**A Franciscan Response to the Clergy Abuse Scandal**

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The initial shock of the news that far too many priests had abused children grew only larger when we learned how Catholic bishops and dioceses tried to silence victims and cover up wrong doing. That truth was sacrificed for the sake of the Church’s reputation is not only a scandal, but a decision that led to abusing priests being sent to new parishes, placing more innocent children at risk. What has been overlooked in many places is the number of good priests who have had to deal with the fallout of the scandal—the anger of some of their parishioners, social media attacks on the Church and the suspicion that lingers around the priesthood in general.

While Pope Francis has taken the courageous step to publicly acknowledge the sin of the Church; and he did this at a public meeting of the Bishops of the world held at the Vatican earlier this year (February 2019) in Rome, we know that no meeting, no amount of new regulations will undo the damage already caused. The Pope did not pretend that this could happen. What he demanded on the Bishops was to find concrete ways to renew the Church as a spiritual home for those whose lives had been broken by priests and bishops who abused their power and position of authority. He knew that expressions of compassion and justice for the victims must be affirmed in dismantling those systems and structures that made power and authority more important than mercy and service; that allowed both the abuse and cover-up to go on so long.

What can Secular Franciscans do to support the healing process, to join with both the Pope and their Patron in the work begun with summons of the Crucified: “Francis, rebuild my house”? St. Francis’ response was positive and local. He was simple, but not naive about the corruption that had crept into the life of the Church of his time. Bishops and Popes, who were more concerned with control and wealth, routinely put their ambitions ahead of the spiritual and material needs of the laity. They were blind to what Pope Francis calls “the inseparable bond between our acceptance of the message of salvation and genuine fraternal love” (*Joy of the Gospel*, 2013).

St. Francis refused to let the scandals of his time detract from what (referring to the Franciscan rule of life) he called the “marrow of the Gospel.” Secular Franciscans need to have confidence in their way of life not just to get through the hard times the Church is facing, but to be active agents of change in the Church—“rebuild my house.” The saving work of Jesus, recounted in the Gospels, continues to take place when we join our lives to his life, especially through the Sacraments.

It is not a sin to recognize that we are a pilgrim Church, always needing to reform, face its failures, and to make changes in order to become what it is called to be. St. Francis did not pretend to have the solution to the Church’s problems. But he knew what he had to do: hold fast to what he believed and to whom he believed in. And to adore and bless the Lord, in *this Church and all the Churches throughout the world, because by [His] holy cross [He has] redeemed the world*.” Secular Franciscans can be confident that they can live out this redemption by working to keep the fire of the Gospel alive in their lives, their parishes and fraternities.

St. Francis wasn’t a dreamer. He was a doer. He knew that the Eucharist was at the heart of the Catholic belief and the practice of the faith. Whatever else was happening in the Church, a healthy relationship between priests and people was necessary. In obeying the call of the Crucified to “restore my house,” the little poor man took concrete steps to *“to fear, love, and honor [priests]... and I do not wish to consider sin in them, for in them I see the Son of God .... And I do this because in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God Himself except* *His most holy Body and Blood, which they receive and they alone administer to others”* (Testament)*.*

St. Francis viewed the priesthood as a gift to the Church—a gift that *he* would care for, even if the priests themselves did not show enough reverence for the vocation they received. In Francis’ own words, “*the Lord gave me, and gives me, so much faith in priests who live according to the form of the holy Roman Church, on account of their order**that if they should persecute me, I would have recourse to them*” (Testament).

Because we celebrate the sacraments primarily in the parish, the parish becomes the concrete place for responding to the hurt and betrayal, the disappointment and anger caused by the injustice and hypocrisy of the sexual crimes and abuse of power that currently overwhelms us. Our commitment to the parish as a place of encounter with God must be strong enough to overcome the public uproar over the Church’s failures. Pope Francis’ explains his hope that positive change will happen: because the parish “possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community.” Franciscans know that the renewal of the Church begins locally, because as Pope Francis points out, “the parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration.”

Franciscans—whether they are friars, nuns, sisters, secular Franciscans or persons and groups who seek to live the call of St. Francis in their own lives--have a task and a calling to model a renewal of the Church in a period of history not unlike that of St. Francis. It is a commitment that has to be taken seriously and guided by the following principles:

1. The Gospel life is not an individualistic undertaking. To be faithful to the Gospel takes us beyond our own personal lives. Individualistic religion has a tendency to become judgmental and to distract us from the mission of mercy. In the wake of the abuse scandal, we need to make a time and a place to speak out and to listen to one another’s feelings and thoughts. It was wrong to keep knowledge of child abuse in the Church secret. It would be wrong to discourage the laity from talking about it.
2. Integral to the life of the parish is the spiritual and pastoral life of the priest. It is perhaps more important than ever for the laity to hold their priests close to them, to help them fulfill their vocation. We need to let them know that we are with them and are open to hearing how the abuse scandal is affecting them. At the same time, the laity need to hold their priests accountable for building a close relationship with the communities they serve.
3. The Church has no place for clericalism. To care about our priests does not mean honouring them blindly or putting them on a clerical pedestal. We extend our friendship to priests and share with them their concern for the reality of God’s presence in the sacraments they celebrate and the commitments they make. This may require a patient, but relentless, commitment to overcome the reluctance of some priests to share decision making in the parish.
4. The Church is, as the Vatican Council II taught, the people of God. The laity are not the group that “the Church” takes care of, but are an essential part of the Church “that takes care.” As such, lay Catholics have a right to “think creatively” about how their parish ought to be and “to entertain other visions for the Church, visions of co-responsibility, collaboration, and participation” (J. Burkhard, OFM Conv.).

Like St. Francis, we—laity and clergy--have to let the Gospel speak to us. We have to learn how to respond to what we hear. We have to learn how to share our call to act. The need of the present moment will not be met by new rules and regulations crafted in Rome (although this will help). It will be met by a renewal of belief rooted in what Pope Francis has called “*The Joy of the Gospel.*”