

Massgoers enter Immaculate Heart of Mary Church Aug. 19 in Abbottstown, Pennsylvania, which is in the Diocese of Harrisburg. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Rose Pacatte

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"*It is better that scandals arise than the truth be suppressed.*"

—Pope St. Gregory the Great

The news that Cardinal Theodore McCarrick had been credibly accused of sexual assault by former seminarians and young priests, followed by his resignation, left me with much sadness. I had known him when he was Cardinal Terence Cooke's secretary in the 1970s in New York. He had helped find a location for my community's Pauline Book and Media Center outside Grand Central Station in Manhattan.

Then came the Pennsylvania grand jury report issued by state Attorney General Josh Shapiro on Aug. 14. It is absolutely devastating: More than 300 priests in six dioceses in Pennsylvania were listed as convicted or accused of sexually abusing more than 1,000 minors, and then church authorities covered up the abuse and/or paid off victims' families to keep silent. (See the movie "Spotlight" for how this was done in Boston.)

The pope's response, and that of many bishops, to the attorney general's report includes a call to do penance for these sins.

But what do sackcloth and ashes look like for the clergy and those who covered up or helped cover up these criminal actions? I don't think repeating over and over again what's been done is very helpful because there is still a lack of transparency about the past. It begins with acknowledging the crime, the elephant in the sanctuary, in the first place.

On Aug. 5, the Sunday after Pope Francis decreed the death penalty as inadmissible in all cases, the deacon at the parish I attended that week preached about the decree and integrated it well with the reading from John 6:24-35 on human dignity and the body of Christ. I sent him an email thanking him, and posted this on

Facebook. Many commented that the celebrant or deacon at their parishes had also preached about it, while others noted that there had been no mention of it at all.

So, after the publication of the Pennsylvania report, I turned to Facebook once again, asking people:

> Please post if your priest, deacon, anyone mentions or prays for the victims of clergy sexual abuse scandal during the Sunday liturgy. #wecare #wearetheBodyofChrist

As of Aug. 24, there were more than 150 comments answering my query and 77 people clicked on one of the reaction buttons (like, love, sad). I'm sharing with you a sampling of the responses.

Many posters reported that priests in their parishes did preach about the crisis, and others included a reference to it in the prayers of the faithful. People who attended those churches seemed to appreciate the attention their priests showed to the situation.

> Our priest gave a homily on the abuse scandal and you could tell it was right from his heart. I thanked him. This is a little country church in Lebanon, CT.

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> Last Sunday the priest did speak about this. He said it's an abomination and that it will get worse as more information comes to light but that needs to happen so that the rot & evil gets removed. He said it's demonic and that we should consecrate ourselves to Mother Mary. This was his sermon last week and he said that he was going to go into a more in-depth sermon about this situation this week.

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> We went to St Patrick's in New Orleans and the young priest delivered a very strong homily about the abuse situation. It could not have been any stronger.

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We were blessed to have Fr. Tom Rausch, SJ celebrate morning Mass. His opening comments addressed the issue. He used such words as "anger, disappointment, embarrassed, depressed", and asked for prayers for the victims and for the Church. Our parish had copies of Archbishop [José] Gomez' 8/17 statement placed by all the doors. In his homily, Fr. Rausch said that today's readings were about unity and very much against what divides us. He also spoke of forgiveness, quoting a student of his who said, "Forgiveness is very difficult. It should not be an act given all at once. It can lose its power when it blinds us to reality." He ended by stating that today's readings "call us to unity, to create community. We need to forgive, but, can't forget that forgiveness shouldn't lack justice."



A screenshot of Sr. Rose Pacatte's Aug. 19, 2018, Facebook post

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Our Pastor did homily at all Masses and invited all parishioners to an evening of conversation this week.

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Mass today started with a letter from the regional bishop, then a powerful homily in which our former pastor called for all abusers and bishops who covered up to be removed from ministry — which got applause. Then a

special prayer instead of creed, petitions on the topic, and announcements that pointed out Cardinal [Blase] Cupich's letter and resources for victims. Well done, St. Gertrude's.

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Father Jose, the new pastor of St Charles Borromeo gave a beautiful, heartfelt and frank sermon. Said yes, it's embarrassing as a priest but nothing compares to the pain of the victims — also said that Mary is saying stop looking up at me and fix The House. Too much more to remember — but also transparency, no secrets etc.

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Yes, our pastor preached beautifully on it. About his anger, and embarrassment, about our faithfulness, acknowledging that we, the folks actually in the pews, had to answer to our families, friends, coworkers as to why we are still here, about the OLA Feast just past and how Mary and Elizabeth contended with surprise pregnancies at difficult times in their lives, how he, our pastor, wondered if the Church would be in this position if the institution had women in positions of authority. He did good.

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My pastor gave a powerful homily today rooted in his own pain over the betrayal of the People of God by priests and religious — and other staff as well when that is applicable. It recognized that all of us are victimized in different ways by pedophilia among the clergy and coverups by bishops. There was no whitewashing of the terrible betrayals involved in all of this. (N.B. at the same time, while recognizing the importance of this policy he has seen "zero tolerance" misused with an innocent priest punished after a false accusation.)

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Our pastor, who did not celebrate this Mass, addressed the congregation beforehand and expressed not only his sorrow and concern for the victims, but also referred everyone to our bishop's letter echoing the same sentiments. Then at the homily, our associate pastor described what an honor it is to say Mass and to repeat our Lord's words "This is my body..." He then expressed sadness and sorrow that so many brother priests had stepped away from the ministry he so highly values. #prayingforvictims

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In Carmelite Friary Kinsale, Co Cork, Ireland during the prayers of the faithful, the priest said we will pray for all who have been disappointed by the Church. I believe that this week in Ireland could bring great healing. Please keep the World Meeting of Families in your prayers.

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Visiting Portland, Oregon. Attended Mass Saturday evening with my daughter's family. At the conclusion the pastor came to the altar and asked everyone to be seated. He then spoke eloquently about his deep disappointment and anger at what is coming out of Pennsylvania. He said to remember always that our faith is in Jesus not the hierarchy or institution. He spoke to a crowded church reminding them that good was going on locally. He was met with loud applause. Talked to my husband later who was at home and he said he heard nothing from our parish at the mass he attended Saturday. Disappointing. So I sent an email asking that it be addressed today, Sunday. We, the Church, have to find our voice and use it over and over if need be.

Some reported that while their priests did speak about the sex abuse news, their messages didn't go far enough to address the pain caused by this scandal:

Remarks from an older priest which seemed to show more sympathy for the priests involved which brought tears and anger to me but received scattered applause from the assembly. Then the pastor read a letter from our bishop which seemed to mostly be reassurance that the diocese is

doing a good job protecting vulnerable populations.

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All the "right" things said … until he said, "It's all in the past." Not the cover-up! That was disappointing.

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Our visiting priest said he knew some of us were a little disturbed by what happened this week, but the important part was that we not leave the Church over it. I just sat there empty for the rest of Mass. ...

On a more hopeful note, a local priest from a neighboring parish set aside time this morning for anyone to meet with him at the church hall and say/ask whatever they wanted. I didn't get to attend, but I told him thank you for doing so.

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Bishops across the country also provided messages to their congregations. For instance, in San Diego, Bishop Robert McElroy sent out a letter that in at least one parish was left in the back for people to pick up. The friend who posted it wrote:

This is so very shameful. Father not only didn't mention the victims. He said "Oh — By the way, Bishop McElroy has sent out a letter, there's a copy in the back. Pray about it. Make sure to pick up a copy on your way out. That's all I have to say about that."

Others reported similar responses by bishops:

Our bishop provided an audio homily to all parishes this weekend.

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> Letter from the Bishop and other remarks from celebrant. What actually happens after this "mandatory" weekend is still to be seen.

Two permanent deacons told of their plans to address the issue:

> I am preaching this weekend. Yes, talking about what's been revealed this past month. Also praying for victims of abuse in Prayers of the Faithful. Trust me, preparing to preach on clerical abuse makes one very aware how inadequate words are. Despite the inadequacy, this needs to be addressed from the ambo this Sunday. Greeting people after Mass last night only reinforced how crucial it is to address clerical sexual abuse forthrightly

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> The general intercessions I wrote for our parish this weekend:
>
> For swift judgment in the house of God, that the Lord who casts down the mighty and lifts up the lowly will overthrow wicked and unworthy shepherds at every level in the Church and uphold trustworthy ones, let us pray to the Lord.
>
> For consolation and healing for all who have been harmed by sexual violence or exploitation in the Church, that their cries will be heard and their pain assuaged by the love of Christ in his people, let us pray to the Lord.

Some posters reported silence on the issue at Mass last Sunday:

> My parish did not address it other than to add a word in the prayers of the faithful for our leaders to lead us "through this time of crisis." I consider this appalling.

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> No mention

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> Not a word from pulpit or bulletin, nor in the prayers of the faithful.

> Let's hear words with some backbone. Let every individual cardinal, archbishop, abbot, bishop, superior say 'I am guilty; come let me wash your feet.'
>
> Tweet this

And others just wanted to express their opinions on the grand jury report. One poster said the Pennsylvania report is "an exaggerated con that worked" and thinks that since 2002 the bishops have been doing enough.

Others did not agree:

> How many years do we have to go and how many billions of dollars ... collected a dollar at a time, from so many humble, sacrificing parishioners?

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> What I find missing is action. There are a lot of words written and spoken, but what do they really mean? Actions speak louder than words. Or let's hear words with some backbone. Let every individual cardinal, archbishop, abbot, bishop, superior say "I am guilty; come let me wash your feet." To me it seems that whole affair is once again put on the good, holy priests, religious and laity to pray in reparation and to remain faithful. I support those in authority who early on felt that treatment was the answer. But now, 16 years later, why hasn't the story changed?

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> I didn't go. Not sure if I will return.

People also are conflicted about praying about this situation:

> Frankly, when I hear "let's pray about the sex abuse scandal", I get sick to my stomach. It's become a platitude, a trite remark which has no meaning, because what they're really saying is we pretend we care, but we're going to keep covering each other's ass. This pedophile cancer goes all the way up the hierarchy of the male dominated church.

My response to this:

> A prayer is at least an acknowledgement that the problem exists. This is what I was asking for — some sign that your pastor thinks it is important enough to mention or pray about. I didn't ask for "thoughts and prayer" which I cannot stand as a response anymore, either.

Finally, at the parish church where the deacon had preached on the inadmissibility of the death penalty the week before, my sister reports that the pastor read a homily that did not mention the crisis and that same deacon read the prayers of the faithful and did not mention it either. My sister was so disappointed that she wrote out a petition on the back of a receipt in her purse and pinned it to the bulletin board on the way out.

You can read all of the responses on the Aug. 19 post here.

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