

Homily 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time: Do you want to stay with me or leave?

Now is a very tough time in the church for all of us -- from the Pope to the people in the pews. As the story of our Church's sins is told yet again, the headlines and sound bites are painful for all of us to read and hear-- and this is especially true for the survivors, those who have been abused and betrayed. Our wounds are many and deep. *Once again, trust has been shattered.*

What happened as a result of bad shepherds is not only an embarrassment for all of us who wear a Roman collar but more than anything else it is a tragedy beyond words to the innocent lives that have been lost, damaged and forever changed. In the Gospel we heard about some people, when scandalized by the Bread of Life discourse who began to leave and Peter, though confused and feeling lost, looks at Jesus and says, "To whom shall we go?" Perhaps in times of difficulty, we too might feel like leaving Jesus and want to "walk away" from our church. Life in the Christian community is hard. Sometimes, the church can be a tough place. We hear things that we do not like; we see things that we do not approve of; we are forced to pray with people with whom we do not agree, or people who are different. *Our Church and its structures are in dire need of reform and renewal, repair and rebuilding, repentance and restoration.*

Fr. Mike Schmitz in his response to the sex abuse scandal urges everyone "Don't leave the Church but *lead* the Church"! Yes, indeed these are tough times to be Church. These are times to be loyal, to be faithful and willing to be courageous and lead the church. But why?

The leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel were called by Joshua and asked, "Whom do you want to serve?" "The God beyond the Rivers or the gods of the Amorites whose land you occupy now"! Jesus asked his chosen men, "Do you also want to leave"? for they had said, "It is too much to digest"? We fell, and most of you may feel the same at this time of the affairs of the Church?

In their response, the Israelites were convinced, and they said, we will serve the Lord who liberated us from the slavery, accompanied us in our moments of infidelity, nourished us and guides us in our trials and darkness. The disciples along with Peter were convinced that they had nowhere to go other than the Lord who stood by them, by sinners, the sick the rejected, the lonely and abused. So, it was their conviction, their one-on-one experience of the mercy, compassion, and unconditional love that they had received from their master that made them stay, to stand, to serve and to lead.

For a husband to serve, to stand by his spouse, to lead the household, to build a home, it takes lots of love and self-sacrifice founded in the Head, Christ, the Rock, and so is for the wife to stand by her husband, to submit, to serve and to be faithful it takes lots of love. This is what St. Paul reminds us through our second reading today. Jesus asks us the same question, do you want to stay or leave?

I arrived in Boston in 2002 at the height of the sex abuse scandal. I was scared, angry, embarrassed and shocked and of course deeply affected by it all then, and now ever deeply hurt by the failed leadership of the Church by condoning and covering up the crimes of these bad shepherds. Words fail to describe the anger that I feel towards the bishops who sheltered the criminals, neglected the abused, the victims of this tragedy. How could they compromise the priesthood, lead double lives and betray the Lord, the authority, the trust of the faithful? I have been struggling to make sense out of this scandal, and how do I respond to you my parishioners and family?

I want you to know, as your pastor, I stand with the victims of these crimes, and condemn the actions of these sinners and criminals, while at the same time call for those bishops and religious superiors who failed to act appropriately to face the consequences and even perhaps resign. Just as I pray for the victims and their families, I wish to offer time and space for those who need to express your anger and feelings towards this abuse, I invite you to come forward and I will listen to you any time this week. In the past few days I have been listening to parishioners who expressed their concerns and especially a mother who shared that her son wants to leave the church because of all this. I want to offer hope for the future, healing for the hurt and resolve to do whatever is necessary to protect the children and the vulnerable in our parish.

By baptism, we are called not only to enjoy its fruits, but we are called to work in the vineyard of God, even when that vineyard is filled with thorns; we are exhausted, the fruit seems rare and the sun is beating down on us. This is the beauty of the church: that we will work alongside other sinners - sinners just like us! This is the most important time for us to be more faithful and more prayerful, trusting in the power of God's grace, our Good Shepherd. These are not the times to leave; these are the most important times when the church needs us the most, just like Jesus needed the disciples to stay.

A couple of days ago I was going to put on the collar and I felt how hard it is to do so? But I will wear it proudly not because I am perfect, but despite all my sins and failures, *the Lord who called me is perfect* and he knows how to qualify the unqualified, prune the proud and self-righteous. There's nothing more that gives me joy and satisfaction than rushing to the hospital as I did yesterday to grieve with a young wife who was losing her 23 year old husband to suicide, and to the man who

needed a last confession and to be reconciled to his daughter before he died of cancer, or to be with the family who lost their only son to an accident, and many such precious moments. I want to stand with Christ, to stay with the broken Church and lead the wounded to renewal and growth and make a difference.

Just as Jesus needed his disciples, just as Joshua needed the 12 tribes of Israel, *I ask you to please stay with the church*, stand with Christ and lead the Church through your own faithful living and witnessing. We are bigger than the crimes committed by many of our bad shepherds and we know that God's mercy and grace triumph above everything! And through that grace we will find healing for the victims and strength and courage to march forward as One but wounded Body of Christ.

To choose to stand with Christ is a choice that leads to things we are not sure we want to eat, cups we are not sure we can drink. C.S. Lewis says, "If you want to get warm you must stand near the fire, if you want to get wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, *healing, renewal, hope*, eternal life, you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them". "Eat my flesh that I might abide in you and you in me", says the Lord. Jesus was inviting the disciples then and us now to see what we are getting into when we eat of the flesh and drink of the blood of God's Holy one. As we partake of the Eucharist today, we are asked to choose. *To choose Christ is to elect to stand with the foolish, the useless, the broken, the victims and the abused and to condemn the crimes of these bad shepherds, to humbly walk with the Lord.*

What is driving your choice to stay, to serve, and to lead with Christ today? As Terrance Klein in [America](#) poignantly puts it, what is driving your choice to stay, to serve, and to lead with Christ today? Why do some stay, even in sorrow, while others leave? I think it comes down to this: If you have been fed by Christ within the church, you know that, come what may, you have no other home. To leave the church would be to leave behind the Christ you have come to know here, the Christ who continues to feed you here.

The 12 remained with Jesus, not for power, nor out of fear, nor because it was a rational decision, but because Jesus, who they fell in with, was Love. The love that fed them and nourished them. What we love, decides everything. Would you stay with Christ, the Church, to serve and to lead for a better future?

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