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Turn this dreadful moment into a graced moment

by Fr Michael Ryan

Examining the Crisis

As he read the scriptures for the Third Sunday in Easter, **Fr. Michael Ryan**, says, it was hard " not to read all this in light of what is currently happening in our church, and to express the hope that, during this current, painful crisis, our church leaders will hear Peter's words as a challenge to humbly acknowledge that, despite their intentions, instead of speaking for God they have sometimes spoken -- and acted -- all too humanly."

Following is the homily for the Third Sunday of Easter preached by Fr. Michael Ryan at St. James Cathedral in Seattle April 18.

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The preacher's challenge is to read the Scriptures not only as narratives of the past but as living commentaries on the present. God's Word is not something that was spoken long ago and eventually got frozen in print; no, God's word is alive: every bit as alive as God is, and every bit as active.

I think of this every time I prepare a homily but I thought of it more than ever this week as I reflected on the reading from Acts [Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41] and on the gospel story from John [John 21:1-19 or 21:1-14]. Both are stories of past events but both speak to this moment, too. In the reading from Acts, we saw the apostles on trial before the Sanhedrin, a body that, for the Jewish people, was like the Supreme Court. After being questioned by the High Priest, the apostles were reminded that earlier they had been strictly forbidden to teach about Jesus. Peter responded, speaking for all of them in a way that must have shocked and started the anointed leaders: "We must obey God rather than men," he said!

Don't miss the irony here. Peter, the one who was frightened by a young serving girl into denying that he even knew Jesus, openly defies the divinely constituted religious leaders of his own faith, the men whom

everyone regarded as God's representatives, who spoke with God's voice and authority. Peter not only defies them, he appeals to a higher law. But what higher law could there be? Theoretically, none. But the resurrection of Jesus caused Peter to see things differently; he now saw that these men who had a legitimate claim to represent God were, in this case, representing only themselves.

Peter's bold challenge to the Sanhedrin may lose some of its punch for us. We're on Peter's side, after all. We know his importance and can rather easily dismiss the importance of the court of the Sanhedrin. But when Peter stood before them, those men were the ultimate arbiter, the supreme religious authority and Peter dared to stand them down!

It's hard for me not to read all this in light of what is currently happening in our church, and to express the hope that, during this current, painful crisis, our church leaders will hear Peter's words as a challenge to humbly acknowledge that, despite their intentions, instead of speaking for God they have sometimes spoken -- and acted -- all too humanly.

It's hard to be deaf to the growing number of voices (not just from the media but from loyal, faithful members of the church, including some bishops) that are calling for the church to turn this dreadful moment into a graced moment -- a moment of self-examination on a whole array of things: on the way it understands and carries out its sacred mission, the way it exercises power, the way it chooses leaders and holds them to account. These same voices also call for greater transparency in the church; for a greater voice in church governance and decision-making for lay people, including women; and for a greater willingness on the part of church leadership to admit mistakes where they've been made and humbly beg forgiveness. These are voices we should heed.

In this archdiocese we are fortunate to have had leaders who have not claimed special privileges for the church and who have repeatedly done their best to be caring, just, and accountable. Thanks to Archbishop [Alexander] Brunett and both his predecessors (Archbishops [Raymond] Hunthausen and [Thomas] Murphy), Seattle, though not perfect, has for more than 25 years been a pace-setter in the way it has dealt with critical issues surrounding clergy abuse. Would that the rest of the church could make this same claim!

These thoughts and concerns prompted by today's first reading from Acts connect quite naturally for me with today's gospel passage from John. The touching exchange between Jesus and Peter on the shores of the Lake of Galilee is not only a beautiful story but a present challenge. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks Peter, not one time but three, and each time Peter assures him that he does. But words are not enough. "Feed my lambs," Jesus tells him. "Feed my sheep." In other words, you will prove your love for me -- not by what you say but by what you do. And that is as true now as it was then. Jesus is still asking that question and it is now the church's turn to answer. Again, not with words but with deeds. "Do you love me? Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep!"

Honesty compels us to admit that the church has too often put its own perceived interests ahead of the clear and uncompromising command of Jesus to feed, care for, and nourish his flock. At times it has allowed selfish institutional issues and concerns to eclipse the most basic rights of the flock, especially of some of the weakest, most vulnerable members of the flock. This must never happen again.

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And, yes, some of the media attacks have been unfair and unbalanced and, yes, the issues we are dealing with are by no means exclusively the church's issues (they are societal issues), and, yes, the moral

quicksand of our secular culture deserves some of the blame, but no amount of spreading or sharing the blame can take away the blame that rests squarely with the church.

After he put his questions to Peter, Jesus told him what the future would hold: "When you were younger," he said, "you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." It was Jesus' way of telling Peter about the cost of caring for the flock, the cost of discipleship. And then he repeated for Peter the first words he ever spoke to him, words that would now mean a good deal more to Peter than they did the first time: "Follow me."

My friends in Christ, I believe that these are words Jesus speaks to the church now -- - all of us in the church, but especially those of us in leadership. I hear them as a call to conversion -- deep conversion, a call to exercise power in a whole new way, a call to lead in the humble, strong, yet gentle way of Jesus and to let go of the need to dominate and to control. With Peter, the church needs to let Jesus take us places we'd probably rather not go.

"Do you love me? Feed my lambs, feed my sheep? Follow me!" My friends, Peter's call is now the church's call. And why should the church -- the whole church, leaders and led -- expect better or easier treatment than Peter got? Why should the church, the whole church, not be willing to let go and follow in Peter's footsteps, confident that, while God may indeed take us to places we'd sooner not go, those places will, in the end be the very places we're supposed to go?

Do you love me? Follow me!"

[Fr. Michael Ryan pastor of St. James Cathedral in Seattle.]

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