

THE CHURCH, SIN, AND RECONCILIATION

Last week I had breakfast with a husband and wife who I've known for over thirty years from my time as an associate at their parish. We get together a couple of times a year to catch up and talk about life. This breakfast coincided with the revelations from Pennsylvania about the thousands of cases of sexual abuse perpetrated for decades by over 300 priests and covered up by their bishops. I put these two events together because two sons and three nephews of these friends with whom I shared a meal that morning were abused as teenagers over thirty years ago by their parish priest who I had succeeded at the parish.

These five boys—now young men—had never spoken about what they had suffered until nearly twenty years later, when a charge of abuse was leveled against this priest who had gone on to be an associate at another parish and then a pastor. That priest had remained a close friend of both families through all those years, and it was only after his behavior was brought to light by a young person in his current parish that these five young men were able to tell their stories—first to their parents, then to Archdiocesan officials. This was, to say the least, devastating to so many—the families themselves, the parishioners at three parishes and the many friends who really never suspected that such evil could walk among them, disguised as friendship.

Unlike the recent cases revealed in Pennsylvania and so many others throughout the country at that time, this priest's behavior wasn't covered up by the Archdiocese of Chicago. The single accusation that unearthed all the previous cases of abuse—many, many more than the cases of my good friends—led to this priest's immediate removal from his parish and eventually from the priesthood; that was at least a small consolation to those who had suffered because of his sins. And all that the parents and the young men—all of them, still my friends—asked of the Archdiocese was to provide them with free counseling for as long as they felt it necessary, and that is what the Archdiocese has offered them for over a decade. I point that out, not so much to praise the response of the Archdiocese of Chicago in this instance, but to acknowledge the acceptance of responsibility that the Church in Chicago finally arrived at after so many missteps and apparent cover-ups—very much unlike what has now been uncovered in Pennsylvania.

I've been in awe of the faith that my friends have retained through all of this. Their faith in the Church was certainly shaken, but their faith in God has remained strong; I gave communion to many of them recently at the funeral of a young woman whose brother had been abused by the same priest. And I'm eternally grateful that these friends never painted with a broad brush all the priests they have ever met, and so have remained my good friends for these thirty-plus years.

There is and always be, sin in the world. There is, and sadly, probably always will be, sin in the Church. That is not to say that sin in the Church, especially among church leadership, can ever be excused and most certainly must never be ignored or casually dismissed. But the culture of protection that shielded sexual predators in the past has, as far as I can tell, been eliminated in the Church of Chicago. That doesn't mean that anything so tragic will never occur again; but if and when it does, I feel confident that all the safeguards are in place to deal quickly and decisively with the perpetrators so that serial predators will never again be given free rein to abuse children and destroy lives.

And that brings us to reconciliation. There is no benefit to anyone, ever, in holding on to the hurts of the past, however deep those wounds may be; my friends are witnesses to that truth. For our God, reconciliation is always the last word for those who open themselves to that gift and are willing to accept God's grace. As St. Paul says, "where sin abounds, grace abounds even more." We've seen far too much sin in the Church for too many years. All the more reason to pray for the grace of reconciliation, stronger faith, and firm hope for a Church that must always acknowledge sin but can never lose sight of the promise of Jesus that he is "with us always, to the end of the age."

Fr. Bob