

Comments After Communion
August 18-19, 2018
Fr. Michael Renninger

I'd like to have a frank word with you about all that you have read and heard in the past two weeks about the abuse scandals that are once again shaking the faith of so many good people.

We are a family of faith. When good things happen in the family, we celebrate and rejoice. When hard and horrible things happen, we cannot avoid them. Transparency is always crucial, and it is Christian.

The church is a family of faith. After all that we have learned in the past few weeks, some may want to 'take a break' from the family, while these new revelations sink in. I understand that.

But on a deeply personal level, I know that my life does not make sense without this family of faith we call the Catholic Church. So, as a baptized member of the church, I do not flee from what's happening. With you, I want to seek God's guidance together.

Times like this force those of us who are ordained to take stock and be honest. Ordained ministers of the church were granted privileges because we were meant to represent Jesus Christ on earth.

But Jesus said that we should humble ourselves like little children if we want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and Jesus also said that anyone who harms a little one 'would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone around his neck.' After all that you have read and heard, one conclusion is justifiable: We, the ordained, are no longer automatically worthy of your sacred trust.

Now, I am not the pope. I am not a cardinal. I am not a bishop. But I am your brother in Christ, and your pastor. And I believe that Christ shows us the way forward at all times. Even these times. Especially these times.

So, to the best of my ability, I want to move forward in faith with you, doing what the Holy Spirit tells us to do.

I've prayed about this a lot in the past few weeks. If we don't pray, how will we hear God's voice? And after some time of prayer, I think that the Holy Spirit is telling the ordained men of the church that we need to stop talking, and start listening.

We need to stop making excuses, and start listening to the truth – the truth which *you know*.

The ordained need to listen humbly, first of all, to victims and their advocates, who might tell us how to begin to ease suffering and to make recompense.* We need to listen to those who are insisting that the whole truth be told. We need to listen to the smart people who are saying that our system of seminary education is deeply flawed, and ask how it might be reformed so as to

produce leaders who thrive as human beings. We need to listen to those calling for new layers of oversight, because the ones that we, the ordained, imposed upon ourselves failed so miserably. We the ordained need to be listening. We need to be learning. We must constantly ask for God's mercy, and yours.

This week, I will send out an email to everyone on our email list. The same message will be posted on the parish web page, and in next week's bulletin. These messages will outline how I plan to start listening to you, and with you.

I am not going to start this process by giving a series of presentations in which I tell you what I think.

I need to hear from you. I need to listen to you, without interrupting, as you share your questions, your pain, your anger, your ideas. We will host a series of listening sessions, in which my task will be, NOT to answer questions, but to listen to yours.

And having listened, we – the parish staff and key lay leaders - will form a plan for our next steps: how to provide the information you've asked for, how to address the questions you've raised, how to respond to bring healing to others.

This week, I will consult with very smart people here in the parish who can help to give shape to how we want to move forward together.

The invitation will be consistent: if you would like to join in this conversation, you are most welcome. If not, perhaps you will at least be comforted by the fact that your parish has started such a dialog.

More than anything, I ask you to please pray for those whose lives have been shattered by the reality of abuse, both within the church, and beyond. Pray for their families. Pray for those who are at risk today. And pray with confidence that the Risen Lord will work through you, his baptized daughters and sons, to help the church to be more fully what it is supposed to be – the Body of Christ on earth.

**See Kathleen Sprows Cummings, "For Catholics, Gradual Reform is no Longer an Option." New York Times, August 17, 2018.*