

A Message from Archbishop Michael O. Jackels

From bad to worse

Sex abuse of a minor – bad. By an ordained person – worse. When his superior knew about it, and did nothing – worst. Of which failure even the pope is now accused – worse yet. And his accuser is suggesting that as a consequence the pope should resign – from bad to worse.

I am sorry, so sorry for the harm to victims, and for the scandal taken from the acts of abuse, and for any failure to protect on the part of bishops.

People may not be willing to take me at my word, but I am committed to protect children and young people from harm, and to promote healing, and to restore trust in the Church, especially its bishops.

People are angry, ashamed to be Catholic, and angry some more. Some people have quit the Church, or withheld financial support. I get that. I wish they could see their way to stay, but no judgment of them. That same response has crossed the mind of not a few people, and my mind as well.

Master, to whom else shall I go?

I suppose I would quit too, except for this: I love Jesus, his teachings, his saving deeds, the way of life he lays out for his followers. And I am convinced that Jesus has nothing to do with the sexual abuse of minors; in fact, Jesus condemns anyone who would harm a young person: "It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble" (Luke 17:2).

You have the words of everlasting life

And for this: By faith and Baptism I am a member of the Body of Christ, the Church; I can't be a follower of Jesus without being a member of his Mystical Body. And the Catholic Church, in its doctrine and discipline, does not condone the sexual abuse of minors; in fact, the Catholic Church refers to it as a grave offense against morals, and teaches that sex outside of marriage, including homosexual behavior, is grave, serious, and a matter for the Confessional.

I will serve the Lord

And for this: Jesus has called me to continue his mission in the ministries of the Church, to partner with him as a priest, carrying out that ministry in imitation of him, that is, in the celibate state, renouncing marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of God. And the priesthood does not make a priest into an abuser; in fact, a man who will be ordained a priest commits himself to life and ministry carried out in celibate chastity, abstaining from sex.

Therefore, as with other crises of faith in the past, so now, and in the future, I will not turn away from Jesus, and from walking with him in his Catholic Church as a priest-partner with him to continue his mission in Church ministry; where else would I go to hear words of everlasting life?

Where to turn for solutions

The sin and harm that is playing out in front of us – sexual abuse, failure to protect – is what happens when human weakness is besieged with the temptations of the devil; this explains what is happening, but it does not excuse it. So, how to cure the situation?

I hope that the cure doesn't involve the pope having to resign; I like him, and think that he is a faith-filled, joy-filled, authentic follower of Jesus and pastor of souls. But should that happen, it would not be the end of the world. At the same time, it would not be the cure to the current crisis.

Some suggest that the cure lies with the ordination of women and optional celibacy. Some people may disagree with me, but I don't think those are a cure to the current crisis, any more than ordaining men only or obligatory celibacy are causes of clergy sexual abuse or the failure of bishops to protect.

Striving for holiness

Rather, I believe that part of the cure is radical striving for holiness on the part of all the Catholic faithful: pope, bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and laity. For anyone ordained, I believe that this includes swearing off any claim on power, perks, or privilege, trying to conform ourselves to the humble and loving, gentle and merciful, serving and self-sacrificing Jesus.

Imitation of Christ

I believe that we, all the Catholic faithful, must lean into imitating the mind and heart of Jesus, his humility and charity, his forgiveness and service, offered to whomever, no matter who, or if deserving, or if he or she asks nicely, or is aware of the cost, or is grateful.

A bold gesture

And I believe that we each need to discern what is our bold gesture to make for the sake of building the kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice and mercy, of pity, peace, and love. It is my conviction that such a gesture must include promoting and strengthening the teaching of Jesus and his Catholic Church on the human person, marriage and family, and the proper use of human sexuality, as well as correcting any spirit of clericalism among clergy.

Conclusion

Someone once asked Father Louis Bouyer, a historian of Christian spirituality, how come there were so many mystics, so many heroically holy people in the 14th Century, a time when Church life was even lower than it is today (if you can imagine). He responded that only when it is darkest can you see the stars, which is to say that oftentimes it takes the worst to bring out the best in humanity.

Many years ago I walked into the church in Taize, France, to find the monks of that place gathered with hundreds of young people, all singing, in unison and in harmony, and in different languages, the refrain: Within our darkest night, you [Jesus] kindle a fire that never dies away.

I find myself singing that a lot lately.

Let us pray for each other,

Archbishop Michael O. Jackels