

## A MESSAGE FOR CATHOLICS

# LORD, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?



**T**his has been a very hard summer for us Catholics in the United States, particularly this past week. I would like to share with you what I shared with my congregation, from my perspective as a young priest.

### “Should I Still Become a Priest?”

After two years of college, I entered the seminary in 2001 to begin studying for the priesthood. I left behind a girlfriend whom I loved a lot, and whom I could have imagined marrying after graduation.

The first semester of seminary was really wonderful. But in January of that first year, we started to hear horrifying things in the news from Boston. And day after day, week after week, it got worse and worse. Like everyone across the country, we were shocked, disgusted, ashamed, and full of sorrow for the victims.

As seminarians, it hit us in a particularly hard way. Do we really want to become priests? Do I really want this scandal to be the first thing people think about when they see me, throughout my entire priesthood? Should I maybe leave and find the girlfriend I left back at college, or another wonderful Catholic woman, and have the wife and large family I always imagined?

But God helped me and most of my brother seminarians to see that, if he is calling us to be priests, how can we say no? And the people of God, more than ever, need to have good and holy priests, priests who will serve with authentic Christ-like love. That is the way we can help these wounds in the Bride of Christ be healed little by little.

### Sixteen Years Later

So here I am, sixteen years later, serving joyfully as a priest these last eleven years. And we can be grateful to God that, over this last decade and a half, Catholic churches and schools have truly become what they should have been all along: **one of the safest places for children to be.**

The Catholic Church in our country has truly made dramatic changes in how it operates since 2002. We have worked hard to develop and implement safe environment practices across the country. For those who don't know, this is how it now works in our Catholic parishes and schools:

- Every adult (clergy, staff, parishioner) who will be around children must first submit to a background check. If anything questionable is found, they are not allowed to serve.
- These adults also go through safe environment training. This training emphasizes safe environment practices, such as the policy that no adult is ever allowed to be alone unsupervised with a child. Participants are trained to recognize the behavior patterns of those seeking to abuse children.
- With permission from parents, all children receive preventative education once a year. In an age-appropriate manner, lessons promote proper boundaries between children and adults.

These and other policies are not meant to change the heart of those who wish to do harm to children. Rather, as such persons contemplate volunteering in a Catholic environment, they will learn that our volunteers are never alone with children and the other adults are alert for suspicious behavior. Seeing that this is the case, they will choose not to volunteer at a Catholic church or school.

What about the shameful practice of predatory priests being moved from one parish to another? In these last sixteen years, the norm is now zero tolerance. Abuse claims against clergy, or any adult volunteer, are immediately reported to the police and investigated. The priest is put on leave and taken out of ministry, basically assumed guilty until proven innocent. This is a bit scary for us good priests, because a false accusation could effectively end our priesthood, but we realize that this is necessary to ensure the safety of all of our children.

So when we all see news accounts of child abuse by clergy and cover-up by bishops, such as the horrifying reports from Pennsylvania, it is important to recognize that these are typically reporting events that happened decades ago before these new practices were put into place. In the grand jury report from Pennsylvania, 90% of these cases occurred in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and only two were reported since 2002.

This does not make these reports any less shameful; but if one were to read the headlines casually, one might get the impression that abuse has been permitted to continue unabated over these recent years, and nobody in the Catholic Church has learned anything since 2002, and **this is not true**.

Again, in the last sixteen years we have made important and far-reaching changes, and thanks be to God, Catholic churches and schools in the United States are now one of the safest places for children to be.

## **“Why Are You Still Catholic?”**

Many of you are being asked by friends or family, and perhaps even asking yourself, “Why are you still Catholic?” It is really a two-fold question:

### **1) Why be a Christian?**

The reason to be a Christian is simple: because the Christian faith is true. Jesus is truly who he claimed to be, God walking in our midst. If this is the case, then how could I leave him?

Jesus is the Bread of Life, the only one who can truly satisfy us. He is our Savior, the only one who can destroy sin and heal our brokenness. In such times, we need Christ all the more. Like Peter, we cry out, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)

### **2) Why be a Catholic Christian?**

There are plenty of other wonderful Christian churches. So why not go somewhere else? Why be Catholic?

The reason to be Catholic is similar to the reason we are Christian. We are Catholic because the Catholic faith is true.

We do not believe that the Catholic Church has perfect leaders and sinless members; this has quite obviously never been the case, all the way back to the twelve Apostles.

Rather, we believe that the Catholic Church is the Church started by Christ almost two thousand years ago. Full of saints and full of sinners, the Church is the worldwide body of Christ here on earth. Through this imperfect family of faith, Jesus continues to teach us, forgive our sins, feed us with his Body and Blood, and minister to us in our brokenness. If this is true, how could I ever leave the Catholic Church?

We are all broken sinners needing Jesus; we are all in need of his mercy and his salvation.

I can only speak for myself, but my faith in Jesus and the Catholic Church does not depend on any particular priest, bishop, or pope. I hope that they are all holy and living authentic lives united with Christ. But even when particular leaders betray Jesus, my faith in Christ and his Church remains.

## **What Do We Do From Here?**

At the root of all scandal, we find a Christian who, instead of living a life of holiness united to Christ, is living a life apart from Christ.

The world desperately needs Jesus. **The world desperately needs saints** to show them Jesus. The only way to gradually rebuild trust, gradually heal wounds, is for each of us to live our faith to the fullest.

So for us ordinary Catholics here in South Carolina, if we want to help the world, if we want to help bring healing, it is all the more important that we live our Christian faith whole-heartedly. This is no time for half-measures. The Church needs holy men and women. The world needs to see Jesus in us. The world needs to see that our Catholic Christian faith, when lived out authentically, brings joy and peace.

**If you are struggling right now** with all of this, know that your brothers and sisters in Christ are here for you. If it would help to have someone to talk and pray with, please reach out to your local parish. And let's continue to pray for our worldwide Church, for healing for those who have suffered abuse, and for each other.

**In Christ,**

*Father Andrew*

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