21st Sunday of Ordinary Time
26 August 2018

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!

Two weeks ago, I was on vacation visiting my classmate from Rome in Boston. We had a nice time; however, it was during this time that the Pennsylvania grand jury report pushed the Church back into the news. I was grateful to be with my friend, who is also a priest, because it allowed us to share how we felt about what was going on in the Church. I’d like to share with all of you those feelings today:

SADNESS
The first feeling or emotion was one of great sadness, because of the sins and crimes that have been committed against the victims and the Church, the body of Christ. But this darkness, as horrible as it is, needs to be exposed to the Light of Jesus Christ! For it is only in bringing this darkness to the light of Christ and exposing it that are we able to experience healing, cleansing and purification. As Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) prayed in the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday 2005 and was recently quoted by our Holy Father Pope Francis in his letter to the People of God regarding this crisis: “How much filth is in the Church?..Lord save us!”

DISHEARTENED
Secondly, I feel disheartened. I was a seminarian in 2002 when the scandal broke in Boston and throughout the country; I watched as the U.S. Bishops developed the Dallas Charter, a standard of conduct for priests, deacons, and laity within the Church. But I am disheartened because although the U.S. Bishops set these standards, the bishops exempted themselves! The bishops do not have to abide by the same conduct as priests, deacons or laity who work for the church.

ANGER
Finally, I feel angry at some in the hierarchy’s narcissism, lack of humility and tone deafness in not acknowledging the pain of the victims and the church in general, pain and hurt is the result of the hierarchies’ own actions or inactions in covering them up!

You may have these or similar feelings…. I know I have them, as well as many of my priest friends and I think that’s okay.

It’s always amazing how God works in our lives. I think the readings today and especially the Gospel, address us exactly where we are.

Jesus has just finished the “Bread of Life discourse” in St. John’s Gospel. It is a “hard” teaching and so many who were listening decide to leave and go back to their old way of life.

Putting ourselves in the Gospel is always a good way to pray. Personally, I find it much easier to do whenever the Gospel concerns the apostles. I find it easy to identify with
the apostles because they always have the best intentions, but so often miss the mark, or don’t quite get it. It’s usually because they take their eyes off Jesus or rely on themselves and not Jesus.

Well here they are with Jesus and he says: “Do you also want to leave?” I can picture myself in their midst, thinking “Oh please, don’t look at me!” Then hearing Peter, (thank you, Peter!), say: “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

The apostles may not always “get it right”; but somehow in the very depths of Peter’s being, he knows intuitively that Jesus is the one who leads to life and truth and he’s able to articulate it.

When I was a seminarian in Rome, I would give tours of St. Peter’s Basilica to English speaking pilgrims for my apostolic work. Within the basilica there are many monuments commemorating the popes. One of the monuments I would include on my tour is the funeral monument of Pope Pius VII, he was pope during the time of Napoleon. Anyway, the story goes something like this…. Napoleon encounters Pius VII’s Cardinal Secretary of State and says “I’m here to destroy the Church.” to which the Cardinal Secretary of State responds “If 1700 years of corrupt priests and bishops haven’t done it, you don’t stand a chance.”

My brothers and sisters, the Church has been around a long time, it has endured many scandals and hardships. For the Church is not its buildings, popes or bishops. The Church is a community of Faith, founded by Jesus, and the belief in his person and through his death and resurrection in which we have been given Hope and are called to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News, the very person of Jesus Christ to the world in Love.

My friend in Boston is fond of saying, “the church will come to ashes and then will be built up again. It’s happened countless times throughout history.”

My brothers and sisters, it is your faith, our Faith, which are the embers shining in the ashes, which will rebuild and renew the Church! Please keep your eyes on Jesus so that as Jesus looks at us in this present time and asks “are you also going to leave?” We like St. Peter may respond with Faith and courage. “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!”