



A message to the faithful of the archdiocese from Archbishop Michael Jackels

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Repair of the church: reflecting on the US bishops' retreat

In the interest of being transparent, and to keep everyone informed about matters related to clergy sexual abuse, I want to communicate the following:

Last September our Holy Father Pope Francis "suggested" that the bishops of the USA spend time in seclusion, prayer and discernment in order to respond to the hurt, derision and loss of credibility resulting from the crimes and sins of clergy sexual abuse.

Almost all of the US bishops responded to the suggestion, and went on retreat together from 2-8 January 2019, at Mundelein seminary outside of Chicago.

The conferences and homilies were given by Father Raniero Cantalamessa, an Italian Franciscan who has been the Preacher of the Papal Household since 1980. In fact, Pope Francis sent him to be the retreat speaker.

It was a blessed experience. I felt like I was being disciplined all over again. I heard (and I hope responded to) the invitation to repent, believe, and live according to the spirit of the Gospel. I told someone I think I am ready to be a better bishop, if it isn't too late.

At the beginning of the retreat each bishop received a letter from the Pope.

In that letter he encouraged us toward a shift in our way of thinking, calling us to respond to the crisis in the spirit of the Gospel, begging the Spirit to point out new paths of life for a new presence in the world.

This paradigm shift is needed. We cannot continue with business as usual, otherwise we would give the impression that we are clueless about the hurt, derision and loss of credibility resulting from the crimes and sins of clergy sexual abuse, or worse yet, that we could care less.

The new path of life for a new presence in the world is I think reflected in our being a Church of the poor, for the poor.

A Church *of the poor* means that we acknowledge our need for God and others, and that others and even God have need of us – a mutual dependence. Being a Church of the poor does not mean that we have to be literally poor; not even Jesus was poor in a material sense, and he never asked that of his followers.

A being a Church *for the poor* means that we make a shift from me to thee, from acting out of the spirit of the world to the spirit of Jesus, which will lead to a sharper focus on what Pope Francis calls the beating heart of the Gospel: love of neighbor, service to the poor.

Jesus' preaching can be summed up in his word or teaching about love: love God and love your neighbor.

In the parable of the good Samaritan Jesus teaches further that our neighbor is anyone in need: family or friend, acquaintance or stranger, even an enemy, especially an enemy (Luke 10:25).

Our neighbor has a claim on our pardon and service, our kindness and gentleness, no matter who it is, and whether or not he or she is deserving, asks nicely, appreciates the cost, or is grateful.

Service to the poor is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, and the sign that a person is living under the reign of God (*Mark*12:28-34).

Love your neighbor is the word that the Church's preaching plants in our heart, and that we are not only to hear, but also put into practice (*James*1:21-22).

Service to the poor is the practice of a pure and genuine religion (*James*1:27), which can preserve us in holiness until the day when Jesus will come again at the end of time (*1 Thessalonians*3:13).

On that day, Jesus will judge us on whether or not we loved our neighbor, and those who practiced love will enjoy heaven, but those who did not, will not (*Matthew*25).

Service to the poor – this is the word that wipes away our sins, that heals our souls, and that covers a multitude of sins (*1 Peter*4:8).

Love of neighbor is a balm that heals us and, as a consequence, that heals the Church of the wounds and sickness that we, its members, have caused by our sinful selfishness.

And service to the poor is what will keep our Church membership faithful, as well as attract new growth.

Moreover, love of neighbor is an essential element of the biblical teaching on stewardship:

We do not own anything; all is on loan from God, entrusted to us to manage according to God's good pleasure: to provide for ourselves and our dependents; and to support the Church's mission and the poor.

The new paths of life for a new presence in the world that the Spirit is asking from us now is I think the same message that Francis of Assisi heard in the falling-down ruins of the church of San Damiano: Repair my Church.

Francis thought that God was asking him literally to repair the building, San Damiano church, and so that is what he did.

But then somehow it was made clear to Francis that it was the Church, the assembly of believers, from the Pope on down, that he was meant to repair.

And he was given to understand that the Church would be repaired in part by attention to the beating heart of the Gospel: love of neighbor, service of the poor.

The message Francis of Assisi heard – Repair my Church – is I think what we need to hear and heed today.

And the principal means to work toward repair of the Church, the assembly of believers, is the same as what Francis came to understand: by our own devotion to service to the poor.

The Church today is in need of repair. Service to the poor has the power to bring about healing and reconciliation, as well as to attract new members to the Church, while keeping the faithful, well, faithful.

Love your neighbor. Be among the poor who ask pardon and readily forgive, who protect and provide for the poor, those who cannot do for themselves. And in so doing we can rebuild the Church so sullied by clergy sexual abuse of minors, clergy sexual misconduct with adults, and the failure of bishops to respond appropriately to these crimes and sins.

O God, have mercy on us and help us.

This article is part of a series based on the 2019 U.S. bishops' retreat. To read the rest of the series, visit: <https://www.thewitnessonline.org/category/bishops-retreat-2019/>

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