

After all that I now know, how can I still go to Church?

Father Christopher M. Walsh Pastor, Saint Raymond of Penafort Church

On Thursday, Archbishop Charles Chaput will be installed as the new Archbishop of Philadelphia. His arrival from Denver brings with it a history of zealous preaching and a call to genuine conversion and holiness. He is a proven communicator, a man who has led with integrity and displays a genuine care for each person he encounters. He arrives in Philadelphia as the District Attorney is seeking access to Archbishop Emeritus Anthony Bevilacqua and preparing for the criminal trial of several priests, including the former Secretary of Clergy. While the news has carried stories about Archbishop Chaput's success throughout his years of service to the Church, the news has also revealed details of inner workings of the Archdiocese as it handled and mishandled cases in which children were sexually abused (or at least had their boundaries seriously violated) by employees of the Archdiocese, including priests. While many of the faithful in the Archdiocese are truly excited by Archbishop Chaput's arrival, many are also asking: after all that I now know, how can I still go to Church?

Since the expansive sexual abuse scandal began unfolding in 2002, starting in Boston and moving throughout the nation and the world, my thought process has evolved a great deal. Like many Catholics, I first thought that this was an attack by the media against the Catholic Church. I attempted to downplay the reports as rhetoric and tried to ignore the ugly details when they were reported. I believed that many victims were just looking for money and that the Church was an easy target. As more of the story was revealed, my position evolved. I came to admit that there was in fact a history of sexual abuse by priests and it was more widespread than I had imagined. Crimes committed against children *did* happen, leaving victims and their families suffering at many levels. I also began to believe that the administration of the Archdiocese has mishandled cases. With these revelations, I maintained that while the Catholic Church had these problems, so did everybody else. These problems exist in other Churches and Houses of Worship, as well as families, schools and organizations that serve young people. I rationalized the problem; this is what happens, it is part of the broken human condition. I believed that people needed to accept that this happened, it was wrong, now let's move forward. Yet as I listened to people, especially those I met through Catholics4Change, I began to realize that people were not only not ready to move forward, they were not sure if they *wanted* to move forward. At least, many of these people were not sure if they wanted to move forward with the Catholic Church.

It was with this realization that I made the most recent evolution in my thinking as I began to appreciate how hurt people are by what has happened. Beyond the pain of those who have experienced the horror of sexual abuse in their life or the life of a loved one, there seems to be another suffering. Even beyond the pain of those who have been hurt by leaders in our Church who lied to them as cases were handled poorly and perhaps criminally, there seems to be another suffering. I am beginning to sense that this other suffering is a suffering that comes from the Church not being the Church. Like others, I grew up believing that the Church was a gathering of people who desired to be close to God through lives of holiness and

service. Priests were supposed to be the image of Christ, not men who abused innocent children. Bishops were supposed to be “shepherds of the flock”, not men who hid behind technicalities of the law and sought to promote their own image and career. I believe the people of God are hurt, people are angry, and are not sure how they can still go to Church because this Church we love so much has disappointed us time and time again as this horror has been revealed. The revelations that have come through testimony and reports of the Grand Jury, as well as the response of the Archdiocese, have caused the larger Catholic community to know the suffering that for years only victims knew. It is the suffering of a broken Church.

As I have sat with the immensity of this reality I came to realize that our pain is also the pain of Christ Himself. The sins that were committed by priests, bishops and others which have led to this horrific chapter in the life of the Church, are but some of the sins that put Christ on the Cross. It was some of these very sins that caused Him to sweat blood that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our pain in the midst of this crisis is the pain of Christ Himself. Just as we are hurting, so too is Christ. The way that many of us are experiencing the Church today is not the way Christ intended. This broken Church is not the gathering He hoped for when He sent the Holy Spirit upon us at Pentecost.

As always, Christ wants to bring us the healing we desire. I truly believe this and pray for it each day, especially for victims. Yet Christ also needs us to minister *in* the Church. As Christ walked the Road to Calvary on Good Friday, the faithful disciples wiped his face, helped him shoulder the Cross, offered a supportive word, or were simply present to him. They were there with Him while apostles, our first bishops, had walked away and were hiding. In a similar way, in this hour of agony, as the Church, the Body of Christ, is suffering, Christ needs his faithful disciples to be present. He needs us to stay and do what we are doing by calling for reform, being a voice for victims, seeking integrity in Church leadership, supporting the effort of others through prayer or simply being present to others who are in need of a comforting presence while this courageous battle is fought in our Church. I know that for many Catholics, after all that we have come to know and experience in this broken Church, we question how can we go to Church? Knowing this ugliness, how can we go to Church? Feeling this disgust, how can we go to Church? I appreciate the reality of this immense suffering and yet I still believe that God wants us to gather as his beloved people, God still wants us to be the Church. I guess I keep coming back to the question, where else can we go? We love the Church because we know that it is through the Church that we meet Jesus and through Jesus are drawn into a community as we journey to the Father and with the Father we experience the love we desire most. Thus, like Peter we cry out: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life (John 6, 68). I know that many are tired of giving the Church “another chance”, having been disappointed so many times when this chance was given in the past. Yet, as a brother in Christ, I ask that you find it in your heart to try again.

As we look at the great reform movements of our Church throughout history, they have rarely come about through the ministry of a Pope or a Bishop. The great reforms have come through ordinary people like Francis and Dominic, Philip Neri and Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. No only were they not

the powerful leaders of the Church, in many cases they were treated quite horribly by the Church leaders of their day. They were misunderstood, judged, mocked and alienated. Yet they remained focused on reform for one reason, they knew that the corruption in the Church was not the plan of God. Furthermore, they know that in His humility, God needed them to be an instrument of reform. Who will be the reformers today? God needs you.

I rejoice that Archbishop Chaput is our new Archbishop, but I also know that he is but one man in a very large Archdiocese. He will not be able to affect the kind of change that is necessary without each Catholic reclaiming the grace of our Baptism and living out the role of priest, prophet and king. Each of us must seek the reform and renewal of the Church by seeking personal holiness and offering our lives as a sacrifice, speaking the truth in love and joining Christ in the building of the Kingdom the Father desires. This opportunity excites me. Therefore, as I wrestle with what I know about the Church and know that more will come out in the months ahead as trials begin, I will still go to Church and I am hopeful that I will see you there. I hope that together we can pray, plan and support each other in this task that God has set before us: the reform of His Church. It is broken and He has called us to part of the team that fixes it!