

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Priority: Responding to Abuse and the Abused

(Acts 6:1 - 7, Psalm 32:1-2, 4-5, 18-19, 1 Peter 2:4 – 9, John 14:1 – 12)

Introduction

Have you ever had an experience where you've been ignored or neglected? Have you ever felt invisible as you struggled with something, obviously needing help, and those nearby simply stood by and watched without coming to help. Sadly, these situations are becoming all the more common as the cultural reflex leans toward taking videos of someone in crisis, rather than actually getting involved and helping! It is the widows in today's first reading that are having this kind of experience, and it's the Greeks that bring it to the attention of the community so that the Apostles respond. In recent decades, there have been vulnerable people in our communities who were not only neglected but were abused. This horror was brought into the light by the Government's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. It is this great tragedy that is recognised in Archbishop Mark's next Apostolic Priority: Responding to abuse, and the abused.

Archbishop Mark writes:

In responding to abuse and the abused, we need to move beyond considerations of law and finance... Of course, we need to attend to legal and financial matters, but the paramount concern needs to be the good of those abused. Not all victims and survivors look to the Church for spiritual and pastoral accompaniment and care, but some do and others may in time, if ever trust can be established. We can learn from experience elsewhere in seeking to respond more effectively to abuse and the abused. Unless we do, this will remain a gaping wound – certainly for victims and survivors but for the whole Church as well – which makes it hard for us to move in the future.

1. Knowing the facts

As of 31 May 2017, the Royal Commission had interviewed 4029 survivors of abuse and 61.8% of those victims had been abused in a Catholic organisation. It's often thought that abuse was at the hands of Catholic priests, but the Royal Commission found that 37% of perpetrators were non-ordained religious, 29% were lay people and 30% were priests. In December of 2017, the Royal Commission produced its final report with 49 recommendations that related to the Catholic Church. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference accepted 48 of the 49 recommendations and have since worked toward their implementation.

This gaping wound caused by the scandal of sexual abuse in the Church continues to cause deep and lasting pain.

2. We are deeply sorry

2008 was the last time a Pope was in Australia. Whilst the Royal Commission hadn't yet begun, the horror of abuse in the Church was already beginning to appear. To this Pope Benedict XVI said, "Indeed, I am deeply sorry for the pain and suffering the victims have endured... These misdeeds, which constitute so grave a betrayal of trust, deserve unequivocal condemnation. They have caused great pain and have damaged the Church's witness. I ask all of you to support and assist your Bishops, and to work together with them in combating this evil. Victims should receive compassion and care, and those responsible for these evils must be brought to justice."

In 2018, Archbishop Mark as the then President of the Bishops Conference alongside Sr Monica Cavanagh, then President of Catholic Religious Australia said, "On behalf of the Catholic bishops and

Religious leaders of Australia, we renew our profound and heartfelt apology to all victims and survivors of abuse and to their families, friends and supporters, who have shared their suffering.” To any sitting amongst us today who have been impacted by sexual abuse in the Church, I am deeply sorry.

3. The way of hope

As we deal with this difficult issue, it can be helpful to recognise the distinction between God, and those who *represent* God. Whilst throughout history there have been many horrific actions done by those who *represent* God, these actions are in no way a reflection of God – in fact they are a betrayal of God.

As such, we must look beyond those who have *mis-represented* God, to the one who came to us as God made flesh, Jesus. It is in Jesus that our understanding of God, broken by scandal in the Church, can be restored. The God that Jesus reveals to us is gracious, merciful, filled with compassion, slow to anger and abounding in love. The God revealed in Christ works to heal the wounds of sin and comfort the most broken and vulnerable. Jesus bestows mercy on the woman caught in adultery, transforms the life of Zacchaeus the tax collector, heals the bleeding woman, and calls out the Pharisees when they mis-represent the God they claim to follow. In today’s Gospel, Jesus is preparing a place for us. It is in this place that the wounds of this life can be healed for eternity in the embrace of the one who is love.

Jesus challenges us when he says, “very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do.” In the wake of this great scandal, we are all called to be like Jesus, in order that we might take small steps to respond to abuse and the abused.

Conclusion

In the early Church, there were vulnerable people who were neglected, and the Apostles had to respond and take action to ensure all were cared for. Today, we are invited to draw our attention to abuse and the abused in the Church. 61.8% of survivors were abused in Catholic organisations. For this we are deeply sorry and echo the apologies of the Pope and our own Bishops. We recognise that the actions of these perpetrators were in no way a reflection of God and were in fact a betrayal of God. Today we look to Jesus, the one who truly reveals God, to help us in our efforts to respond to abuse and the abused. We ask our Lord to bring healing to the wounds of survivors, and to help us as Catholics in Australia to do whatever we can to welcome, support and care for victims of abuse.