

Response to the Clergy Sex Abuse Scandal
November 19, 2006
Homily connected with The Dialog of 11-16-06

I don't usually give a homily from a script. But, in light of the news in Thursdays Dialog I choose to do so for two reasons. First, I want to stay focused on a few specific points and second, I want to be assured that I will not be misquoted.

Friday night ABC televised a special featuring Barbara Walters. It was entitled "30 mistakes in 30 years." Last week's "Dialog" included a lengthy letter from Bishop Saltarelli and the disclosure of the names of 20 priests accused of sexual abuse of minors. It could have been titled "20 mistakes in 56 years." Certainly Barbara Walters mistakes in her TV interviews with celebrities pale in comparison to the mistakes made by the hierarchy in dealing with dysfunctional and criminal priests.

The bishop's reason for issuing his letter and publishing the list is to be more transparent as the chief shepherd to the flock entrusted to his care. I would like to follow his example and be more transparent with you about how I have wrestled with the demons unleashed in me by this scandal. My motivation for doing so is to honor the bishop's words, "the first obligation of the church is to assist in the healing of victims." I began doing that four years ago when a number of victims approached me for spiritual direction. That is a ministry I am qualified to exercise thanks to the Certification program I completed at Neumann College. It equipped me with new skills for listening with the heart that I have used as an agent of healing to those most scarred by the scandal. But, in all honesty, I was not prepared for the depth of emotions evoked in me by the tragedy of their stories. Each victim's revelations, though different in chapter and verse, burdened my heart in a demoralizing way. It wasn't long before I realized that my spiritual life was in peril. My efforts at pastoral care giving needed to be recharged by another spiritual caregiver.

When the scandal broke into national news from Boston in January 2002 it triggered in me a dark night of the soul. At that time I was seeing a spiritual director about four times a year. Within a short period of time I needed to see her more frequently. My soul was caught in the grip of an evil darkness and I knew my usually hopeful spiritual DNA was being negatively contaminated by it. My heart became seriously conflicted by the scandal and the stories shared with me by some victims. My morale plummeted like someone alarmed by low blood pressure. The medicine I needed to correct this spiritual slump was not Lipotor or Toprol. I needed a change of focus in my spiritual life and in my prayer life. The change I needed came with the help of my spiritual director. She lovingly and gently

guided me away from my unchecked addiction to blame and anger and find new solace and healing by focusing on Jesus as Victim.

I must confess that like so many Catholics I am comfortable connecting with Jesus as healer, miracle worker, storyteller, and all the other nurturing images that fuel a “feel good” Christology. But, I am not so prone to connect with the image of Jesus as Victim. This insight awakened in me a new awareness that we only pay honor to that piece of his identity one-day a year in our church calendar, namely Good Friday.

Last week an unscheduled Good Friday happened in our diocese. Catholics in all twelve counties were forced to read shocking news about former pastors and associates that turned an ordinary Friday into a sad Friday. I am feeling sad with you. Having said that what more can I say that will help you find meaning in this sad news for your ongoing spiritual journey? I believe it is my responsibility as an ordained preacher to help you pick through the unfiltered layers of the bad news of life experiences so that together we discover underneath the fragments of good news hidden in the bad. This picking and preaching is how Jesus the Victim feeds and guides us to the redemptive side of whatever disheartens our spirits and wounds our souls. Allow me to open a window on my soul so you can see how I engaged this process.

Four years ago like so many of you I engaged the scandal on the surface level of asking the “why” questions. “Why” did the bishops do this to us? “Why” the cover-up? “Why” protect so many sick priests at the expense of harming innocent children? “Why” create more victims out of good faithful priests? Those were valid questions we all needed to ask. Eventually, my spiritual director helped me see that these narrowly focused questions were not recharging my wounded spirit. In fact they were a deterrent to a freedom from the inner darkness I so long desired. The first breath of fresh air into my shadowed soul came when I started asking the meaning question.

What does the scandal mean for me as a priest, a fellow pilgrim with other hurting Catholics, a sojourner with victims and one who desires to move to another place on the spiritual path, a place beyond anger, despair and disappointment? The meaning question changed the landscape of my soul. It forced me out of the head and into my heart. It invited me to look for Jesus being with me in my hurt and not to look for him in answers to questions swirling around in my heard. That kind of analytical therapy interfered with the kind of deeper conversion therapy I needed to get unstuck.

The change of focus in my questions left me in awe. I noticed that my broken heart began to mend when I began asking Jesus the victim to be

with me. I also noticed that I was able to transcend the horrid details of the victim's stories in spiritual direction. To my wonder I began looking at Jesus the Victim in them as victims. This was a new experience of Incarnational theology for me.

The divine enfleshed in a wounded human soul. The sacred tangible in human tears. Jesus the victim redeeming another victim. Silence that was so sacred I wanted to take off my shoes. The living room where we were meeting was holy ground.

I encouraged each directee to pray with a scripture passage that my own spiritual director had given me to pray with. Those passages focused on Jesus the victim always giving his heart to a loving Father who loved him back enough to keep his heart free to rise above the evil plots of insecure people. Befriending Jesus the Victim was my hope in gradually transcending the darkness this scandal originally unleashed in me like a cloud of poisonous gas. In addition St. John of the Cross, the great 16th century Carmelite Spanish mystic became a prayer partner for me. He is the author of the spiritual opus, "Dark night of the soul." Both Jesus and John led me to a deeper level of faith where the spiritual question became clear, who will I give my heart to in the unfolding chapters of this scandal? The answer echoed softly in my soul, give your heart to the victims.

I began to chant those words like a mantra. They unleashed in me a renewed sense of hope. The rhythm of my inner life began to change to a different beat. I also noticed some physical changes in my health. I noticed that my heart was less constricted because it was less burdened by the emotional plaque built up in my arteries by unchecked anger, hurt and rage. I was also free to take new risks with Sunday assemblies as I apologized to anyone who was abused by a priest. That was a prelude to taking risks in telling people how I have forgiven the bishops. Finally I became free enough to say, "I love you as a priest and as we all move to places of healing in this scandal I desperately need you to love me back." Just as we are getting flu shots for the upcoming season we Catholics should be learning new ways to love and forgive one another as the spiritual antidote that will inoculate us against the virus of long-term negative side effects of this scandal. I mean the virus of giving our hearts to the lesser gods of blame and punishment. If we do not invite the divine physician to heal these wounded pieces of our souls then they will metastasize into small tumors and eventually become terminal cancer for the inner life. Giving our hearts, even if they are still wounded, to Jesus the Victim is a special grace we can pass on to our non-Catholic brethren and especially with all our fellow Catholics victimized by this scandal. Knowing that they have a piece of our heart may be what they need to help heal their broken hearts. That may be the first step in finding their way back home and rejoining us as communities of wounded healers. So, the next time

you are confronted about the scandal be a wounded healer yourself and say, "I'm praying how to give my heart to the victims."

Whenever you do know that you are in good company, including:

- Esau, the victim of his younger brother Jacob's greed.**
- Dinah, the victim of rape by Shechem the Hivite.**
- Uriah , the victim of murder plotted by King David.**
- Susanna, the victim of a false accusation.**
- John the Baptist, the victim of jealousy.**
- Mary Magdalene, the victim of being possessed by seven demons.**
- Stephen the Martyr, the victim of people with false integrity.**

This is a short list of victims in our Judeo-Christian stories we can honor as agents of hope as we suffer with our own victims. We do so because whenever we connect with them we connect with God who had the last word in their stories. They, along with all the new victims created by wars, scandals, abortion, abuse of children and all kinds of cyberspace evil, awaken us to ask the spiritual question, who will I give my heart to? Always remember whenever you give it to the victims you stand with God who is always on their side for his own son, Jesus, was a victim who became our hope.

As the liturgical year draws to a close, the church traditionally has directed our attention to the end of history. This is the message in the first reading from Daniel and Mark's account of Jesus' end-time discourse. They challenge us to take an inventory of what is unconverted in us that may be a stumbling block for life with God in glory. The image of the fig tree, which never buds until after the last frost, is a hopeful sign that new spiritual growth will come after every winter of scandals.

I want to close by reflecting on a piece of the life of a victim named Elie Wiesel. He is a survivor of the Holocaust, a biblical scholar and Nobel Peace Prize winner. In his book "Night" he records a poignant story that has meaning for the attitude we should have toward the victims of our scandal. At the Buna Concentration Camp three prisoners were sentenced to death for sabotage. Three gallows were erected in the camp. Each victim stood on a chair. Two were adults. One was a child, a sad-eyed angel. The SS Officer gave an order and the chairs were tipped over. The entire camp was ordered to "bare your heads" and march around the victims. The two adults died instantly, but the young child was still alive...

"For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed by. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed. Behind me, I heard someone ask: where is God

now? And I heard a voice within me answer him: Where is God? He is here – hanging on this gallows..”

May you hear the same voice within whenever you meet victims, and may you become bold enough to give them the heart of Jesus the victim in you who will use it to heal their hearts from which will bud forth, new seeds of hope.

Amen.