

## Homily for Ordinary Time XXIV, 2018

September 16, 2018

I don't know how much you may have heard from this pulpit about the once-again sex-abuse and coverup crisis now engulfing the church. But I want you to hear some things directly from me, and today's reading from Saint James is a good place to start.

James says very simply, "Faith without works is dead." Let's take this apart.

"Faith," for James, would not mean what we English-speakers think of when we use the word. James doesn't have a list of facts or ideas in mind, except perhaps that "Jesus is Lord," and "Jesus died and rose to redeem us from sin." "Faith," for James, primarily meant trust: I trust that Jesus is Lord and died rose to redeem us! Having faith means, I trust that Jesus can be relied on.

And here's where we run into our first problem. We've been learning that some people who by their office are supposed not only to speak for Jesus but in some sense to embody Him, can't be relied on – whether they've been abusers themselves, or have covered up the crimes of abusers they were supposed to supervise, or simply knew about abuse and did and said nothing. Our trust is in Christ, but some of His self-described representatives have broken trust with us.

Now any large organization is going to have some bad apples among its leadership. Most thinking adults can deal with that. But when leaders, by their actions or inaction encourage growing mistrust, as is happening in our church with these recent revelations, the members of the group – you and me, in this case – rightly feel betrayed and wonder what else is going on that our supposed leaders don't want us to know about. Once lost, trust is very, very hard to rebuild. That's where we are today.

And with that loss of trust, the mission of the organization suffers. Who wants to follow untrustworthy leaders? Who will make the sacrifices to live a disciplined Catholic life if the leadership of the church is itself undisciplined? Who on the outside will give the Gospel message a hearing from a church that tolerates not only misbehavior but corruption among some of its leaders? To paraphrase Saint James, a church without trust is dead.

And it gets worse. Let's move on to the second part of Saint James's claim. What sort of "works" are we seeing from church leadership in the face of this crisis?

When the abuse scandals first hit national headlines in Boston in 2002, the bishops of our country put into place the so-called Dallas norms. Any of you who volunteer know the drill that came from that: background checks, safe-environment training, new procedures, annual audits of parishes for compliance. That seems to have worked: Recent data seem to show that Catholic churches are just about the safest places for children these days. But –

The bishops at Dallas addressed only abuse: Not their own failures to discipline abusers, or their failures to report criminal abuse, or their coverups of abuse. As the grim comment among priests went at the time, "The generals lost the war, so they're retraining the troops." It's now sixteen years after the Dallas norms, and we're still waiting for a few robust "works" that will address not only abuse but the failures of bishops to deal with it.

There is an immense amount of good work being done by Catholics today; Catholic organizations – Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services, and many, many more – are full of self-sacrificing people who know the truth of what Saint James says, and who put themselves on the line every day to help others. The pews in parishes – this one and many, many others – are full of people who do the hard work every day of following Jesus's way in their marriages, their raising of their

children, their caring for sick relatives, their workplaces, and their neighborhoods. Tragically, some have become fed up and have walked away from worship and from the Sacraments. You who are listening haven't, just as I haven't.

But a lot of good people have had their spirits broken by this mess, and (again going back to Saint James), words alone from church leaders aren't going to fix things. If the hierarchy is to regain trust with the Catholics in the pew (and in this pulpit); if the church is to regain credibility with outsiders; if young people are to again be able to look to church leaders for inspiration and direction; then we need to see actions, not just words.

In the short term, we need the full truth. We need to know who was an abuser; who failed to supervise; who knew but said nothing; who covered up. And in each of those cases we need to see appropriate actions: discipline for bishops who failed in their office, and justice for those abused.

In the middle term, we need to see put into place effective ways to supervise and discipline bishops. We need clear and effective ways for lay people and parish priests to bring issues to their attention, and we need to see transparent and just processes for allegations of misconduct among them.

And in the long term we need to see church leaders take a long look at how members of the hierarchy are selected, and how they are evaluated during their service. The current system clearly has failed in too many cases, and the church's membership and mission have been damaged.

While we wait for those actions, we need hope. And for that we turn to Isaiah, as he says in the midst of his own and his people's suffering, and says to us today: "The Lord God is my help; who will prove me wrong?"