

Fr. Jose Rubio's sermon to the Thomas Merton Community on September 23, 2018

What are we to do with the sex abuse scandal by priests that is currently affecting the church? First of all, it seems to me, it is not helpful to blame the culture or blame society. It is not helpful to say that sex abuse occurs more frequently outside the church than inside the church or to say that it happens in other churches and religions as well. It is not helpful to say that sexual abuse is committed by soccer coaches, swim coaches, gymnastics coaches, sports doctors, gynecologists, teachers, and so on. This is because, as our bishop stated in his letter on the scandal, "we are held to a higher standard." We, priests, are held to a higher standard.

It seems to me that what is needed is a frank discussion by the whole church of what I see as four key issues in this scandal. And, I'd think that unless these issues are openly discussed, nothing will change. These four issues are: clerical privilege, celibacy, a homosexual subculture among the clergy, and the role of women in the church.

First, **clerical privilege**. This is the idea that a priest is a special person who has a right to certain privileges, that priests have, by reason to their clerical status, access to privilege and power with the ecclesial community and that they are therefore exempt from accountability. This sense of entitlement prevailing among some ordained men could be conducive of exploitative behavior. As the Me-Too Movement has shown, when people have power and feel unaccountable, abuse happens and those without power are abused.

The second issue that needs to be discussed by the church as a whole is **celibacy**. Admittedly, the majority of sexual abusers are married men and are abusing family members. Nevertheless, it would seem that when there is no natural way to express affection and love, the desire turns abusive.

St. Paul counsels celibacy in his first epistle to the Corinthians:

I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. 33 But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, 34 and he is divided. I am telling you this for your own benefit. . .for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction. (1 Corinthians 7:32-35)

But this is not my experience. I know many married men – some of them sitting in this church – who are totally dedicated to their wives and children and totally dedicated to the things of the Lord. And I know celibate priests who are not totally dedicated to the things of the Lord or about how they may please the Lord. Again, I am not saying that celibacy causes pedophilia, but I am saying that the idealized culture of clerical celibacy and clerical privilege has allowed it to hide there for a long time, and, when there is no natural way to express physical affection and love, the desire can turn abusive.

Third, we need a frank and honest discussion about a hidden subculture of **homosexuality** that exists within the celibate Catholic clergy. Again, I do not in any way want to imply that homosexuality causes pedophilia. It does not. The reality is that in our society the majority of the perpetrators of sexual abuse of minors are married, heterosexual men who are abusing young girls, many of them members of their own family. But, among Catholic priests the majority of the victims of sexual abuse are young boys. Again, when there is no acceptable way to express physical affection and love, the desire can turn abusive. If one is truly celibate it really doesn't matter whether one is heterosexual or homosexual. And

celibate priests who are gay should not feel they need to hide something about themselves. In my opinion, the issue of sexual abuse of children by priests will not go away until there is a frank and open discussion about the issue of homosexuality in the Church, as painful and as difficult as it may be.

Finally, we need to discuss **the role of women** in the Church. This is a bigger discussion and one that needs to include members of other religions since there are no women clergy or their equivalent in Islam, orthodox Judaism and orthodox Christianity, Mormonism and many other faiths, as well as Catholicism. And even many Christian denominations that ordain women in the United States and Western Europe do not ordain them in third-world countries.

Women clergy are a new phenomenon in Protestant denominations. For example, the Episcopal church (ECUSA), which was one of the first denominations to begin ordaining women, did not begin ordaining women until 1974. But in those brief 40 years, there is a visible qualitative change in the attitude of male priests. The experience has been positive for those Protestant denominations that ordain women.

So, I think that no solution to the sex abuse scandal will be found until there is a frank discussion of clerical privilege, celibacy, homosexuality, and the role of women in the Church.

But what are we to do here?

We need to be truthful and insist on the truth. For Jesus, this was his purpose for coming on earth. He tells Pilate, "for this was I born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." (John 16:37)

And we need to insist on that truth in our families. Nothing should be secret in a family. Truth will out, always, and when it does it is always worse. It's my experience from the time I was a child. When I tried to hide something from my parents they always found out and it was always worse than if I had told the truth from the beginning. This is what happened with sex abuse; dioceses tried to hide it to avoid scandal. But when the truth finally came out, as it always does, it was much, much worse.

Finally, we need to be convinced that the Church is not the clergy. You are the body of Christ. You are the Church and you have done nothing wrong. Which is why to ask you to pray for forgiveness seems so wrong when you have done nothing wrong. Those who have committed abuse should pray for forgiveness, not you.

We cannot see the church as consisting only of priests and bishops. The church is much more than that. There are 1.2 billion Catholics and only 600,000 priests, less than ½%. We need to place our faith in the 1.2 billion; that's the Church. Above all, the Church is all of you who, Sunday after Sunday, come to be nourished by Christ's saving word and were trembling hands to be nourished by his body and blood, the food that sustains us so that, despite the failures of our leaders and, more importantly, despite our own failures, we can be faithful to our God and to his Christ and to his Church which is this vast community of sinners is hoping for forgiveness and resurrection.