

Traveling Companion: Zero Tolerance

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They arrived to count the collection on Monday morning. On opening one of the envelopes, she discovered an interesting note. She brought the light blue "Supplementary" envelope to me. Obviously it didn't have an envelope number so it could not be traced. As she handed me the envelope, she said, "I thought you might like to see this."

When I opened it and found the small piece of paper inside, my heart sank. It simply read, "Zero Tolerance."

Immediately, I knew what it was all about. My mind filled with thoughts of the ongoing sex abuse scandal again.

The next morning, I went for my 5 a.m., 18 mile bike ride along the beach. As I tried to avoid the bumps and bruises along the road, I encountered the inner bumps and bruises that I felt from the definitive two words on the piece of paper in the offertory envelope.

Those two words brought the reality and the suggested solution much closer to home. The solution of "zero tolerance" was no longer something suggested by a national newspaper or something that the National Bishops Conference wrestled with. It was something on my doorstep. It was from someone who was a parishioner. That thought brought it alive for me and generated its own questions and quandaries.

My mind vacillated back and forth between the crisis in the church over the sex abuse and the recent bishops meeting in Dallas and their decisions regarding "Zero Tolerance."

Recently, I had noticed a letter in the daily newspaper from a parishioner. The strongly worded letter asked people to vote with their pocketbooks because of the present sex abuse crisis. He suggested that individuals withhold contributions to parishes as a way of making a definitive statement of their anger at the crisis. I wonder if the "zero tolerance" note might be from this particular parishioner.

Among many priests, there was a certain relief that the issue had disappeared from the front pages. It allowed priests to concentrate on their priestly ministry instead of trying to soothe their own wounds.

As I peddled along through the dawning of a new day, I noticed the orange ball of the sun breaking over the horizon. It reminded me of the much anticipated purging of the church so that it might face a new era. The beating of the waves on the seashore, washed ashore the garbage of another day, leaving it exposed on the sand. It, too, reminded me of the beating of the church and the debris that is now exposed on its seashore.

There was a glimmer of hope that I took home with me. Early morning fisher-folks waded out into the waters of the Gulf casting their nets, hoping for a bite and a prized catch. Others readied their weighed casting nets from the seawall, tossing them effortlessly and with precision into the waiting waters. It reminded me of our still hopeful army of the Lord's fisher-folks who cast their nets daily into the oceans of life for the Master.

I returned from my ride, showered, breakfasted, browsed the morning paper; relieved that I didn't find any church scandal buried in its bowels.

Consoled, I checked my email and found an email from a fellow priest in another state. In treatment and going through his own purgation, for alcoholism; I read his email. The email contained a powerful and poignant question from a lay friend of his. It simply asked his superiors: Here is a person who has spend his priestly life bringing God's forgiveness to others; how come you cannot offer him the same forgiveness?

So, where does all this leave me? I'm still confused and hurt as I wonder about the implications of "Zero Tolerance."