We must show ourselves trustworthy and open to the most obstructed of hearts... To those who are hurting and those who are scandalized.

Today's readings speak to the importance of openness. Our Church needs to be open... And we must lead the way, demanding that openness. And we start by looking in the mirror. Are we open to God's call in our own life? Do others see a person trying passionately and joyfully to live the truth of the Gospel message? Do others see a person who loves Christ above all else? A person who is willing to do whatever it takes to follow Christ?

Are we open to others? Are open especially those who are hurting and those who have lost faith? Are we willing to walk with them? To stand with them as they go through the mess?

We are reminded by Isaiah not to lose heart, and to always remember that God will come to his people. He has come to us in the person of Christ on this very altar... He is with us today... He is with us every day. Let us be with him.