

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (August 19, 2018) – Homily
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On the Liturgical Calendar, this past Tuesday was the feast of *Saint Maximillian Kolbe*, a Polish priest who is recognized as a *martyr of charity* – one who literally laid down his life in love. In 1941, as the Nazis were overtaking Europe and World War II commenced, the Gestapo arrested Father Kolbe and sent him to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Undeterred, Father Kolbe continued his priestly ministry amid the horrors of the camp: praying with inmates, consoling others, and hearing confessions. Yet, his ultimate act of self-sacrifice occurred when he heard a young father cry out in agony as he was sentenced to a starvation bunker. Upon hearing his cry, Father Kolbe offer to take his place and *he* was sent to the starvation bunker rather than the young father. A survivor of Auschwitz commented that Father Kolbe's self-sacrifice was "*like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp.*"

How we need that *light* at this moment! This past Tuesday also marked the release of a Grand Jury Report from the Pennsylvania Attorney General detailing the *exact opposite* of the priestly self-sacrifice shown by Father Kolbe, revealing despicable crimes of sexual abuse committed by clergy and the failure of Church leadership to address it. I began reading the report the past few days; it will make you literally sick to your stomach. My heart was broken for the victims, children who were so profoundly wounded by men who are called to act *in persona Christi* – in the person of Christ. Saint Paul tells us that if one member of the Church suffers, we all suffer (1 Cor 12:26). While we certainly cannot understand the depth of suffering experienced by the victims, in a spiritual way, we can unite in their suffering and bring it to the altar as we celebrate Mass this Sunday. Jesus weeps for them and suffers with them.

I was also filled with anger upon reading the Report. Anger towards the priests who perpetrated such heinous acts and the bishops who failed to act to protect God's children. At ordination, a priest's hands are anointed with *chrism* for the service of God and His people. To think that such hands can commit acts such as sexual abuse is sickening. In one of his letters, Saint Peter tells the bishops in the early Church that, "God's flock is in your midst, give it a shepherd's care" (1 Pt 5:2). Sadly, the Report shows that some bishops did not offer that care but rather left some of the sheep, the most precious ones, to ravenous wolves.

Upon hearing about the Grand Jury Report, I'm assuming that you share those same sentiments as well – sorrow and anger. *You have every right to feel that way.* Perhaps you feel betrayed and maybe you're even thinking about leaving the Church altogether. I can understand how you would think that. However, in the midst of those emotions, perhaps you can let FAITH have the upper hand, rather than the sins of clergy. Personally, what sustains me in these dark times is FAITH, particularly your faith in Jesus Christ. I place my faith not in institutional structures or men who wear hats, but in JESUS CHRIST. Faith in Jesus provides LIGHT! I see the LIGHT of FAITH when a team of parishioners goes down to Haiti to serve the poorest of the poor. I see the LIGHT of FAITH when our outreach team rallies around and supports a young father stricken with cancer. I see the LIGHT of FAITH when our youth group goes down to the streets of Philadelphia to serve food to the homeless. I see the LIGHT of FAITH when parents sacrifice for their children and help them grow in their own faith. And there are so many instances of the LIGHT of FAITH working in our parish. The darkness of this time cannot overcome the power of faith in your hearts!

I think the verse we hear from our Second Reading is fitting for this weekend. Saint Paul tells the Ephesians, *“Watch carefully how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, making most of the opportunity, because the days are evil”* (Eph 5:15-16). Saint Paul sees the *opportunity* to live wisely, to live as disciples of Christ, even in the midst of evil. This verse is of particular importance for shepherds of the Church, bishops and priests. To first duty of a shepherd is to WATCH – to protect the flock from anything which would harm it, from without AND within. Secondly, it is to ACT – to live in a way which leads the flock to good pasture. So, this is the opportunity for RENEWAL, for the shepherds of the Church to renew their commitment to WATCH and to ACT in leading the flock entrusted to them by God. In this way, we will live as LIGHT. LIGHT is what dispels evil, especially the horrible evil of clergy sexual abuse. Being TRANSPARENT is key for renewal in the Church. When there is light, Satan scatters. As a Church, we have to bring all these evils to the LIGHT, because as we hear in the Gospel of John, *“the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”* (Jn 1:5).

There’s a story told of Saint Francis of Assisi, who lived during the 13th century, a tumultuous time in the history of the Church. Saint Francis was praying in a dilapidated church, San Damiano, when he heard Jesus tell him, “Rebuild my Church.” Initially, he thought this statement referred to the building itself. However, Our Lord desired Saint Francis to spearhead a spiritual renewal of the Church as a whole, through being faithful to the Gospel and living a life of simplicity, focused on Christ. Francis did indeed carry out that task, rebuilding the Church, because he knew the foundation of it is JESUS CHRIST. That is how renewal beings in our Church today – getting back to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and loving God and neighbor, not worrying about merely maintaining institutional structures and a good reputation.

So, let us continue to pray for the victims of clergy sexual abuse. God weeps with them and loves them, a truth disfigured by some who were called to image that love. Let us also pray, as we hear in Jeremiah, for shepherds after the Heart of the Lord (Jer 3:15). Certainly, there *are* such shepherds in the Church today, right now, *much more* than the ones who have degraded the Priesthood of Jesus Christ. May the example of Saint Maximillian Kolbe spur us all, both clergy and laity, to self-sacrificing love. It may not be to same extent as martyrdom, but we can do it, with God’s help, in the ordinary moments of each day. In that way we all can *“rebuild the Church,”* brick by brick, and be *“like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp.”* May God bless all of you and know of my prayers for you during this difficult time. Thank you for your witness of Faith in Jesus Christ.



Our Lady of Guadalupe Church