



St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church

1400 Suther Road • Charlotte, NC 28213 • Phone (704) 549-1607 • Fax (704) 549-1614

September 2, 2018

Dear Parish Family,

As your pastor I find it necessary to offer you my thoughts in light of recent events. No doubt you are reflecting upon your Catholic faith and experience within the Church. So am I. Since the only responsible way to move forward is to learn from the past, I share these thoughts with you. I hope you receive them as they are intended, to help purify the Church. By “purify” I do not mean the purging of sinners. Who would be left? Rather, by this I mean the purification of institutional complicity.

I entered the seminary in 1993 and was ordained a priest in 1999. I have been serving in parishes both in the states of New York and North Carolina. Most of the scandals have come to light since 2000, early on in my priesthood. Since then many horrible and disturbing facts have been revealed. I would like to begin by first stating that I understand human weakness and sin. Who of us is perfect? But I also understand that more important than compassion for the sinner is the protection of the innocent. Recall the words of Our Blessed Lord, “whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” (Mt 18:6) For this reason I think it is important that the secular world and civil authorities look at these matters and take appropriate action. The Church does not have a police force or prisons. We are not equipped to deal with crimes such as these. Therefore we must depend upon our friends and neighbors who are in positions of civil authority to help us.

Next, I ask why are there clergy, notably bishops and priests, in the Catholic Church who are at best violating the basic norms of sexual morality with consensual adults and at worst abusing minors? After some considerable thought I believe I know a significant part of the answer. In fact I believe that most priests of my generation know it as well. There is another open secret that is just beginning to be discussed. Namely, there is a culture in the church that walks hand-in-hand with the problems we are facing. I experienced it when I first entered seminary and it has remained the defining aspect of the contemporary Church. I am tired of it. And I know my peers, along with the new generation of seminarians, are too. Simply put, it is a ‘culture of dissent.’

I entered the seminary without any ideological inclination. I wanted to learn more about the teachings of our faith. I had read about so many beautiful things. Above all I was inspired by the extraordinary lives of holy people, the saints. Being a product of my generation I looked like everyone else. I enjoyed the music, the movies and all the cultural experiences of my upbringing. I quickly discovered that because I bore the marks of my generation it was simply assumed that I wanted the Church to change, to become more like the secular the world. I found this assumption bizarre and something of a *non sequitur*. So that you might know that I am not making a mountain out of a molehill or seeing shadows in the dark, at the end of my first year of formation my advisor instructed me to choose a side. I was told that I sounded like a conservative but had the personality of a liberal. I explained to him that I didn't accept that point of view.

I was simply interested in learning the truth. I didn't care if the truth seemed to some to be liberal, conservative or centrist. In my view, the truth could be found anywhere in the spectrum of contemporary ideologies. He dropped the issue. Nonetheless his was the world I was entering. It was a battle and I was told to pick a side. Nine months before, I had been neither influenced by nor was I aware of the concept of “conservative” versus “liberal” Catholic.” Welcome to the contemporary Church.

Since then every topic in the life of the Church that some may find disagreeable, and others agreeable, has been put into camps much like the schisms in the American political landscape. The Church has similar divides within her. The central difference is that we are not discussing political views, social sensibilities or policy. Rather we are discussing the content of divine revelation and those practices that best reflect these truths. One faction embraces dissent and works for substantive and material change. Herein lies the connection. It cannot be denied that the scandals are born of a relaxed sexual morality that is part of a permissive and dissenting spirit. You cannot get to this level of flagrant violations of chastity and abuse without first crossing the threshold of dissent; without first disbelieving the moral teaching of the Church. There will always be moral weakness regardless of one's convictions. What we are now seeing, however, goes well beyond weakness or a lack of moral courage. What we are seeing is a comfort level with what should be judged as sinful. Proponents of a culture of dissent desire to change the Catholic Church from top to bottom, from her moral teaching right down to her liturgical practices. Although I do not believe adherents to this culture of dissent are content with anyone being taken advantage of or harmed, it is nonetheless true that a licentious morality opens the door for some to justify even the most immoral behavior. It is self-evident that clergy who do not even try to follow the moral teachings of the Church are clergy who do not believe them to be true. So long as a culture of dissent remains in the church we will never be rid of these problems.

What does this culture look like? Throughout the years I have heard more from bishops about the traditional habits and inclinations of young priests and seminarians than about violent disturbing practices, moral crimes and the violation of their flock. The real issues, we were told, were about becoming a new church; opening ourselves to a more liberal sexual morality; changing our liturgical practices to embrace modern sensibilities and tolerances; altering our language and speech so that none would be offended. Heaven forbid young men be drawn to the truth of the Gospel; the venerable history of our Church; or look to the past as a model. How dare they not embrace this new vision, this new brand of the Church that builds bridges and accepts all things? Anything and everything subject to formality, to prescriptions of any sort, whether it pertains to morality or the liturgy, doctrine or sacramental practices, is deemed too formal, too rigid, and too legalistic. In the name of reform some sound and time-tested practices are now judged as closed off to new ways of thinking and experiencing. Yes, we need reform. I am in favor of reform. But reform can never mean dissent.

It seems to me that the bishops and the priests who have advanced an agenda built upon an openness to dissent are the very ones who have led us down these grave and depraved paths. I have not studied the issue or otherwise scientifically examined the matter as it relates to the corollaries between traditional and progressive or liberal and conservative ideologies. I am simply relating to you my own experience in the life of the Church. I believe those of us on the inside of the Church ought to be connecting the dots for people. And these things are connected. We have valuable information that needs to be heard. A church that blesses a living contradiction between doctrine and practice, between our creed and personal beliefs, is a church that cannot expect anything from anyone; not from the laity, the clergy or the bishops. It is reduced to a loosely symbolic unity of individuals with diverse religious and moral doctrines to be judged by no one

and that submits to no authority. A church such as this is not liberated. Rather, a church like this makes room for lax moral behavior, the likes of which can slip into horrible sinful violations of others. A church like this is vulnerable and increasingly formless. Whereby each person, each parish, each diocese, each region surrenders only to one's own desires, whims, feelings, moods, inspirations and impulses.

In the life of the Church all this stuff has been bundled together. It is bundled together because they are inherently connected. You cannot have a church that does not practice what she preaches, or at least tries to. Or even worse pay lip service to her doctrine only to tell you with a wink and a nod that is okay to ignore it. You cannot have a church make some unholy alliance with its people to never bring up topics that are considered to be outdated or morally difficult in exchange for turning the other way for all sorts of misbehaviors or neglect. These arrangements in parishes frequently look like the priest saying to the people 'I won't upset you with any uncomfortable Catholic thinking if you leave me (the priest) alone.' What is the point of that? And how is this not an unhealthy recipe for the type of problems that we have seen? All of us look at these horrific acts from different perspectives, hopefully seeing them as despicable. Some contemporary movements have taught us that we must speak when we see toxic cultural elements in need of purification. This is what I have seen and I know that I am not the only one. Additionally, some bishops have spoken out and have called these problems a crisis of faith. I believe this is what they are alluding to.

To all I say, if you do not believe in the doctrines of our faith, why remain? Have some integrity, especially if you wear a miter. Take some time and try to find answers to the questions that seem to be plaguing you. With sincerity, humility and a bit of grace I believe you will end up back at the doors of the Church where you will find many good believing people.

How did we get here? The same way we got here 2000 years ago when our Lord assembled the Church with his own hands. The Gospel of John recalls that people departed when they found Jesus' teachings too difficult, they walked away. Judas, however, did not. Rather he walked away in his heart, only to remain in the ranks of the apostles where he wreaked havoc by trying to convince everyone to do it his way.

Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Patrick J. Winslow".

Rev. Patrick J. Winslow, JCL
Pastor, Promoter of Justice and Missionary of Mercy