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Pastor's Column

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I share with you this weekend an article written by Rev. J. Ronald Knott, a priest of the Archdiocese of Louisville, Kentucky. It is an insert in today's bulletin.

His words capture the feelings of many priests, including myself.

As a Church we must continue to bless each other with the word—"sophronismos." (I hope this will make you curious enough to read the article!)

Fr. Mike

Collateral Damage: How One Priest Feels These Days

By J. Ronald Knott

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In my 32 years as a priest, I have been threatened by the Ku Klux Klan, have been thrown out of a ministerial association because I am a Catholic, have had fundamentalist preachers run me down by name on the radio and have had a knife pulled on me in church for a homily I gave. I have also seen one of my rectory mates carted off for alcohol addiction and another leave the priesthood. I have been stalked by a schizophrenic and singled out in a hateful crusade by right-wing Catholics because I welcomed marginal Catholics. While I was serving as its pastor, the cathedral walls cracked down the back and along one side and almost fell to the ground two-thirds of the way into a renovation. Finally, I have had my house broken into three times.

Nothing, however, has affected me like this damnable sex scandal the church in the United States is going through right now. I am at the lowest point I have reached in 32 years. In response, I have done predictable things, like "isolating" myself. A few weeks ago, however, I did something that I have never done before. I was driving somewhere wearing my Roman collar. When I pulled up to a light, I put my hand over the collar so that the people on each side would not see it. In the latest of three nightmares, I dreamed I was back in the seminary when the police came and took everything I owned: my books, my homily collection, my spiritual journals, my clothes, my family photos, my money, everything! My heart is obviously bleeding from many holes.

In the first place, my heart bleeds for the victims and their families. As a person who was psychologically abused throughout childhood, I know a little about that particular brand of abuse and how it can destroy one's self-image, how one can blame oneself, how toxic anger can be stifled and how powerless one can feel. It took me 21 years even to begin coming to grips with the sort

of abuse I experienced and even longer to forgive the one who inflicted it. That took years of intense inner work. I can only imagine how devastating sexual abuse must be.

Yet my heart also bleeds for the abusing priests. Yes, I have compassion, even for them. I cannot imagine the humiliation they must feel, many of them now in their old age. While in no way would I minimize the damage they have caused, I struggle with an effort to reconcile the large spark of goodness in these men with the evil they have done. I suppose I could hate them, if I knew what their victims know, but I did not know that side of them. I knew another man, and that man was kind, generous, hard working and dedicated. I suppose the key to reconciling those opposites is indicated in the old adage, "Love the sinner and hate the sin."

In the third place, my heart bleeds for all those faithful Catholics who have been scandalized and have had their faith shaken, a faith that is hard to hold on to these days in any case. My heart bleeds for all those angry and alienated Catholics who see in these events even more reason to be angry and alienated. As one who has specialized in trying to clear a path for the return of alienated people, I know that such a trip home has now become even more difficult, if not more unlikely.

And then my heart bleeds for those faithful priests who have to bear the shame brought on a profession they love, a profession to which they have given their all. As a vocation director, I find that a hard job suddenly seems impossible. My aim is to present the priesthood to young people as a chance to "do something beautiful for the Lord," something that I have enjoyed doing even when the pickings were slim. Now I feel as though I came home one day to find that my priceless Renoir had been clawed to shreds by cats. This has left me with a sick feeling in my

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guts. It reminds me that thousands of great nuns, the majority of whom were even heroic, have experienced similar unfairness. They have been stereotyped by endless jokes in movies, plays and stand-up comedy about a few cruel and heartless nuns in the classrooms of the past. Indeed, a few bad apples can spoil the barrel.

In the fifth place, my heart bleeds for the bishops, even for those who should have known better. After having lived with one bishop for 14 years, I know how impossible a bishop's job can often be. Thirty or 40 years ago, most bishops did not know enough about the problem of sexual abuse of children to know what to do. They did what most families did with unwed pregnancies. They kept it quiet. Fifteen years ago, many bishops were given bad advice by "professionals" who told them that therapy and counseling worked and their clients could safely return to ministry. Bishops have also had to make their way across the alligator swamp of insurance companies and lawyers and the media. What was considered good advice yesterday is indicted as a cover up today.

Last of all, my heart bleeds for priests like myself who have been thrown into a whirlpool of self-doubt, especially when the pope recently told a group of the newly ordained that they "must be perfect." It has taken me 35 years to quit beating myself up for not being perfect and to accept the consolation that my best is good enough for God. Now we priests are sitting around rectories, homes and apartments combing through our lives for every thought, word or deed, for every youthful indiscretion, every joke, every hug, every touch, that could come home to haunt us. Not one of us has failed to have the chilling thought of being falsely accused as the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago once was and as Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles has recently been. We know that if we are falsely charged we might as well be guilty, because once accused, we would never fully recover our reputations. I am sad to say that I don't know any priest who is now completely at ease around children.

Yes, I have been tempted in the last few weeks to hide my collar and quit my job as a vocation

director, but I have also felt a surge of hope. Like Jonah (2:8), "when my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord." Like Jeremiah (20:9), I have been tempted "not to think about him, not to speak his name any more. Then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it wearied me; I could not bear it."

My source of hope comes from the pews, when I "share the Scriptures" and "break the bread" with faithful Catholics who have taught me once again that their faith is solidly rooted. That faith is not, nor has it ever been, in God's weak messengers, but in the sacred message they proclaim. St. Paul says that we are all "earthenware jars that hold a great treasure." Everywhere around the country, faithful Catholics seem to know the difference between the treasure and the crock. They have reminded me once again that the validity of the Gospel does not depend on the personal goodness of the messenger. They know that most of us are doing the best we can, often trying to lead two and three parishes or fulfill multiple ministries while holding ourselves together at the same time. They know we need their support and encouragement, especially during these trying times, and they give it freely. I am one very thankful recipient of that support and encouragement.

My fellow Catholics wish for me what Paul wished for Timothy when the latter was discouraged enough to quit: *sophronismos*. That is a nearly untranslatable word that means "knowing how to act in the face of panic" (2 Tim. 1:7).

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