

Homily for the Mass of Sorrow  
Our Lady of Sorrows  
September 15, 2018

Today on the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows we enter deeply into the human experience of the depth of human sorrow as well as the depth of human love and where there is love, there is God. Mary, out love stood at the side of Jesus, her son as he suffered on the cross, and Jesus gave her the Apostle, John to be at her side in her sorrow. They were together and so we come together at this time of deep sorrow in the history of our Church.

The relationship of mother to her children is unique. A mother carries her child in her womb, nurses her child at her breast, literally her blood becomes milk for her child. Even if bottle-fed, even if adopted, the physical relationship remains different than that of a father. The physical is deeply related to the spiritual. In my conversation with my own mother about the terrible sin of abuse in the Church she said to me, "The Church needs to focus more on the victims and less on the institution." I heard those words before and had even thought them myself, yet I heard them differently because they came because they came from *my* mother

This physical relationship of Jesus as son and Mary as mother was similar. Their human bond of love both physically and spiritual was unique. We, who through the grace of our baptism, share intimately in this bond. This bond of love, is a bond of heaven and earth, it is a bond that enters deeply into the human experience of intimacy, and love as well as the deepest of human suffering and even death itself. This day, the day we unite our experience of suffering with the Sorrow of the Mother of God, who is also the Mother of the Church. Her love, her faith was great and so too was her suffering. Unless we might be tempted to think that somehow the unique relationship Mary had with her Son protected her from human suffering, St. Bernard reminds in the Office of Readings for today, "Perhaps some will say: 'Had she not know before that he would die?' Undoubtedly. 'Did she not expect him to rise again at once?' Surely. 'And still she grieved over her crucified Son?' Intensely." That suffering was so intense that St. Bernard goes on to say, "For if he could die in his body, could she not die with him in spirit?"

Today we gather as a parish, a community of faith, as members of the one Body of Christ and we enter fully into the sorrow of heinous sins that were committed by far, far too many priests, by bishops whose promise to be faithful administrators was misplaced and so they protected these offending priests instead of the victims, instead of the vulnerable, instead of children. Far, far too often, when parents, very often mothers, and in some cases women religious raised their voices about what they say and heard, their voices were not heard. While we all know that in many cases, decades ago, bishops didn't know how to respond, and in some cases, before 1980's before the professional community fully understood the true nature of pedophilia, they advised bishops that these priests could be treated. Many bishops were poorly advised. We are blessed that Archbishop Hunthausen took swift action to form strong policies of protection of children and vulnerable adults once he fully understood the nature of this evil. We also know that not every bishop did. Cover-ups still went on. To hear the stories that we have heard in the last two months causes tremendous sorrow for us all, and in that sense we are all victims of these abuse.

One of our parishioners, Sue Richards sent on to me a homily by a pastor who serves in a parish of one her friends in another State. Here is what Fr. Brendan shared in his homily two weeks ago, three weeks after he first preached on the topic of the scandal in the Church:

“You see, I am not only speaking to you for the victims  
I am speaking to you as a victim.  
I, myself, was sexually abused by a priest 35 years ago and  
up until 2 weeks ago, I have never shared it with a soul,  
not even with my own family.  
The shame was simply too much.

It happened when I was 18 years old  
and the priest had spent 4 years grooming me for his final play.  
I first met him when I was in Boston with my parents at age 14.  
He spent the next four years writing to me regularly  
and even visiting me in Ireland.  
While I should have recognized the smaller inappropriate actions  
throughout those four years, I never did.  
I was a young boy who believed I had a vocation to the priesthood  
and I trusted a priest to guide me in that vocation.  
He waited until I turned 18 to make his move  
so I could not call it child abuse.  
He said this as he attacked me.  
While ultimately, he was unsuccessful in his attempted rape of me,  
it left psychological scars and even more so spiritual scars.  
The priest was a notorious abuser from New Hampshire and Boston  
who admitted to raping dozens of boys and young men.  
In 2004, he confessed in court and was sentenced to 44 years in prison.  
He died in prison in 2006.  
With his death I thought, as many victims do,  
that my own suffering had ended.  
I was wrong.”

He goes on to say that the news of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report opened up his wounds again. In this Mass we offer up his sorrow and the sorrow of every victim. ‘We offer our personal sorrow as well.

He shared how he has found his voice and he invited everyone to find their and to raise their voices to the bishops. He called for the bishops to open their ears as Jesus open the ears of the deaf man to listen to the voices of God’s people. Then he spoke of his faith:

“Throughout all of the pain,  
the Lord has never left me alone.

He has continued to love me, heal me and still calls me to serve him.  
I am only here today because the Lord keeps me in his heart and has surrounded me with loving family and friends.  
I am who I am because of the Lord's abundant grace.  
That despite the suffering and pain, the Lord is still here no matter what.  
He never left me then and he will not leave me now.  
I believe that is true for each of you and the Church itself.  
He has never left us and he will never leave us alone.  
May we find our voices and advocate for the victims and change and may the Church leaders open their ears.”

In my homily two weeks ago, I said that we must first pray and then act. Today is a day of prayer for us in the Rosary and Mass to focus on nothing but the sorrow of the victims, and the lacerations the Church has suffered from this sin, as Cardinal DiNardo named this experience in his meeting with Pope Francis on Thursday. Our prayer, the liturgy draws deeply into the Sorrow of the Blessed Virgin and the Suffering of Jesus Christ. For me personally, this I am entering into the meaning of the Sorrow of Our Lady like I never have before, the suffering of Jesus Christ is more real and raw as I bring all of this to him. I take this insight from my prayer on this day: When Jesus's blood poured from his side after he was pierced with a sword, some her DNA also poured out too. That physical unity as Mother and Son is deeply connected to the spiritual unity that we have with them, our sorrow with her sorrow, our suffering with his suffering. The meaning of the prophecy of Simeon when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the temple take on even a more profound meaning than before, that her heart would be pierced by a sword. As this new began to surface while I was in Germany, I found myself taking extra time to reflect on the many statues of the Sorrowful Mother that I saw. We are not left alone.

The prayer today is in preparation for us to act, to raise our voices. Prayer is essential, because we need to speak in the way that the Lord would call us to speak. Prayer is not enough and so we will have the opportunity as a parish to gather on Wednesday, October 3<sup>rd</sup> to share our sorrow, what is heavy on our hearts, and to truthfully and respectfully offer to our Archbishop our recommendations for how to move forward as a Church.

Today Mary, the Mother of the Church with great love, asks us to confront every sorrow, and to do so rooted in prayer and committed to action.