

Humbly Reverencing the Cross

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 31

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

John 18:1-19:42

This Lent has been a particularly painful one for Catholics throughout the world as we have been reminded daily by the media that the Church, the Bride of Christ, is a broken, wounded, sinful Bride, constantly in need of the healing and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Every day, the Pope has been plastered in the newspaper and on the television as the media has tried to make an already painful situation even more scandalous. While I'm not going to go into the details of that situation here, nor do I feel the need to defend the Pope, I do want to share with you what has gone on in my own heart and what it means to me this Good Friday.

First, when I hear stories of priests and religious who have abused others, especially children, I feel deep sadness. I have counseled victims of abuse and I know that their pain is something profound. It changes them and creates areas of hurt that they deal with the rest of their lives. My prayers go out to all of the people who have been abused by members of the Church.

In addition to sadness, I am angry. I'm angry that for the last eight years—ever since the news of widespread abuse first hit in the United States—I have been particularly self-conscious about how I do ministry. I have to be careful who and where I talk to or hug people. I have also had people verbally accost me in public, telling me that I'm going to hell simply because I'm wearing a Roman collar. It makes me angry that a uniform that used to signify help, comfort, empathy, forgiveness, and love, is now seen by some people as a symbol of hurt, lies, scandal, and mistrust.

Another feeling that I experience with the news of clergy abuse is humility. I am humbled by the fact that the Church, the Bride of Christ, is human, and therefore sinful. Each news story reminds me of my own humanity and my own sinfulness. I am humbled by the fact that I have hurt parishioners throughout the course of my eleven years as a priest. I'll never forget the mother in North Little Rock who came to me one day and said that her son cried himself to sleep because of me. She explained how I had made a joke at Mass the day before and didn't realize that I had hurt his feelings. I was devastated. It reminded me of the words that Bishop McDonald had spoken to me just a couple of years before, "Thomas, your joking is going to get you in trouble some day."

I know that there have been many more times since then that my words, actions, selfishness, inconsiderateness, or aloofness have caused people pain. For those times, I am truly sorry. I am humbled by my sinfulness and our celebration today of the veneration of the cross of Jesus Christ reminds me that we all need the cross and the victory of the cross—even priests, even the Pope. As we all come forward here today and venerate the cross, I invite us to be mindful of the fact that Christ did not choose the Church as His Bride because she was spotless and sinless, but because She is faithful and loves Him and needs Him.

Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. No one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

-Ephesians 5:25-27, 29-30

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read Revelation 21:2-5a. What hope and desire does it stir up in your heart about the Church, the New Jerusalem, the Bride of Christ?