

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Would that I had good answers to your many questions about what's happening in the Church. I don't. Would that I could help us all make sense of the ecclesial conflict and confusion in the news and in our hearts and minds. I can't. Would that I could promise that this will soon be over. It won't be. I read the same news you do. I have no special sources. Yes, Cardinal O'Malley met with the priests of the Archdiocese about a week ago - and in my estimation it was a good meeting. But I didn't go to that meeting expecting to hear new things. The meeting was good because the Cardinal and others spoke to us priests about supporting one another as we support the people in our parishes and for all of us to be supportive wherever we can of those who have been abused and betrayed.

I left that meeting realizing, yet again, that this tragic saga will not end or come to some generally accepted resolution in my lifetime - or in yours. On occasion, over the years since 2002 and the publication of stories about sexual abuse by priests in Boston, I've been asked when we'll stop praying one of our weekly intercessions in the prayers of the faithful: "For the healing of those who have been abused and betrayed and for the restoration of trust in confidence in the Church, let us pray to the Lord..." My answer to that question is always the same: "We'll stop praying that prayer when we no longer need to pray it." As the news so loudly reminds us: we still need to offer this prayer.

Looking ahead I'm sure that the Attorneys General of many or even all states will conduct investigations of the crimes of the Church and its ministers as was done in Pennsylvania. Yes, many and even most of those cases are decades old and many victims and their abusers have died. Indeed, changes made in Church and parish life since 2002 have gone a long way, even if imperfectly, to ensure that abusers do not have access to the most vulnerable among us. But it's how the history of these crimes has been handled and managed that civil authorities want to bring to light and that needs to happen. That line of inquiry, as we have seen, opens church leadership (current and past) to a new scrutiny and the fallout from that will be disappointing, maddening and sad. I believe, however, that this process will have a purifying effect on church life and for that we should all be grateful.

In the meantime, however, it's not easy to be a Catholic. It's near impossible to try to explain to non-Catholics why we still belong to and worship with the Catholic community. And that task becomes more and more difficult as more and more reports fill the news. Even those of us who are able to make solid distinctions between our faith in Christ and the criminal abuse and failures of some of its ministers find ourselves stretched again and again by the negative pull on our souls by all we've learned and continues to be revealed.

As a pastor I know this burden very well but also as a pastor I'm blessed to see how the life of the faith community endures and pushes ahead even in these dark and difficult days. We already have several new people inquiring about RCIA and becoming a Catholic - and these calls have come since the McCarrick and Pennsylvania stories hit the headlines. I've been privileged to minister over the last month to sick and dying parishioners and their families and to families coming to the Catholic Church, in grief, to bury their dead. I've had several opportunities in the last two weeks to sit and talk with individuals who truly needed to hear the *good news* of the gospel in their lives to help them find the light of hope in their despairing souls - and they came to the Church to find that light and went away unburdened and hopeful in a way they hadn't known for a long, long time. And each weekend over the past month I wait to see if our pews will fill for mass - and they do, more and more, as summer vacations end and our daily lives readjust to the approaching change in seasons and all that it brings.

Be sure that I'm not being a Pollyanna here! Not a day, not an hour goes by that I'm not aware of the clouds that hang over our Church and our lives as Catholics. Every day at least several people and often many more want to talk to me "about what's going on." The burden is heavy on all of us and we need each other to make our way through this crucible. It's at times like this that we need to focus on the Cross of Jesus and ponder.

Here are some of the reasons I continue to walk with the Church in spite of what has happened, is happening and will continue to unfold before us. I will begin with my personal reasons and go on to those reasons that I hope and pray hold for us all.

1) In a particular and peculiar way the Church has been my whole life. I was born into it. I grew up in it. I was nurtured in the Catholic faith. I have spent my life in its arms and my work and life as a priest have been my peace, my joy and my hope. In addition, I cannot discount the reality that the Church is my future, my home, my security and the place and the people who, I pray, will hold me and care for me when my time in this life comes to its end.

2) I believe in Jesus Christ and my belief in Christ is mediated in the life of the Church which I understand and accept to be truly his mystical Body in time and space. I'm not just saying that - I believe that. If I didn't believe that, my whole existence would be rather foolish. I believe that the Church is the Body of Christ in our world no matter how poorly any or all of us reflect in our lives who we are (the Body of Christ) and no matter how poorly we live the gospel we preach. If the validity of the Church as Christ's Body depended on our holiness we all should have cashed in our chips long ago.

3) Everyone in the Church is called by Jesus to live a holy life - a life that is loving, forgiving, self-sacrificing and faithful to God and God's law in the particular circumstances that are peculiar to each. I am not deemed holy because my life is more faithful than one whose sins are greater than mine. I stand before God and will be judged purely on my own merits. As will you. I know my own faults and failings and I know how I have sinned in thought, word and deed before God and my neighbor. And I know that God forgives me. As Pope Francis has said many times, "The Church is meant to be a field hospital: the Church heals, it cures. There are so many wounded! So many people need their wounds healed!" When the battle has been particularly fierce, when our foes are found in our own ranks, when the injured are many, and when illness is discovered to be endemic - we do not close the hospital! If anything we double our efforts and expand our outreach - because that is what we're called to do and that is who we're called to be: the Body of Christ in the world today.

4) As horrific as have been the crimes perpetrated on the most vulnerable by the Church and its ministers, as clear as it is that a radical transformation is in order, as daunting as it is to consider what it will take to accomplish this: the Church -and that is us- is called to renew and deepen its commitment to Jesus, to his gospel and to the mission that is ours by virtue of our being baptized Catholics. As tragic as this history of abuse and its cover-up are, the truth is that the grace, power, beauty and mission of the Church are deeper, broader and wider than the sins of any and all its members. The Church is Christ and Christ, in his mercy, is greater than the whole sinful history of humankind. This is what we believe.

And so the life of the Church goes on. In our own parish this past week we finally cleared some hurdles with the Historic District Commission which have even further delayed our beginning the work on re-purposing the rectory into our new parish ministry center. Not too long from now, I will be writing to ask you to give generously in support of this effort. I cannot imagine more difficult times or circumstances in which to make such an appeal to you but the life of our parish goes on and we need to prepare well for those who come after us. And some of you reading this letter just thought, "Fr. Fleming - do you think that others *will* come after us?" Yes, I do: I hope for this and I pray for this. And I hope and pray you are of the same mind and heart. I hope you will not only stay on board but that you will redouble your efforts to make of the Catholic faith community in Concord a people and a place where others come to hear the good news of the Gospel, to meet Christ Jesus, to be refreshed by his sacraments, to commit to the work of justice his gospel enjoins on us and to gather in communion at his table where he, our wounded Healer, comes to heal our wounds.

Some dioceses, bishops, pastors and parishes are scheduling ways in which a local Catholic community can express its grief over this tragic history and its compassion for those who have been victims. I will bring this possibility to our Parish Pastoral Council this Monday night, September 10.

Let us pray for those who have been victims of the Church and its ministers. Let us pray for the Church in its efforts: to do penance; to amend its ways; and to make any and every change necessary to ensure that our faith communities are truly safe places for all. And let us pray for one another, for our faithfulness to the Lord, to his gospel, to one another and to the Church we call home.

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming