

Of all the Christian sites in the Holy Land, the one that had the most impact on me was Capernaum. You'll recall that Capernaum, a fishing village along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, was the "base," if you will, from which Jesus conducted most of His earthly ministry.

Today, Capernaum is an Israeli National Park. You can still walk along the ruins of the streets and houses that Jesus passed every day. You can look out at the same hills and mountains that Christ saw every morning. You can watch the sun set over the same horizon He did.

If you're in the mood for a walk, you can stroll a short distance away to the site where He gave the Sermon on the Mount. Or you can visit the hillside where Jesus fed a multitude with a few loaves and couple of fish. If you're still in the mood to wander, the ancient village of Migdal is close by, the village in which a certain Mary, whom we know as Mary Magdalene (Mary from Migdal, that is), was freed from seven demons and then became a devoted follower of Jesus — one, by the way, who's mentioned more often in the Gospels than most of the Apostles.

Capernaum and the other sites associated with Jesus along the shoreline and hills of Galilee offer a vivid impression of Jesus' humanity. In Rome, the

Christian sites tend to focus on Christ's divinity. But here in Israel, and particularly in Galilee, we're reminded that Jesus spent most of His time — almost all of it, in fact — among His neighbors. He lived as they lived; He ate what they ate; He endured the same things — the unpredictable weather, the blistering heat, the routine harassment (and sometimes worse) of the Roman occupiers. He entered fully into their experience. He was fully present with — and fully present *for* — them. In fact, this is precisely the reason why so many of His contemporaries — including His own apostles and disciples — had a hard time understanding or accepting who He was. “Wait, what are you telling me?”, they must have thought. “The ‘Messiah’ wants a piece of fish? After which He’s going to take a nap? Come on. What sort of ‘messiah’ does that?”

Jesus was fully present with, and particularly for, the very people He lived with and encountered every day in the messy and sometimes sordid reality of their daily lives. He took them as He found them. He didn't insist that they first be “worthy” of Him or that they pass some sort of virtue test before He'd deal with them. His disciples sometimes did (and still do), but not Jesus.

For those who lived in Capernaum, or Bethsaida, or Migdal, or any of the other towns and settlements along the Galilean shore, Jesus was present in their hunger, in their suffering, in their bondage to whatever demons — natural or supernatural — that afflicted them. This meaning of the “real presence” of Jesus, the meaning that’s evoked by the hills and waves of Galilee, is important to remember when considering today’s Gospel.

As it has these past few weeks, today’s Gospel features Jesus’ teaching on the Eucharist.

Less than a year ago, the world commemorated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Not that the Reformation is over, of course. Far from it. It’s still very much with us, and our Church is still preoccupied with refuting its doctrines. Many of the Reformers, for example, denied the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist (but not Martin Luther himself, who believed in it devoutly), and they still do, needless to say. In reaction to this, the Church formalized its doctrine of the Eucharist, borrowing from Aquinas’ (or more accurately, Jesus’) idea of “transubstantiation,” that is, that during the consecration the “substance” of bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood of Christ while the “accidents,” or appearance of bread and wine, remains.

When we think of the Eucharist, this is what comes to many a Catholic mind — as it should, because the Eucharist is the “source and summit” of our lives, as the Church teaches. And so when today’s Gospel rolls around, priests and deacons often are irresistibly tempted to launch into yet another discussion of transubstantiation.

Which I just did, very briefly.

But that’s not the reality of the Eucharist I want to talk about.

I want to talk about the reality of the Eucharist that’s revealed amid the ruins of Capernaum and along the hills and paths of Galilee. I want to talk about the reality of the Eucharist that’s revealed in Jesus entering fully into the lives and struggles of His neighbors.

Because if the Eucharist truly is the “source and summit” of our lives, it can never just be a sacrament of the altar; it has to become a sacrament of the streets. The Eucharist, the real presence of Christ, can never remain something that we adore simply in a gilded monstrance set atop an altar or enthroned in a chapel; it must be something we adore in the lives of real people, in real circumstances, coping with real trials and struggles, suffering from real problems and sometimes real injustices. After all, as the celebrant says at every

Mass, quoting Jesus: “Do this in memory of me.” But do what? Celebrate the Mass? Of course. But more than that, “Be present as I was present. Walk as I have walked. Heal as I have healed. Give of yourself as I have given myself for you.” For as a deacon or priest prays silently on our behalf at the altar when mixing a little water with the wine, “May we come to share in Christ’s divinity who humbled Himself to share in our humanity.”

We receive Christ’s great gift of Himself that we might offer ourselves as a gift to Him, and in doing so we become Christ-bearers, Eucharist-bearers, in the world beyond our church doors. That’s what it means for Christ to be present, and anything less than that renders the Eucharist, renders the presence of Christ, little more than dogma, or, worse still, profanation.

With that in mind, it would simply be a travesty for me to stand before you today talking about the ongoing presence of Christ both in the Eucharist and in the *life* of the Eucharist to which we’re called while ignoring the fact that just a few days ago, a grand jury investigating clerical abuse in six of Pennsylvania’s eight Catholic dioceses found that over a period of seventy years, at least a thousand children (and likely many, many more) suffered

horrific abuse by more than three hundred clerics — while the leaders of the Church — our leaders, our Church — did nothing.

Nothing.

Except to try to ensure that these crimes, their crimes, would never be exposed.

In the words of the grand jury report, “[Clerics] were raping little boys and girls, and the men of God who were responsible for them not only did nothing; they hid it all. For decades. Monsignors, auxiliary bishops, bishops, archbishops, cardinals have mostly been protected; many, including some named in this report, have been promoted.”¹

As people of faith, as people of the Eucharist, as daughters and sons of the Church, it’s time — it’s past time — to raise our voices as one to say clearly and unambiguously: anyone who purports to be a leader of the Church, anyone who purports to be a successor of the Apostles, who has covered up or ignored these or like crimes, or has abetted them, or has otherwise been complicit in them in any way, needs to be removed from office and from the clerical state.

¹ *40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury, REPORT 1: Interim - Redacted, 7.*

Now. Now, without delay. Empty and perfunctory expressions of sorrow or calls for prayer are utterly insufficient to begin to treat the ghastly trauma suffered by the victims of this criminality, just as they cannot begin to salve the wounds these crimes and their perpetrators have inflicted on the Church and on our very Lord Himself.

That's one thing, above all, that we owe to the victims of these atrocities.

A second thing is to ensure that neither individual clerics nor the Church itself will any longer be able to hide behind the protection of statute of limitations laws that limit the criminal and civil prosecution of crimes against children to a ridiculously small window of time following the commission of the crime itself, a favor conferred by politicians throughout the country who've been purchased by the Church and other powerful interests over the years. In Tennessee, for example, most criminal proceedings must be filed within four years after the commission of the crime or the date when the child-victim reaches the age of majority, and civil litigation must typically commence within an even narrower window of three years. Given the severe trauma suffered by victims and the enormous strength and courage it takes for victims to come forward and report what happened to them, this is entirely unrealistic, as those

who've lobbied for these limitations well know. Such laws amount to a "get out of jail free card," and they must be changed, the Church's continuing opposition to any change in them notwithstanding. The guilty may have succeeded, for a time, in hiding behind these laws, but as one commentator rightly pointed out a few days ago, "There's no statute of limitations in hell."

The crimes detailed in the grand jury report and similar horrors committed elsewhere are the most shocking imaginable desecration of the Eucharist. If we, clergy and laity alike, avert our eyes from this terrible evil in our midst and remain silent, may God have mercy on our souls.

It's time to reclaim the gift of the Eucharist, for Christ gave it and Himself to all of us, not just to bishops or clergy. We'll only be able to reclaim it, we'll only be able truly to celebrate the Eucharist in memory of Christ, if we remember that, like our Lord Himself, we — all of us, clerical or lay — are here *to serve* and not to *be served*, and certainly not to cling to any sense of privilege or authority, and we'll only be able to reclaim it when we reject the culture of silence that is far, far too prevalent not just among the clergy but among the laity as well. A radically disordered clericalism — that is, a perniciously exaggerated and unfounded emphasis on the nature and role of clergy in the

Church — is in no small measure responsible for the crimes detailed in the grand jury's report to say nothing of similarly heinous cases elsewhere, and clericalism in turn depends for its lifeblood on a laity that remains silent when justice demands condemnation and accountability, and which has been encouraged to confuse respect for blind submission or unquestioning acquiescence.

Our bishop and every bishop is here to serve you, not the other way around. If you refuse to tolerate these horrors, let them know it. You'll be doing what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council not only emphasized is your right, but your obligation.² The mighty have failed us, and now it's up to all of us together to help lift up the lowly.

Brothers and sisters, I know this has been hard to hear. I know that many of you are outraged and disgusted, as am I, by these crimes and by the role our bishops and other clergy have played in them. Some of you have shared your reactions with me. This is surely not the time, then, to joke with you, or to tell you an endearing story, or to pretend that nothing has happened.

² *Lumen Gentium* 37.

I respect you too much for that, and I will not dishonor the victims by ignoring them and thereby victimizing them yet again.

As painful as this is for me to discuss or for you to hear, if we're to continue being an effective witness to Christ in the world, we, all of us, must insist on change, and we can never insist on the changes that *must* be made in our Church if we don't first acknowledge what *needs* to be changed, or if we are cowed into remaining silent. Silence is itself another cover-up.

If there is a singular grace in these tragic and unconscionable events, it's that they serve as a powerful reminder that our faith must never rest in those who hold this or that office, particularly those who seek only to serve the institution of the Church and their own privilege while imperiling the most vulnerable among the Body of Christ. Instead, as Pope Francis emphasized to the College of Cardinals on just the second day of his papacy, our "gaze must always [be] fixed on Christ, the Risen Christ, present and alive in the Eucharist." Mindful of Christ's presence in our lives, however unrelenting our personal or ecclesial night may seem, we must, as Pope Francis went on to say,

“never give in to pessimism, to that bitterness that the devil tempts us with every day.”³

How prophetic his words have proven to be.

And how prophetic, too, are the words we heard — providentially — in the Gospel for the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary only one day after the release of the Pennsylvania grand jury report. They are Mary’s words, words that remind us, we can only pray, of how the victims of these terrible crimes will find healing, and of how those of us who are appalled and enraged (which is all of us, hopefully) will find the strength to be propelled by our fury to help build a Church worthy of the Lord we serve. They are the words of faith, *true* faith, *our* faith. And no one, however lofty his station, may take them from us.

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,” Mary exulted.

“He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation. He has shown the strength of his arm, and has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has

³ Quoted in Catherine Harmon, “Pope Francis greets cardinals one-on-one,” *The New Catholic World Report*, 3/15/13, catholicworldreport.com, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2013/03/15/watch-pope-francis-greets-cardinals-one-on-one/#.UVDynxeG2Sp>

filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has come to the help of his servant Israel for he has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children forever.”

Lord Jesus, You who weep at the crimes of your servants, You who feel the sting of the lashes we, the clergy, have inflicted on You, heal the suffering of every victim. Heal Abraham’s children. Lift up the lowly. Scatter the proud. Remember your promise of mercy.

Amen.

Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God, that we may be worthy of the promises of Christ.

Amen.