

An Open Letter from One Catholic Priest to All Other Catholic Priests

The Need for the Revelation of Truth Concerning the Priest Sexual Abuse Scandal

December 6, 2010

Dear Brother Priests,

Soon after Christmas 2009 a group of priests here in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee met to begin what has become an effort to provide some pastoral outreach to victim/survivors of sexual abuse of minors by priests. Quickly we expanded our group to include some victim/survivors and others who support them. Together we initiated an ongoing series of simple candle vigil services for prayer and talking. The effort is making a difference.

A question that is asked by some victim/survivors is where have all the good priests been? No doubt our presence now is warmly appreciated, but this challenging question has caused me to reflect on my own accountability. During my homily on the weekend of November 13 & 14, I explained that I had not been where I should have been. I was not standing with people in pain who needed the public presence of a priest. I had been inattentive when I should have noticed. I apologized. Of course, I cannot reverse time, I told my parishioners, but I can be different going forward, especially by standing publicly with those who seek the revelation of the complete truth regarding the priest sexual abuse scandal in the Church. The reaction of my parishioners has been powerfully supportive.

Surely, everyone wishes that this crisis would be resolved for the good of all. Unfortunately, however, I find that some people are saying that the victim/survivors should simply forgive and move on with life. Yet such an expectation overlooks what seems to me to be the necessary sequence of events for forgiveness and peace to happen: (1) knowing and understanding the whole truth; (2) doing justice based on the whole truth; (3) allowing healing to blossom over time; (4) then granting forgiveness that releases one from bondage; and (5) finally welcoming the peace that comes from healing and forgiveness.

What has caused me to be more attentive now to this scandal and crisis? Listening to and being moved by the stories that I hear. These stories can be discomfiting but they are part of the truth needing to be revealed and understood. Here is some of what I hear.

1. Sexual assault is violent, at times causing bleeding. The word blood captures me. However, what is more captivating is to hear victim/survivors say that as agonizing as the assault was, the reaction of the Church has been more traumatic. They loved the Church and were involved in the Church (which probably is why they were available to be preyed upon), but the Church wasn't there for them in their need.

2. Many people, from victim / survivors to parishioners in the pews, have left the Church because of the priest sexual abuse crisis, and that is true scandal. Moreover, some of these people who are disconnected from the Church would like to be reconnected, but the absence of truthfulness and accountability stops them.

3. Many victim/survivors “lost their voice” and can’t speak about what happened. They depend on others to speak for them and to cry out on their behalf.

4. Some victim / survivors and their families not only were not believed they were tormented by some clergy and laity such that the families decided to move to a different parish (if they remained in the Church), or even to a different city.

5. A prevailing question is why is it so difficult for the Church to reveal the truth?

I see four positive results coming from the complete truth being available to all people.

1. The truth would complete the puzzle so that the picture can be seen clearly, both validating the stories of the victim/survivors while also clearing the names of the innocent.

2. The truth would help create accountability for what happened.

3. The truth would empower the laity and the clergy alike to become the seedbed from which can come forth justice, healing, forgiveness, and peace. This effort needs the people in the pews but first they need to know the truth.

4. The truth would provide the energy to generate necessary changes in the Church.

My brother priests, obviously the revelation of the truth is not forthcoming easily, but we can be the catalyst for change. We have been sent into the Lord’s vineyard with a mission to provide voice and witness to all that Jesus Christ is about. I trust that you will do all that you can to help bring about a grace-filled resolution to this crisis and scandal. And, as I say, we need to do this in a vocal and public way.

I suggest that this Christmas season we raise our united voices in calling for the necessary sequence of truth, justice, healing, forgiveness, and peace, regarding this most difficult challenge in the Church. Indeed, doing so in this season of peace would provide a route to peace for all who suffer in any way because of sexual abuse of minors by priests.

Let us always embrace the words of the Lord: fear not; the truth will set you free.

Sincerely in Christ,

Rev. James Connell

Sheboygan, Wisconsin