

“We Are Being Forced To Our Knees”

The recent “sexual abuse of minors by clergy” crisis and the creation of national guidelines and policies to correct this wrong by the United State Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is now over two years old.

The situation is healing, but is still long from being healed. Many of the cases continue to wind their way through the court system.

After \$85 million in settlements, the Archdiocese of Boston is now faced with 140 more law suits. The newspapers are reporting that settlements in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the Diocese of Orange could possibly reach \$1½ billion. The Archdiocese of Portland has declared bankruptcy.

This is such a difficult time for the Church, especially our leadership as they steer a course that is sensitive to the needs of those who have been victimized by priests and sensitive and caring to the overall common good of the Church.

As Church, we pray for our leadership in this time of crisis – “Lord, help them to be open to your Spirit. May their decisions benefit the Faith and the Church we desire to hand on to the next generation.” We pray for ourselves – “May this be a time of renewal and recommitment for us through a greater involvement of the laity in all circles of the Church.”

I share with you the words of Bishop Raymond Luecker taken from a column that he wrote in 1993 entitled, “We Are Being Forced To Our Knees.” Bishop Luecker, who died in 2002, was the Ordinary of the Diocese of New Ulm, Minnesota for 25 years. These were, and are, very prophetic words, considering that they were penned 11 years ago:

“These are difficult times for the Church that we all love... We see confusion and dissent, religious ignorance, quarreling among ourselves, decrease in attendance at Mass, people alienated and dropping out, an ever-growing shortage of priests, struggle over gender issues and sexual misconduct.

I would like to focus on one issue: public scandals by the clergy and others in the Church, especially over the issue of sexual abuse of minors. All too often, Church Leaders have failed to recognize the nature and severity of such abuse, have simply not known what to do about it. As a consequence, response from such leaders has looked like covering up, denial. Attempts at damage control have taken the form of manipulation of the press, have resulted in lack of concern for victims, families and for parish communities.

We need to acknowledge what we don't know, and apologize for acting like we did know. We are still disciples and need to be taught, need to learn. We have to acknowledge institutional sinfulness.

I believe we are being forced to our knees, forced to recognize that we are not in charge, but rather God is in charge of the Church. We are being forced to recognize that we are human. We are coming to acknowledge and admit that as a Church (not just as individuals) we have made mistakes. We have a hard time admitting this.

Suppose we come to a point where through these scandals we lose all of our savings. Suppose in the process we lose power, prestige and control. We are not perfect. We are sinful people. We can't solve all the problems. We have to live with ambiguity and gray areas. We are vessels of clay.

We will then come to recognize that we are servants. Jesus showed us how to rule by washing the feet of others. He told us that the princes of this world lord it over others, but it is not to be this way with us. We are called to be servants and to wash one another's feet.

Yes, we are being called to our knees. I believe this applies especially to our Bishops, who for so long have carried the trappings of feudal lords with all the titles and dress and privileges that go along with it. It seems to me that we are being forced to recognize that we do not have much power, and that is all right. We are called to be ministers of the word, of the worship of God, and the service of others. We come before the Lord and cry out ‘I am alone and afraid. I am surrounded by those who hate me. Everything is gone.’

We come to a point where we admit we are powerless - our lives have become unmanageable – and there is a power greater than ourselves. We come before God and cry out, ‘Lord, you are my God. I need you.’ All of us, Church Leaders and the Faithful, are called to accept the Lord as the center of our lives. I am speaking of dependence on God, daily conversion, coming before the Lord in faith and prayer, seeking mercy and forgiveness.

I hope and pray that through the grace of God we will be able to respond to the present scandals in the Church, reach out in love and healing to victims, reach out in forgiveness and reconciliation to perpetrators, and come before the Lord as a community of believers to recognize our need.”

May we continue to pray for just resolution and for healing for our Church. May we see this crisis as an opportunity for renewal and deepened commitment to the Lord and to the Church.

This week all the priests of the Diocese of San Diego will be attending our annual Convocation, which provides a time for prayer, quiet, and conversation with our Bishop and other Priests of the Diocese. We will be at Pala Mesa Resort in Fallbrook from Monday until Friday.

Please keep the priests of our Diocese and all priests in your prayers!