

‘We may be unfaithful, but He is always faithful’

(2 Timothy 2:13)

Evils in the Church and our faith in Christ’s promises

With our Bishops now having given their official response to the Royal Commission, and with some further upheavals in the Church in the United States in particular, it’s good to reflect again on what these sad events mean in relation to our faith in Christ and his promises to the Church. We’ve looked at aspects of this a few times over recent years, but upon request we’ll now return to the topic by drawing together a brief summary. Naturally such reflections in no way replace our response to victims, our efforts to do whatever is possible to heal harms and to ensure these crimes are never repeated – as we’ve looked at, for example, in regard to the Royal Commission or the Child Safe Standards. But we also have the solemn duty before God to protect and strengthen faith – our own and that of others.

1. Church teaching has always utterly condemned sexual abuse – as intrinsically evil and indeed, deserving in itself of damnation for those guilty of it. A defence of the Catholic Faith as still being the true religion is in no way a defence or even minimisation of the crimes themselves (contrary to what some tend to imagine). These are two quite distinct issues. Indeed, a proper understanding of our faith leads us to an even deeper awareness, and rejection, of the evil.

2. And defending the Catholic Faith through all this is not a distraction from the needs of victims, but is part of our ongoing necessary service to human beings, which obliges all those who are aware of the central role in human salvation intended by God for his Church. This can also actually help victims (if open to it) to spiritual healing, by rebuilding faith.

3. Our faith is in Christ and what he established – not in the goodness or wisdom of this or that Church leader or leaders. (And evidence e.g. for Christ’s miracles; his promises to Peter and of the guidance of the Holy Spirit of Truth; can in no possible logical way be undermined by what happened centuries later.) Jesus guarantees the truth of Church teachings and the grace of the sacraments – not the holiness of his ministers (as we see even among the Apostles, with Judas). Free will – sin’s only primary and direct cause – leaves the possibility of sin and damnation for anyone.

4. For our responses to be in line with truth and genuine morality, we must be guided by reason, not blind emotion. Emotions *guided by reason* are good, but without this guidance, the direction of our anger at abuse, for example, irrationally overflows: from the guilty to the innocent majority; from individuals to the collective; from sinful actions and negligences *contrary* to Catholic teachings, to those teachings themselves. Sin – whether the crimes themselves or their enabling – is always in truth the choice of specific individuals, not of an amorphous entity such as ‘the Church’.

5. To be and remain a Catholic means choosing to be in moral and spiritual union with Christ, and with the good things he established. But to the precise extent that someone sins, they reject and depart from their moral union with Christ, and with the rest of us. So our being in union with Christ in no way places us in moral union with their sin, and our morally obligatory action of being faithful to Christ and his Church cannot rightly be a cause of guilt or shame in us.

6. Jesus in fact prophesied that evil would infiltrate his Church (the weeds and the wheat, the good and bad fish – *Matthew* 13:36-50), and indicated that the gates of hell would always be trying to defeat her, but would never ultimately prevail. (*Matthew* 16:18) How can the actual *fulfilment* of his prophesies that we see, now or in the past, invalidate his promises?

7. To reject, on account of the scandals, the faith and worship that Jesus asks of us, is in effect a way of punishing *him*, the innocent one, for the crimes – adding to, not diminishing, the pains he suffered on the Cross for those crimes.

8. To a considerable degree, the background cause of clerical abuse is simply the equal presence of sinful humanity inside and outside the priesthood, since the percentage of males in general who abuse is of the same *order of magnitude* as the percentage of priests who abuse. (One would indeed have hoped priests would abuse *less*, but this expectation partly comes from a ‘clericalist’ assumption that priesthood immunises someone from sin in a way that Baptism does not.)

9. The greater opportunities that priests had for contact with minors, compared with the general male population – a fact not in itself cause for reproach – also increased the extent of clerical abuse. But there can also be specific cultures that arise in this or that community, including in the Church, that facilitate sin, and might increase the incidence of abuse. (We think for example of clericalism, a distortion of our understanding of priesthood that exalts the priest by subtly diminishing the dignity of the laity; such attitudes may have influenced the response of some bishops to abuse.) Yet these distorted cultures themselves (that we must fight against) arise from prior sins, negligences and errors of many individuals. As with the actual crimes, they are not the fault of the teachings of Jesus.

10. The current crisis is certainly a great setback for spreading Christ’s teachings, and indeed, for human well-being – but God’s Church has survived such crises before, such as the widespread immoralities of popes, bishops and priests in the early 11th century or in the Renaissance. In the end we trust the promises of Christ, who will save his Church, as he always has. You and I are not personally guilty for what has happened, but we are put on this earth to bear each other’s burdens and, often enough, to deal with problems we have not caused ourselves. So with courage and by the grace of God, we keep doing our own part as best we can – to pray, to heal, to share faith. Our strength is Jesus Christ – the same, yesterday, today and forever (*Hebrews* 13:8) – who assures us: ‘I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.’ (*Matthew* 28:20)