

Fr. Bower and I have heard from parishioners urging us to share our thoughts and feelings about this week's news of the Pennsylvania grand jury report. It published the names of over 300 priests who have been credibly accused of the sexual abuse of over 1,000 victims, along with the horrible details of these cases of abuse. This happened in six dioceses in Pennsylvania over a seventy-year period beginning in the 1950's. I have not read the report, which is over 800 pages long, but I trust what the news reports tell us. And I know a few of the priests who are on the list from seminary days over 35 years ago. In this week's bulletin column I share my thoughts about the allegations of child sexual abuse against Archbishop McCarrick, which were revealed not long before the Pennsylvania report. Much of what I say about the McCarrick situation also applies to the news of these priests in Pennsylvania. So I won't restate that but I do want to share some additional perspectives.

I first want to give you some history.

In 1997, a series of Indianapolis Star reports entitled "Faith Betrayed." This detailed allegations of sexual abuse of minors and other sexual misconduct by priests of our diocese, and the unsatisfactory response of the diocese. Its effects were, on a smaller scale, similar to the Pennsylvania grand jury report or the investigative reports of the Boston Globe in the early 2000's, depicted in the movie "Spotlight." It was devastating.

When I was in high school, the Pastor of my home parish, St. Lawrence in Muncie, was a child abuser. He was one of the priests included in the Indianapolis Star series. I knew – and still know – some of his victims. I knew there was something "off" about him, but I was pretty naïve and probably could not have imagined what was happening. Another priest in campus ministry at Ball State struck up what I thought was a friendship with me, and now, years later, I realize he was "grooming" me as a potential victim. I was never abused, thank God, but when someone tells me about their being abused as a child, I never doubt them. It's far too common. Although I can't tell them that I know how they feel, it doesn't take much to imagine the pain they have gone through. And when the abuser is a priest or another representative of Christ or his Church, something evil becomes even more monstrous.

In case anyone is feeling like someone is out to get the Catholic Church, we need to let go of that. For decades, people went to Bishops and other church leaders and were not heard. They felt like their only recourse was to go to the press, the police, or an attorney.

As hard as it is, we have to continue discussing this issue. Of course we don't want it to dominate everything we do as a parish or a church, and we can't simply cover the same territory over and over again, aggravating the wound, but we cannot disregard it, dismiss it, or deny it.

At the same time, we cannot allow this terrible crisis to paralyze us. All the good things that the Church does, the mission that the Church has from God, the grace that we experience here, are not canceled out because of these evil actions. Please: Don't leave. Stay, and stay engaged. Keep believing, keep serving, keep loving one another. We need each other, and the Church needs every one of you, now more than ever.

And I hope this doesn't sound like an afterthought or something that I'm just expected to say because I'm a priest: We have to pray and we have to hope. I ask that everyone in the parish, beginning today, include every day in your prayers the victims of abuse by clergy and church personnel, and all victims of abuse. Pray for the Church, for the Bishops, and for the Clergy. We are hurt by this just as you are. And I will even be so bold as to ask that you pray for the perpetrators.

Prayer and hope (which is not wishful thinking) remind us that it is God's church, not ours, and that God is in the midst of all this pain.

I don't have a plan. I also don't have a lot of power. We will continue to discuss this in various settings in the parish, although I don't know what that will look like right now. If anyone wants to be part of the discussion, you know how to reach me.

For me, one of the worst possible consequences of the Pennsylvania report would be that someone – anyone in this parish – would conclude that they or their children or other loved ones are not safe and secure here at Our Lady of Grace.

So the message that I want to get across to you, more than anything else, is this: Fr. Bower, the parish staff, our volunteers, and I are all committed to keeping Our Lady of Grace Parish safe and secure for God's children in our midst. I hope you know that.

And I hope that you know that we are with you.

Our Lady of Grace, pray for us.