



# Priestly People

SERVANTS OF THE PARACLETE

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## The Challenge of Forgiveness: *Healing the torn fabric of the Church*

by Ray Gunzel sP

(Fr. Ray) passed away in May 2020 and we honor his memory with a reprint of one of his thought provoking articles.

Few would deny that the most heinous sin against the innocence of childhood and youth is an assault on their fragile evolving sexual identity. It is an offense that is felt far beyond the life of the victim and his or her family. It is a wound that pierces the heart of the church and society down through many generations.

This blow to the heart of the Church awakens within us the desire for recrimination. As loyal Catholics we want to assist in healing the victim and make amends for the horrific crimes committed against innocence. ***We want the church and her clergy to regain their moral and spiritual authority as credible teachers and guides.***

Crimes against innocence demand that we bring the perpetrator to justice, even to the point of removing him from public ministry. Only the most insensitive or indifferent person has not experienced a wide range of emotions from rage and despair to feelings of hopelessness. ***But in Christ we find hope and healing, in Him we find forgiveness and reconciliation.***

A truly Christ-like response to recent sexual scandals of the clergy is, without doubt, the most daunting challenge for the Christian community. People who are models of faith find themselves challenged to the core by the specter of the harm that has been done to the Church and society. The misconduct of a few of their members has cost tens of millions of dollars and brought dioceses and religious communities to the brink of bankruptcy. ***Yet no matter how seemingly justified and appropriate our anger, we Christians are confronted by the fact that the heart of our faith summons us to forgive, forgive even those who perpetrate the most heinous crimes against others.***

Forgiveness is the wellspring from which pours the living waters of our life in Christ. Without forgiveness we abdicate



our right to claim to be true disciples of Jesus Christ; without a willingness to forgive even the most despicable offense, our religious posturing remains a shallow pretense. From the heart of Christ comes the divine imperative to forgive our enemies without counting the cost. ***Only unconditional love, from which flows forgiveness and compassion, determines the authenticity and fruitfulness of our faith.***

***Forgiveness does not require that we condone, excuse or tolerate the offense.*** True forgiveness grounded in love requires

us to look honestly and compassionately at a wounded brother or sister who shares every bit as much in the all forgiving love of the Father as the most faithful servant. True forgiveness of others begins with an acknowledgement that we are all wounded sinners. ***Each in our own way is utterly dependent on the gratuitous redeeming love of a God who is father to us all without condition or qualification.***

Forgiveness requires us to look deeply into the heart of the church and our own hearts to tease out attitudes, perceptions and values that contribute to a clerical culture of privilege and entitlement, characteristics totally contrary to the humble teacher of Nazareth. Forgiveness begins with honest and humble self-knowledge, an acceptance of our share in the sin that wounds the heart of humanity. The heart of the community of the faithful is not immune from this sin.

A culture of power and privilege, of unquestioned authority and power over others is the nest within which is nurtured attitudes that lead to abuse, manipulation and exploitation of the powerless. This culture of abuse is nurtured and sustained by unreflective and uncritical trust and confidence from those over whom that authority is exercised.

Some people took advantage of an exaggerated “respect” for a person’s right to privacy without question or challenge. This respect for privacy ruled even in the face of the most suspicious and inappropriate behavior. Only the courageous speaking out of the victims and their families brought this abuse to light and put a stop to the abusive behavior.

When a priest or religious was eventually exposed as an offender, the first thought was to protect the faithful from scandal and protect the image of the church, the clergy and religious. Sometimes a caring, pastoral response to victims followed. Ultimately, everyone is responsible for protecting the integrity of the Church and its leaders. ***The healing process requires the solicitous care of our religious teachers and leaders and all the faithful members of the Body of Christ.***

The healing of the fabric of the Church begins with each of us accepting our share of responsibility. Our individual life is the well-spring from which springs the renewal and healing of the community of Faith. ***Each one of us is a cell of the body of Christ, but each one of us is also a body to be filled and transformed by Christ.*** As such we must bring into fullness in our lives the full reality of his resurrected life. The resurrected Christ has no body to live in except ours. This is not a poetic, pious aspiration, but a concrete functional reality. The church, and each one of us individually, are the continuation of the incarnation of the Word of God.

Collectively, the church is the body of Christ, but each one of us is called to be that body in its fullness acting in the name of Christ. The condition of the Church in the world is a reflection of the condition, the intensity of the life of Christ in each one of us.

Mary is the model of the Church because she was totally given over, surrendered to the mystery of giving the redemptive Word

of God human flesh. Paul experienced this mystery in his own life when he exulted: “For through the law I died to the law, that I might live in God. I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me...” (Gal 2:19-20).

The fullness of Christ living in us drives out all that is not of God, and frees us to live the ultimate truth of our human nature. ***To live in Christ is to discover the fullness of God as the ground of our being. Then love and compassion are liberated to flow through us as clear water through a spring.***

We cannot worship at the altar of God one day a week and pay homage to the God of mammon during the rest of the week. Purity of heart is an all or nothing affair; either God in Christ reigns in us, or the God of mammon. The resurrected Christ cannot share our life with the God of Mammon. ***It’s all or nothing.***

Every Christian is challenged to consider and ponder the Lord’s central teaching on what it means to be a follower of Christ, to “put on the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 1:10; 2:16). At the Last Supper Jesus summed up the entirety of his mission when he took bread and wine and instituted the Eucharist, the eternal sacrament of Divine Mercy and Forgiveness: “...for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt. 26:28). On the cross Jesus’ last words were of forgiveness for those who would perpetrate the worst possible insult to a person’s sense of self-worth.

From this abyss of humiliation and rejection he proclaimed the message of Divine Mercy. ***Jesus’ Spirit transcended the personal horror being perpetrated against his personhood: He forgave his murderers.*** By this act of unconditional forgiveness Jesus breathed into the heart of the church for all time its single identifying characteristic. In this act of supreme love Jesus summed up and completed the mystery of the Eucharist. The mystery of the Eucharist living in and through us dissolves and abolishes for all time all class distinctions. It makes sinners and saints, offenders, and victims one body in Christ. There is no room in the Body of Christ for privilege, entitlement or unquestioned authority and power. All are subject to the same law of unbounded Charity and compassion for sinners.

***The Eucharist comes to completion in very real, concrete acts towards one’s neighbor, even though that neighbor might have grievously offended us.*** This truly heroic stance in the face of those who would cause us harm and suffering, even to the taking of our life, is the defining characteristic of Jesus’ mission (Lk. 23:34). It is the characteristic that is the fruit of divine love coursing through the body of Christ on earth. The body of Christ on earth is a seamless, unified and coherent organism. The living waters of the resurrected Christ must flow without restraint through every organ of the body without hindrance, from head to toe.

If then we face directly into the meaning of our participation in the Community of Faith, Christ’s body in time, we are confronted with the stark and unambiguous call to “be

Christ” for our world, in our time and place, individually and collectively. This is more than a declaration of abstract theological faith. We are called to be the forgiveness of Christ living in our flesh. The mystery is made effective in our actions and our relationships. ***Christ’s forgiveness, his healing and his redemptive act in the Eucharist are all inclusive, no one is excluded and you and I are the agents by which this divine mystery of reconciliation is released into our world through time.*** With the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete at Pentecost, we have become co-operators in the ongoing work of the salvation of the world. Into our bodies, to take possession of our mind, heart and will, Christ poured the living flame of the Holy Spirit. From that moment until now the community of the Faithful have been the body of Christ, the Incarnation through time. We are the healers of the lepers, the forgiveness poured into the heart of the prostitute; we are the welcome to the tax collector; we are the healing balm poured out upon the sex offender.

A lesson that seems to be lost on so many of us is that on the cross Jesus revealed by example the greatest height of human dignity, nobility and virtue awaiting birth from the depths of our consciousness. There is the potential in each of us to transcend the evil, the darkness, the sin that dominates our heart by forgiving and praying for the good of those who would persecute us or harm us in any way.

The cross therefore is not an instrument of shame and failure, but rather a sign from which flows an image of the highest, most glorious and heroic accomplishment of the human soul: the ultimate triumph and victory over the darkness that dominates and tyrannizes the human spirit. By his incarnation and final passion and death on the cross, Jesus opened the way for us to follow him into the Kingdom; not later, someplace else, but right here, right now.

***Understanding and compassion with forgiveness of our adversaries is the key that opens the Kingdom within our hearts.*** This is a difficult lesson for those of us who struggle against personal offense from others; how to cope with those who cause us suffering and do good to the offender. This is the greatest triumph over our fallen human nature; Christ taught by his final act what it means to be truly human, truly liberated from the tyranny of our sinful nature.

This is the mystery we celebrate and proclaim as the central belief of our faith when we take the Eucharist. We proclaim our willingness to be taken and consumed into this mystery of divine love, to become the action of Christ in our time and place. St. Augustine reminds us that the Eucharist is more than a thing, an object of veneration, something we can venerate but keep safely outside ourselves in the tabernacle or monstrance. Augustine puts it this way:

The bread is Christ’s body, the cup is Christ’s blood... if therefore you are Christ’s body and members, it is your mystery that is placed on the Lord’s table. It is your own mystery that you are receiving! Be a member of Christ’s Body then so that

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your “Amen” may ring true. Be what you see; receive what you are. All who fail to keep the bond of peace after entering the mystery receive not a sacrament that benefits them, but an indictment.

What then if the compassion of Christ remains locked in our hearts because we allow our own bias, prejudice and sentiments to trump Christ’s call to be his body? What if, in spite of our devotion to the Eucharist, in spite of our celebration of the great mystery of resurrection and Pentecost, we allow the mores and perceptions of our unenlightened culture to determine our response to the sexual offender?

We then deny not only the offending person an opportunity to experience the enfleshed love of Christ, but we deny the Church, the body of Christ, our submission to the fundamental imperative to give flesh to divine love. To be a sacrament of divine mercy, healing and forgiveness, means that we, in our bodies, our hearts, take divine forgiveness into those places where others refuse to go; to the outcast, the despised, the feared; and yes, the sex offender!

One of the greatest gifts we can offer to the victims of clerical sex abuse is to offer to the offender an opportunity to reconcile his heart and soul to the Christ they are committed to serve. By ministering Christ’s healing to the offender, we extend care and compassion to the victim by insuring that the offending behavior stops and potential future victims are protected and kept safe from harm.

To do otherwise does victims a disservice by contributing to the futile hope that in the suffering of the perpetrator is their healing. The Church Christ founded lives in the hearts of those who transmit compassion, encouragement and forgiveness to all.

These men must not return to ministry, but they must undertake the silent, solitary and anonymous ministry of prayer and penance that goes directly to the heart of our wounded church and world.



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