News
Opinion



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by Thomas Gumbleton

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I'm sure we all sense as we heard that Gospel and reflect on the sadness of Jesus when people began to walk away, those who had followed him for a long time, many of them. He turns then to his closest friends, "Will you also go away?" You can sense the heaviness and the sadness with which he asked that question and how reassuring it was that Peter could speak up and say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Jesus was reassured at that moment.

As far as I can remember reflecting on it this week, I think there's only one other place in the Gospel where Jesus expresses extreme sadness and that's recorded in Matthew's Gospel. It's the beginning of Holy Week when Jesus, sitting on the mountainside looking down over Jerusalem, weeps. He weeps because he said, "If only you had known what was for your own good." People were deserting him at that point and he wept.

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 26, 2018

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b

Psalms 34

Ephesians 5:21-32 or 5:2a, 25-32

John 6:60-69

I can easily envision, as I presume you can too, at this point in the history of the church, that Jesus looks upon us and weeps. What else could he do with the terrible tragedies that have been exposed within our church over the past couple of weeks, but actually have been going on now for the last dozen years? There have been extreme failures in the church. What must be most distressing to all of us as Jesus looks with sadness to him, the failure of leadership in our church.

Not only were atrocities committed against children, but then bishops covered it up. That's gone on for years. We don't know where it's going to end. It's happening in the United States, not just in Pennsylvania, obviously, where that terrible report

came out, but certainly throughout this country and other parts of the world. In Chile, the whole conference of bishops resigned because of their failures. It's in Africa. It's in Ireland where the pope is today. It's a terrible failure, sin, and calamity for the church.

As we think about this and pray about this and feel the deep sorrow in our hearts that we know Jesus must feel, I think it's also important for us to reflect on what needs to be done, what has to change. In my own experience in working with survivors of sex abuse over the last ten or twelve years since I myself became a member of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, I've discovered many tragedies.

One of the things that made the crime even worse was the way the bishops reacted; and this has to change. But the bishops did, as you recall, the first thing — they turned to their lawyers. The lawyers, of course, were trying to protect the bishops, the church as they understood it, its material resources. They told the bishops, "Don't talk to any of those survivors." The bishop is supposed to be a pastor. A youngster in his diocese is wounded deeply. "Don't talk. It might compromise if this goes into court." Money was more important than children.

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Twice I visited in other dioceses families of young people who had been abused and whose lives fell apart in high school. Twice I visited families where the youngster committed suicide. The bishop wouldn't go and visit. How terrible is that? We have

to get rid of this idea that we go into court. A courtroom in our law system is adversarial. The people on the other side are your enemy. We have to beat them in court. We have to give up that notion. Bishops should be pastors, shepherds, people who love their whole flock and work for the good of the flock.

Some dioceses have begun giving up all recourse to the law and are simply trying to be pastoral. That certainly should be done everywhere in the church. The other thing that might have to be done, or certainly I think should be done is to remove the obstacle that is in the courts, of a statute of limitations. I know from my own experience that it's almost impossible for a youngster to speak about this for years. It's only gradually, and sometimes after many years, that they can come forward.

By that time, the statute of limitations prevents a courtroom recourse for the victims. That should change, but in every diocese so far where there's been an effort, including Michigan, to change the statutes, the bishops fight against it to protect, again, our wealth. To me that's an atrocity; it's evil that has to change. Within our church Catholic culture, we also have to look deeper. There are many, many facets to this problem. We can't deal with all of them today.

But, this past week Fr. Richard Rohr — some of you may know him; he's a well-known spiritual writer who everyday gives on his website a reflection on the Scriptures. One day this week he changed his usual thing and spoke about this crisis in the church. He suggests this, "This moral catastrophe first of all demands public and sincere lamentation from every segment of the Body of Christ, and only then can the deep healing begin."

So we all have to feel the deep hurt, pain, sorrow, and lament that has happened and then maybe the healing can begin for the body of the church. "It also demands public ownership, repentance and reform of our very immature teaching in regard to sexuality in general, male power issues in particular, and our 'enforced' understanding of celibacy." Here he begins to talk about our Catholic theology and says, "Celibacy is a 'charism' which means a free and empowered gift." It isn't something you train yourself to be, it's a gift that you have or do not have, a gift from God. "It is a contradiction in terms for the Catholic Church to think it can *mandate a free gift* [that God gives], which of course, has no precedent in Jesus."

He says, "It is clearly not necessary for ministry, is often even a liability, creating an aura of spiritual superiority when the exact opposite is often the case." It makes

everyone think that priests are above all the rest of the people of God and that's wrong. We are part of the people of God, wounded like every other member of the people of God, sinners like all other people of God. "Until the Catholic Church disconnects celibacy from ministry, I think we will continue to have ordained men, who are both unhappy, unhealthy, and a scandal to the Body of Christ."

But now listen carefully to this. He says, "Lest anyone think incorrectly, I am not saying that celibacy causes pedophilia, [It doesn't. A healthy celibate priest would not become for that reason a pedophile.] but I am saying that the idealized culture of celibacy allowed [this tragedy] to hide there for a long time."

Everybody thought priests are above all that. This couldn't happen. That's where he says that this evil within the church was able to be hidden because we put the priest on a pedestal, above all the rest. That was wrong.

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That's not the way Jesus gathered the church around him in the beginning. Everyone was equal and the same in the sight of Jesus, in the sight of God. There's no hierarchy. We're all brothers and sisters in Christ, and we have to make our church reflect that. So to take away this aura of superiority that celibacy seemed to give for so long to priests, is an important part of bringing about the change that we need to heal our wounds. There are so may other things that we need to do, and of course in this homily it's not possible to talk about all of them.

But perhaps one thing we need to do besides reflecting on these changes that have to come within the church and demanding that they happen, we also have to respond to Jesus, who is weeping over our church. There's a marvelous passage in the Letter to the Hebrews, in Chapter 12, that I think tells us what we need to do right now, each of us. The writer is reflecting on heaven: "What a cloud of enumerable witnesses surround us [All those who have gone before us into everlasting life, into the joy and fullness of life of heaven — they surround us, this communion of saints.], so let us be rid of every encumbrance and persevere in running the race marked off before us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus."

If we could remember that and do that — let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, try to understand what he tells us, try to take it in, and try to follow him, keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and we will find our way out of this terrible situation that is present in our church. We can bring healing and we can bring about the changes that will make the church whole, and make the church holy again. We pray for this, we ask God to make it happen, but we also take our role in trying to bring about the changes that are necessary. Keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

[Homily given Aug. 26 at St. Clare of Montefalco, Detroit, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]