

Dear Parishioners,

In recent weeks, there have been demoralizing news stories about sexual misconduct by a Cardinal in the United States and more stories as a Grand Jury in Pennsylvania released its report on sexual abuse in six dioceses. While both of these stories offer details of incidents that are decades' old they once again open up many feelings. Additionally, the "Me-Too" movement has opened awareness of another layer of sexual misconduct in our society and that will I believe this will need to be addressed by the church.

I have had a number of parishioners ask me about all of this and so I have decided to write this lengthy letter to you. I am not speaking from the pulpit for three reasons: This ensures that every Mass participant has the chance to receive this and not just those at the Masses I am celebrating; it ensures a clarity that is necessary; and my desire to have the Sunday homily address the scripture and its application in our lives. I also am conscious of the presence of small children at Mass. By putting this in writing, I can address you more freely as your pastor.

What I want to share with you today are my own feelings and history on this subject; my sense of pain for all victims of sexual misconduct; and what I suspect the future might offer.

Let me begin by saying that I feel angry and betrayed. I grew up in a Catholic household, was involved in my parish, and went to Catholic schools. Like many people, I had no awareness of this ugly side of the human condition. The priests, religious brothers, and priests who I encountered were people I admired. As I got older, I was aware of their human frailties but never was aware of this sin. As the seventies came, I was aware of men and women leaving ordained or consecrated ministry to marry. Yet in all of this, I saw only two cases of physical contact – a sister hitting a child for misbehaving and a Christian Brother slapping a kid. Of course, at the time I did not even identify this as physical abuse. I never heard of any case of sexual misconduct.

In 1982, I entered the seminary without any knowledge of these sins. It was in the seminary that I first became aware of this ugly reality. The National Catholic Reporter ran an expose of a priest in Louisiana who hurt boys. At Mundelein Seminary there was man studying for the Archdiocese of Chicago who befriended some of the High School students who worked at the seminary. Another seminarian was concerned that something was not right and he went to the seminary authorities with his suspicions. At some point, the rector of the seminary dismissed this seminarian. We found out later he was ordained a priest for a diocese in California and subsequently served time in prison for sexual abuse.

Generally, however, I experienced Mundelein Seminary to be a healthy place. Again, I certainly was aware of the humanity of my fellow seminarians. We did have an honesty about many issues, including human sexuality, and with the exception of that one incident, I mentioned in the previous paragraph I never noticed anything that would be construed as criminal. I believed my classmates and I were striving to live honest celibate lives. On the day I was ordained I could not imagine that this ugliness would be part of the story of the church. I was wrong.

I was thrown into this world of sexual abuse in my first assignment. The story is too long to detail but a trusted layman, married with three children, turned out to be a serial pedophile. In 1987-88, this story was in all the newspapers. This individual, in his role as scout leader, catechist and coach, molested dozens of boys over many years. It shattered my own innocence.

In my thirty-two years of priestly ministry, I have witnessed the removal of over fifty priests in the Archdiocese. Like you I have lived through the Dallas Charter of 2002 that implemented reforms; with the false accusations against Cardinal Bernardin and Father O'Connell; real accusations against clergy. On three occasions, people have told me of past abuse at the hands of former priests (In all cases I duly reported as required!). I even had the horrible experience of a priest in another diocese whose name was Michael Foley being removed and people thinking it was I. I have seen the pain on parishioners' faces. Like you, I have many feelings. Let me share just a few. Some may be your feelings as well.

- Anger: I am angry with those who would hurt young people. I am angry with bishops who still do not seem to get it. I am angry with church leadership that too often approaches this legally more than pastorally. At times, I am also angry with those who do not acknowledge the steps that have been taken by the church to prevent this evil. You probably feel anger as well.
- Embarrassment: I am embarrassed for the priesthood and for the Catholic Church. This consecrated life is effective when people trust their priests and when even strangers see priesthood as something noble (not clerical, but altruistic). I am embarrassed that because of the actions of others, people may not trust me. I am embarrassed for the Faith. The church does so much good in the world and this is lost to many because of these sins. You may suffer some of these feelings.
- Sad and tired: For myself, thirty years of these stories have worn me down. Just when I am feeling okay some other story breaks. It is so tiring but never as tiring as the pain of those who are hurting.

There are many other feelings as well. I wanted to share these to give you a sense that I share much of what I feel many of you feel.

I find it helpful to remember the following truths. If we are angry, how much more anger should victims and their families feel? Their trauma is deep. If we are tired, how much more tired must victims and families feel. They often carried this pain for years. If you are embarrassed and sad, how much more should victims feel sad that a church they trusted let them down! If we feel betrayed by the church (and I do), how profound must their sense of betrayal be? If new stories of evil wear us down, let me assure you that every story opens up new wounds for those already hurting.

Since that first awareness of sexual abuse by the scout leader in my first assignment, I have had several dozen people speak to me about wounds they experienced as children or as vulnerable adults. Usually these have been at the hands of family members or adults they trusted. I am humbled by their courage. Their pain overwhelms me at times.

What does the future hold for the church? Sadly, my suspicion is that more stories will come out over the months and years. I have no crystal ball but I suspect I am correct for many reasons including ongoing litigation; the fact that in the developing world, these cases are just becoming known; and the “Me Too” movement is correctly going to shine a spotlight on sexual harassment in the church.

How will the people of God move forward? I do not know but at a practical level, I would suggest the following, at a minimum:

- We need transparency! This archdiocese is actually better than many. As ugly as facts are, they need to come to light. I think the Cardinal’ addresses this well.
- We need true accountability! Bishops and church leaders who fail in their duties should be removed from their duties. We need more lay men and women to have positions of responsibility in the church that can hold others to account.
- Those in leadership must remember whom we serve. This means that everything should be done pastorally. We are called to be a “People of Faith, not a business or legal entity.
- We need to pray for the all victims and their families. In other words, we must truly be a church.

In the end, we need Jesus Christ. We are accountable to him in all we do. He is present in the Scriptures, in the sacraments, and in the good works of the Church. I want to conclude by saying that as your pastor I am sorry for the pain that all of this causes. Please know I feel it too.

In Christ,

Father Mike