

Traveling Companion: Where do we go from here?

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The Priests Council of the diocese recommended to Bishop Rodi that he invite all the priests of the diocese to meet with him to discuss the present sex abuse crisis in our church. The meeting took place on Thursday, May 9th.

The meeting was historical. It was the first time anyone invited the priests of the diocese to share their feelings about the present crisis. The response of the priests indicated the necessity of such a meeting as well as the willingness of the priests to share freely their concerns about this particular issue in the church. Prior to this meeting, no one cared to ask the priests the impact the crisis was having on their personal and professional lives. The meeting provided a platform for priests to voice their fears, concerns, questions and struggles about the crisis in particular. Priests appreciated Bishop Rodi providing such a platform.

The comments and feelings that surfaced were insightful. Most priests felt damaged, indicating that all priests were being painted with the same broad brush stroke. Some indicated that, in this country, you are innocent until proven guilty; but, as far as priests were concerned, in the light of the present crisis, they were guilty until proven innocent. Other priests reacted to the way bishops in this country were handling the situation. Some wondered how to talk about the crisis with their parishioners. Others felt the crisis could dampen the enthusiasm and creativity needed in ministry. Many reflected how vulnerable they were both personally and professionally. Some tried to gauge the reaction of their parishioners to the crisis. All realized it was a tough and painful time to be a priest.

Did the meeting accomplish anything? Questions still persists. At the end of the meeting, the moderator said, "Thanks for coming. Have a nice day." I wanted to put up my hand and say, "Wait! This is not the end. It is just the beginning. Where do we go from here? I left frustrated. Maybe, that's why I write this commentary. I have wrestled with that question, "where do we go from here?" ever since.

We know that having a "nice day," will not answer that question. We know that we need further input, that we need to surface some of the more subtle issues that face our church in general and our diocese in particular.

We feel like society and the media in particular, is performing an autopsy on the priesthood to determine the nature and cause of its demise but we want to shout, we're not dead, we're still breathing, still life-giving.

We are confronted with self-appointed gurus who claim to be experts and who tell us that the solutions are simple: the end of celibacy, weeding out homosexual priests, revamping seminary training, more thorough screening of candidates for the priesthood, women priests. But, as Scott Peck reminds us, "life is complex." Simple solutions do not solve complex problems.

We realize that, legislation and guidelines, while justified, necessary and important, do not solve the systemic problems any more than a divorce decree solves the emotional scars of a battered, marital breakdown.

As a church, we need to have the courage to revisit our concepts and execution of secrecy, obedience and power.

We need to have the courage to think outside the box of our own smugness and comfort zones. We need to rediscover that catholic means universal; that business as usual serves only to isolate us from our inner core. Instead, we must be willing to listen creatively to each other without the fear of reprisal, knowing that the truth is greater than any one perspective or anyone person's grasp of it.

We realize that honest self-analysis can be both painful, embarrassing and threatening initially but, in the long run, it will strengthen the leadership of our church.

If priests are going to survive these turbulent times and continue to perform their ministry effectively, they need the prayerful support and appreciation of the laity

As a church, this is not a time to retreat into a safe harbor. Instead, we have to remember that we have a history of weathering every storm through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, we are not a perfect church or priesthood but we are constantly being purified and perfected by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Where do we go from here? We can either bury our heads in the sand or kneel on our wounded knees and pray for and work toward forgiveness and healing.

Yes, our church is hurting, pierced for our offences. We need to earn that trust again where that trust is broken. As a church, wounds are a reminder that we need healing, a reminder that we need to take an honest and deeply personal look at the causes of such wounds and then realize that by such wounds, we have the potential to be healed.

Where do we go from here? We go to our Master and our people in our woundedness, our brokenness, realizing that our crucified church needs redemption; needs to rise from the ashes of our wounded past and once again become a healing church where the Holy Spirit will be able to penetrate the shadow side of our institution and, through tongues of fire, purify our church so that, again, it can be a light to the nations.