

## *Reflections*

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### **Christmas Salve for a Wounded Church**

Christmas marks the most significant religious and cultural event in human history, when the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, “for our salvation, came down from heaven...and was made man.” It should be a time that evokes feelings of gratitude, joy, serenity, love, goodness, and hope.

But as this holy season approaches, the Church has been severely wounded by an increasing stream of accusations and investigations of clerical immorality and hierarchical concealment. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick was removed from public ministry in June for an allegation of sexually abusing a minor, and one month later, with further reports that he carnally corrupted adult seminarians over decades, he resigned from the College of Cardinals. In August, the Attorney General of Pennsylvania released a 1,400 page report describing widespread sexual exploitation of adult males in that state by hundreds of priests and pervasive hierarchical cover-up.

Since then, fourteen additional attorneys general have begun or announced investigations of the Catholic dioceses in their respective jurisdictions. In October, the U.S. Department of Justice issued subpoenas to probe clerical molestation of children in Pennsylvania. Then, on November 13, while the semi-annual meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) was underway, two class action suits were filed in federal district courts by victims of clerical sexual abuse, one case accusing the USCCB and the Vatican of operating a criminal enterprise under RICO federal racketeering statutes.

And how has the hierarchy responded? With inaction, denial and silence. At the opening of the bishops’ meeting, USCCB President Cardinal Daniel DiNardo announced that the Holy See had directed them to not vote on two measures aimed at improving episcopal accountability in sex abuse cases. In his report to the group, Francesco Cesareo, the chairman of the bishops’ National Review Board said: “Today, the faithful and the clergy do not trust many of you. They are angry and frustrated, no longer satisfied with words and even with prayer. They seek action.”

But action was beyond their grasp. After the defeat of a proposal simply to encourage the Holy See to release whatever documents it could about Archbishop McCarrick, one bishop remarked “we cannot seem to speak clearly, even when we want to agree.”

Many priests and bishops were stunned by the revelations and are disconcerted by the hierarchical inaction. An aggrieved laity is producing relentless commentary on social media about the betrayal, withholding donations to the Church, and contributing to numerous reports in the secular press. There has been little guidance for thoughtful deliberation, pastoral efforts and healing.

In spite of the moral darkness permeating the Church, things can change. Reform, however, will occur only when the true nature of the problem is recognized and addressed. Bishop Thomas Daly of Spokane remarked, “There is truly a diabolical nature to this crisis.” Bishop Richard Stika of Knoxville expressed similar views, stating, “I believe Satan is behind all of this.” Both

are echoing St. Pope Paul VI, who in 1972, shortly after Vatican Council II, declared that “the smoke of Satan has entered the Church of God.”

A spiritual crisis cannot be solved solely with material approaches. As Cardinal DiNardo said at the end of the bishops’ meeting: “Our hope for true and deep reform ultimately lies in more than excellent systems, as essential as these are. It requires holiness: the deeply held conviction of the truths of the Gospel and the eager readiness to be transformed by those truths in all aspects of life.”

The cardinal’s solution requires a concerted effort by all Catholics, clerical and lay, to live the faith they profess. They must rid the Church of those who use their positions for self-gratification and the exploitation of others. A reformation can start now in Advent by making it not only a period of spiritual preparation for the birth of Our Savior at Christmas, but of repentance and renewal of the Church.

In this call for reform, there is an essential role for the laity. Bishop Thomas Daly of Spokane reminds us that, "During times of corruption and sin in the hierarchy and clergy, God raises up holy lay people and families to call again His Church back to holiness." Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler further emphasized that role: “This crisis needs the strongest lay voice possible.”

We are not in this place at this time by chance. God has willed us to work out our salvation in this period of moral corruption. Jesus, through His coming has given us the means – Grace, the Eucharist, the Sacraments, His Church – to attain that salvation.

Advent provides an opportunity to prepare ourselves spiritually for Christmas and begin the renewal. Undertake activities to morally strengthen yourself – say the Rosary daily, spend an hour each week in Eucharistic Adoration, go to Confession, attend Mass more frequently, meditate on the liturgical readings through which the penitential spirit of the season is exemplified. Pray for the Pope, cardinals, bishops and priests that they are faithful to Christ. Pray that the Church, though it is composed of members with human weaknesses, remains one, catholic, apostolic and holy.

As the current crisis reflects a diabolical influence, corporeal sacrifice is needed. As recently-deceased Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, reminded us, “Some sins, like some demons, can only be driven out by prayer and fasting.” And, it may also be time to reinstitute the Prayer to St. Michael following every Mass. When Pope Leo XIII wrote the prayer in 1884, he did so after having a horrific vision of evil spirits attacking and trying to destroy the Church. Although the prayer was no longer mandated after Vatican II, Pope John Paul II urged its continued recitation.

Do not stop these activities at Christmas. Continue them throughout the year. The future course of the Church rests within the heart and will of each one of us. If we truly want a Church that fully reflects the teachings of Our Lord, we must lead our lives according to those principles.

If we live everyday as a preparation for Christ’s coming, the results will be profound. For ourselves, our families and the Church, have hope and pray. If we do, our Church *will* be quite different.

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