

"Needs, Questions, Change, Hope"

Homily of April 21, 2002

by Kate Nauer

Henri Nouwen, who was a Catholic priest who ministered with emotionally challenged people, told a story about a psychiatrist who had been working with a very, very difficult patient. Finally, in desperation, the psychiatrist threw his hands in the air and said, "I have done everything I can for you and you are still the same." The psychiatrist, sobbing, added, "I have failed to get through to you." From that time on the patient began to show signs of progress. Once the doctor and the patient could realize their own limitations as well as the limitations of the other, then they were able to move forward and the healing could begin.

There is a similar reaction in the Acts story that we heard today. Jesus is risen and Peter is feeling pretty confident. Remember this is the same Peter who, just three weeks ago, was denying that he even knew Jesus. But now, in his new-found confidence, he lets the eleven leaders know that this man that they crucified, was in fact the Lord in Christ. And when they hear this, the leaders are scared and confused and they respond by saying, "What are we to do?" Something very significant has shifted. Something very powerful has been revealed to them and they are not quite sure what to do with the information. Suddenly, those from whom the answer was usually given had no answer. What they did have was a need. They needed time to make sense of things and to sort through things.

What are we to do? It's a question resounding throughout Catholic communities in the United States. We're in the midst of a crisis, and everybody, from the Pope to the pews, is asking the same question, "What are we to do?" Something very powerful is being revealed to us and we're not quite sure what to do. Now, we have a great need and we need time to sort things through. Some things are more clear to us than others. In the sexual abuse of the minors and the cover-ups by some of our leadership, the response we must have as a Church is non-negotiable. We have to do all we can, first of all, to aid the victims of this horror and their families. And we have an obligation to see that the guilty are held accountable, not just the priests, but also the hierarchy who have mishandled their authority. Anything less will not assure us standards and safeguards to guarantee that our children are safe and that the victimization stops now.

If there is anything good to say about the crisis we are experiencing, perhaps it is that, as a Church, we are learning that Christian revelation and growth is not always attractive, nor does it come about without hard work. This is true of the relationships in our lives. Our friendships and marriages need to be intentional, or they begin to die.

Partnerships require care and conversation and space to grow. If we don't work on our partnerships, we wake up one day and we realize that we have lost our connectedness. And I don't think it is any different in our experience as a faithful people.

Institutions and communities need to grow and change or they die. And we are in a growth spurt in our Church today. Some would like to see the Church leap forward, and others would be content to see the Church step back just a little. Either way, the growth pains are real and, as a community, we would do well to pay close and prayerful attention to the subtle movement that is taking place in our parishes because something very powerful is being revealed to us today in our time.

Right here in our own parish, we have had two listening sessions in response to the crisis. All together, about three hundred people have attended these sessions and, although the sessions were centered on the issue of sexual abuse, many other questions were raised for us to begin to ponder as a community: topics of ordination, the role of women, celibacy and a married priesthood, homosexuality, and leadership accountability. All of these topics have come to the table because a forum was established where they could be discussed. No decisions were made, just an opportunity for ordinary parishoners to come together to seek comfort and courage, to acknowledge they don't have all the answers, but turning to one another for ideas and guidance.

It makes me wonder what the sex abuse crisis would look like today, had it been handled differently from the beginning. And maybe this is what Jesus meant when He said that life lived through Him would be full and abundant. He didn't say it would be easy or safe or that we should follow along without asking questions. God gifted us with this beautiful creation, with its joy as well as its woundedness, and then, God blessed each of us with spirit and grace, not to live in isolation or to be casual observers, but instead to live fully and abundantly. And in matters of faith and our relationship with God, God is always inviting us to ask the question, "What are we to do?" And then to be co-creators with God and to seek the deepest truth. It's not easy and it doesn't come naturally to us. Who wants to risk the unknown? It's way more inviting to remain in the comfort and safety zone.

My husband and I have three kids at home, aged seven, eight, and ten, and ever since the time they were very little, I would play a game with them or I would say, "Why don't you just stay three or four, six or seven years old?" And they would just look at me and smile, because there is a part of me that wants to protect their innocence forever and there is another part of me that wants to believe that I have all the answers that they are ever going to need. But I know neither one of these are good for them in the long haul, because I want my kids to live lives of abundance in Jesus. And in order for that to happen, I'm going to have to step aside and make room for them one day to ask the question, "What are WE to do?" And then I'm going to have to place faith and trust in

God.

As Catholic Christian parents and as adults who care for children, we have a duty to model for our kids lives of integrity and justice. By our actions or our failures to act, they will learn discipleship. Perhaps one of the greatest gifts of faith we can give to our kids and give to one another is to admit our limitations and our fears, to place trust in God and in one another. We saw the beauty in the promise that this can bring in the story of the psychiatrist and the patient. We saw it in the story of the early Christian Church. And we are seeing it in our Church today. Out of the crisis in our Church today has come much pain. But when we refuse to allow the fear of the unknown to be in charge, and when we replace fear with questions and conversation, then the work of healing and forgiveness and new life can begin. And, already, out of the ashes, something very powerful is being revealed to us. People are beginning to ask, "What are we to do?.... What CAN we do?"

We are beginning to discover that some of the old answers no longer fit the experience or the culture of the people. Tradition, mystery, and sacred truth will remain. But our style of leadership is in transition. Out of our pain is rising a thirst for dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect. And just like the followers of Jesus in the early Church, just as they couldn't have had the glory of that first Easter morning without the suffering of Good Friday, we are all, hierarchy, ordained and laity alike, going to have to struggle some as we move through this conversion, through this conversation about authority, about roles and gender. Because something great is being revealed to us today, we must listen with the ears of Jesus.

Revelation means to uncover, to see life with new eyes. New life doesn't happen easily or without risk. It's fragile and it needs to be handled with great care. With gentle but courageous hearts, and recognizing all of our limitations, let us move forward then and seek common ground and continue to build, caring gently for one another along the way. Amen.