News



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont) said he rarely speaks publicly about his Catholic faith, but he was so moved by an honest homily about the sex abuse crisis last week that he asked that it be entered into the Congressional Record.

After Jesuit Fr. Benjamin Hawley's sermon — which was critical of church leadership but also pondered whether the church might finally be experiencing an "appearance of dawn" on the issue — Leahy said he "wanted to stand up and applaud him," according to a record of congressional proceedings from Jan. 9.

In his Jan. 6 homily on the Feast of the Epiphany, Hawley said he found himself "seesawing between hope and doubt, between hope and fear, between hope and no hope," as he reflected on current revelations of sexual abuse and cover-up in the church.

"I want to have hope, but I have to admit that having hope is hard, sometimes nearly impossible," he said at Holy Trinity Parish in Washington D.C., where he is an associate pastor.

Hawley pondered whether "Jesus' epiphany" could be seen in the U.S. bishops' retreat outside Chicago, Pope Francis' strongly-worded letter to the bishops delivered during that retreat and the upcoming meeting of heads of bishops' conferences in Rome in late February.

Yet, he honestly admitted his discouragement at the bishops' "slow" and "begrudging" response.

"I am grateful for what the bishops and [Pope] Francis are now doing. But I keep asking myself why it takes so much external pressure to get them to do the right, decent thing that seems so obvious and not even that hard," Hawley said.

Yet, "it is going to be this hard as long as people, especially people in positions of power, make self-serving choices," said Hawley, who previously served as pastor at the student parish at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

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Still, the priest said Catholics can find hope in Jesus and Mary. "On this great Feast we can come to realize that, if you and I have to live on the seesaw, then at least we can remain anchored to hope there, because Jesus, the source of our hope, accompanied by his Blessed Mother, has the power to anchor us there in love."

Leahy said that except for sermons preached by his wife's brother, Holy Cross Fr. Claude Pomerleau, he did not remember "being so touched or affected by a sermon."

"My wife Marcelle and I, as Catholics, have shared the concern of many, whether Catholics or not, about the continued revelation of often gross misconduct on the part of some in the clergy and in the hierarchy of our church," Leahy said.

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