

Nov. 11, 2018

Thoughts from the pastor,

I wish I had news for you at this time, but right now things are on hold as some people try to figure out the best route for our parishes. The decisions made in replacing Fr. Don will affect SEAS, St. James, and at least one other parish. That is because there is still a possibility that a priest from another place might be sent here. Because of this, it is not up to us. So we wait for a while.

Another piece of quick information is a reminder that this weekend the second collection will be for the three food pantries that Catholic Charities run. We have done this before and it is called: *Hunger doesn't take a Vacation.*"

I did want to take this opportunity to shed more light on the difficulties of dealing with the abuse scandals the church is and has been facing. Last week I wrote about the situation of person bringing up abuse they had suffered decades in the past. This week I would like to help you look at another kind of situation, and that is when it comes up immediately. The immediate reaction is to feel the pain of the victim and want to punish somehow. This is an appropriate reaction but has to be nuanced a lot, because there is a huge range between penance and lynching.

The first problem is to ascertain if there has actually been abuse. Most situations are one person's word against another. For this reason the church has done two things in the U.S. They have a policy of reporting any allegation that might be a criminal act to the proper civil authorities. And whether or not it is an actual criminal act that is alleged, there is also a team of experts who also look at the situation. This team is made up of law enforcement, legal, and psychological experts and others depending on the diocese. The Church had been accused of covering up cases in the past. Some of this was because of a misunderstanding of the impact of this kind of crime in past decades. After all, there have not been many laws covering child abuse in years past. But this group of experts are given the task of investigating cases that aren't criminal but still hurtful. Like law enforcement they also have to be wary of false accusations. I personally have worked with people who were very confused about who actually caused their hurt. This can happen more easily when there has been abuse in their past and then the episodes get overlaid and confused. Even in the best of circumstances that can happen to anyone. I have been sure that a certain person told me something, when hours later I find out that I was mixing people together.

Even when the allegation is verifiable the case can be confusing. To help you understand this I have to remind you of my own background. I did not grow up on a hugging family. The first time I found myself in the middle of a strong Italian family suffering grief I thought that they had all gone crazy. When they started hugging and crying on my shoulder I felt violated. There are a lot of levels in which this can be problematic. A hug and a kiss on the cheek can mean many things. If it comes from a mafia member it might be kissing you for your final good-bye. I have been hugged and kissed by people who have had very different meanings behind their actions.

In our sexually mixed up culture this is a dangerous situation and has to be dealt with very carefully because a very innocent person can be destroyed because they have grown up with different boundaries for their emotional connections with people. This may be over simplifying some of the recent case we have been dealing with in our area but it does help explain what a bishop and his committee of experts have to deal with.

If they went with the idea of crucifying any priest who has had a person who felt uncomfortable when they were being hugged but that priest, we might only have the most cold-hearted of the priests left to serve in our churches. But this leads to a difficult decision for the people involved.

How do you figure out the difference between contact that was a mistaken crossing of personal boundaries, and the contact that was the beginning of a more predatory approach. This is what the treatment programs are supposed to be dealing with. And those programs always have the goal of helping the accused person find healthy ways of living out their life. For priests this would include better understanding of safe and appropriate relationships with people. It might also have to help them with issues that the priest might be facing in their own background.

In our Archdiocese there are three cases in the news lately in which the Archbishop and his team decided to give the priest another chance after having been through all the things that they thought would be the best way of dealing with the big three objectives I mentioned last week. Just so you remember, the first is trying to protect the victim from being hurt further and help them find healing. The second is to help the accused priest find a path to reconciliation, healing, and recovery. The third is to find ways to keep any other abuse from happening. In one of the cases in our Archdiocese the priest seems to be doing very well. In another one the priest has not done well and things did not turn out well. In the third case the priest had been doing very well but chose to resign rather than risk going through what the second one dealt with. Each of these kinds of cases are from the same root of an instance of perceived abuse. Each of them has caused tremendous hurt but not all the hurt has come from the perceived abuser. This is because some of our most basic Christian teachings have been ignored.

The Gospels give us examples of how Jesus worked with sinners. He was very hard on some of them. Those were the scribes and the Pharisees, who were very intolerant and showed no mercy. Sometimes Jesus showed great compassion. The woman caught in the act of adultery he kept from being stoned when he said, "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." On the cross he forgave the men who crucified him, and all of us who have helped crucify him by our sins, with the words: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." From many of the accounts too many have been ready to throw stones, pick up pitchforks, or are almost seemed ready to crucify. This is not only bad behavior for Christians but has the opposite effect from what is intended.

For the victim, it escalates the situation to the point where many of them feel like they would have been better off not bringing up the issue for it did more harm than good. For the perceived abuser, it strips away their dignity and gives them little hope of reconciliation and healing. This can destroy them for a situation that truly might have been a simple misjudgment of boundaries in a very mixed up culture. In trying to keep everyone safe for the future, it creates a culture in which few people would want to interact in any meaningful way, especially priests, who are targets in today's secular society. If we don't get a handle on this, priests are going to become demoralized and shut down; because they would have no way of knowing what might be the next thing that is going to be perceived as offensive.

Some of this might seem very obvious to many of you. I write it out like this because it is not clear to some who are dealing with these issues in very hurtful ways. If you don't believe me just watch the Facebook posts on this issue. This is yet another reason that I am so grateful to all of you at SEAS who have been so understanding, as you have worked with priests with problems the last thirty years.

God bless you,  
Fr. Frank