

LETTER TO A SUFFERING CHURCH: A BISHOP SPEAKS ON THE SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS
Bishop Robert A. Barron / Word on Fire Institute / www.wordonfire.org

These notes are taken from a video interview with Bishop Robert A. Barron, auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese of Los Angeles and author of the book, Letter to a Suffering Church. The interview was broken down into five segments or chapters. All quotes are taken from Bishop Barron. The italicized questions are the ones that appeared in the video and were posed to him.*

The videos can be seen at this link, which is Chapter 1. The remaining video segments are linked at the top of this page: <https://videos.sufferingchurchbook.com/the-devils-masterpiece>

Chapter 1: The Devil's Masterpiece

What role did the Devil play in the sex abuse scandal?

- “Well, I refer to this scandal as a diabolical masterpiece. It just seems too thoroughly intentional, too thoroughly thought through in a global way to be simply the result of chance or merely human contrivance....If you were thinking through how best to undermine the Church, I can't imagine a better thing to come up with than this scandal. So I do see indeed the influence of dark powers. You know who else has been very strong on this is Pope Francis, who's always insisted upon seeing the spiritual dimension—that we don't simply analyze this problem sociologically, psychologically, culturally, et cetera—that we also analyze it in terms of spiritual powers. And I think it is the Devil's masterpiece.”

How does the Devil operate in the world?

- “The basic truth is, the Devil doesn't *make* people do anything. The Devil works through insinuation and temptation and suggestion. The Devil requires human cooperation. Am I denying for a second that human beings in their sinfulness have been deeply involved in this crisis? Absolutely not.”
- “Yes, the Devil is at work, but precisely through human minds, human wills, human actions.”

How would you characterize the victim's suffering?

- “I would characterize the victim's suffering as horrific, and it's the worst possible face of this whole scandal. Yes, the Church has been undermined institutionally in all sorts of ways, but the worst aspect of it is, um, that people have been so thoroughly victimized precisely by those who should be their representatives of Christ on earth, those who should best represent the love and mercy of God had become in many cases, uh, uh, bearers of great suffering to people. That's the deepest scandal of this whole time.”

How would you describe the effect of this crisis on the Church?

- “Well, I mean, again, not only institutionally at almost every level—our capacity to evangelize, to teach, to preach, uh, to serve the poor—I mean all these ways the Church's credibility has been so massively undermined that our work has been compromised.”
- “For every person who was abused—think of a young person being abused by a priest—uh, the ripple effect that that had. So all the members of that young person's family who were affected, all the members of the extended family of that young person affected, all the friends and neighbors who knew about it affected. Now, multiply that ripple effect, you know, thousands of times, and what you find eventually is the whole Church practically being affected by this terrible outrage. So it's not just that you count up the numbers of the victim survivors. More than that, it's this terrible ripple effect. See, in a way, it's the, it's the shadow side of our theology

* Any and all profits from the sale of this book will go to trusted charities that support the victims of sexual abuse.

of the Mystical Body, which says that we're all connected....When there's an attack on the Body of Christ, when there's outrageous insult to the Body of Christ, we are all affected."

Chapter 2: Light from Scripture

What does the Bible teach us about the sex abuse scandal?

- "My conviction is, as a Catholic bishop, is we won't see this thing properly or fully until we see it from the standpoint of the Word of God, and I think that's often missing in our analyses. You know, very often the legal probably takes precedence and again, that's an important aspect of it, but we won't really understand it properly until we see it from the perspective of divine revelation. And, in fact, the Bible, has a *lot* to say about sex, about sexual abuse, sexual misconduct. And I think that's the best place to start."

What are some examples in the Bible of sexual abuse?

- "I can name two right off the top. There are many, but two, I think, have special, um, resonance for our time. One of the stories in the First Book of Samuel about Eli and his sons Hophni and Phineas...Eli was high priest at Shiloh. He was one of the leading religious figures of the time. He had two sons, Hophni and Phineas—who were also priests—who are abusing the people, both financially and sexually. People come forward to Eli, complaining about these two sons and [say] 'You'd better do something about it.' Eli does indeed speak to Hophni and Phineas and says, 'Hey, you guys, cut this out,' but then does nothing further. They continue abusing the people and Eli does not act. Um, what happens as a result is disaster for Israel. So in their battle with the Philistines, they lose an enormous part of their army. Then they bring the Ark of the Covenant—the greatest, you know, talisman of the Lord's presence—they bring it into battle, they are defeated again, and the Ark of the Covenant is, uh, taken, Hophni and Phineas are killed, and then Eli, when he receives the word, falls backwards and he dies. So, um, that story I've always found weirdly and interestingly illuminating for our time."
- "Think of how Israel is handed over to its enemies [because nothing was done to stop the abuse mentioned above]. I remember back in the 2000s when this thing was really kind of breaking and, you know, unraveling [in the media], people would say, 'Oh, these newspapers, you know, they hate the Church.' And you know, they may or they may not, but my response was, 'Well, that's a biblical category: the Lord handing the Church over to its enemies, precisely for the sake of punishing the Church, ultimately to purify the Church.'"
- "A second biblical story I would put a special emphasis behind is that of David and Bathsheba. So this, now, we're in the Second Book of Samuel. The great King David, the warrior of Israel, also the sweet singer of the house of Israel, someone that sums up some of the best Israelite life. David, who as a young man, is always attentive to the property of God, always asking God what to do—even in regard to the simplest matters. But now we pick up the story when David is an older man, he's established as king, and we hear that that time of year when kings go on campaign, David is at home on the roof of his palace having awakened from a long nap....Furthermore, from that perspective on the roof his palace, in a kind of God-like point of vantage, he looks out and sees Bathsheba. Now God's not involved at all. He never asked God what to do, never asked for God's direction, but starts barking orders in a series of kind of staccato commands he arranges for Bathsheba to be brought to him, even though she's married—in fact, married to one of his heroic fighters, Uriah the Hittite. When she becomes pregnant, David panics and he calls Uriah home in the hopes that he can bring the two of them together so it won't look like anything was odd going on. But in fact Uriah resists him because he's so faithful to David and to the army and doesn't go to visit his wife. When David sees he's getting nowhere with him, he arranges for his murder. So what you have there is an extraordinary abuse of power. You have someone who's been put in that position by God as king of Israel, but instead of relying upon the direction of God, he acts like God and begins manipulating everyone around

him. Sexual abuse, to be sure. Abuse of power? Absolutely—to the point of murder he ends. And the Bible is so clear-eyed about it. You know how wonderful in a way that David—arguably the greatest figure in the Old Testament, I mean, as great as Moses or Abraham—but yet there David is fully revealed as someone engaging in this kind of misbehavior. Uh, again, I would say that’s a pretty interesting distant mirror of our own time, of this abuse of power that indeed has been going on, resulting in both sexual abuse and um, kind of institutional mismanagement.”

What does Jesus say about the treatment of children?

- “I think in some ways all this comes to its fullest expression in the New Testament in Jesus’ attitude towards children, which is very interesting because at that time and place children were, um, kind of non-entities. They weren’t taken seriously in a social setting, their point of view wasn’t respected, they were kind of like almost sub-human figures. And so, ‘Who’s the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ the disciples, you know, ask. And Jesus takes that occasion to bring a little child—seen as nobody at that time—and put him right in their midst. And then to me it’s the great, uh, icon: putting His arms around the child, so Jesus embracing the child [and saying] ‘Unless you turn and become like this little child, you know, you will not be great in the kingdom of heaven. But [there’s] also that warning you hear in the Gospels: anyone that causes one of these little children to stumble, it’s better—they should have a millstone tied around their neck, you know, and put into the sea. Both the instinct to protect a child and to bring the child’s full dignity to expression—unless you change and become like one of these children—that’s the icon for the protection of children and the taking, uh, seriously of the dignity of young people. And the Lord Jesus Himself gives expression to that.”

How is this scandal an affront to God’s intention for human sexuality?

- “It’s very important in the Bible to look at, um, human sexuality’s something very positive, so the Bible is not puritanical, it’s not dualistic. It doesn’t see sex in itself as a problem. In fact, it celebrates it, and one of the signs of the covenant consistently is ‘Be fruitful, multiply.’”
- “But the Bible is very alive to the fact that when sexuality is taken out of the context of love, which means willing the good of the other, it then becomes very often something that’s used for one’s own aggrandizement, one’s own pleasure, it becomes a means of manipulating others, dominating others, as you saw in those two stories. That’s what the Bible condemns, not sex in itself but this abuse of sexuality when it’s taken out of the context of love.”

Chapter 3: We Have Been Here Before

What does the history of corruption in the e Church teach us about the sex abuse scandal?

- “I’d like to go back to the very beginning and to St. Paul who said we hold this treasure in earthen vessels. Now, what’s the treasure? The treasure is Christ, risen from the dead, who[m] Paul was announcing. Now Paul, from the very beginning of the Church, knew that that treasure was in very fragile, corruptible vessels—meaning people like us, meaning human beings. Go back now to 1 Corinthians, go back to Romans, go back to Philippians, go back to the early letters of Paul. You’re gonna find Paul dealing—first century—dealing with corruption within the Christian community.”
- His former teacher, Msgr. Charles Myer, “teacher of generations of Chicago priests,” who taught Church history, “kind of took a certain delight, I think, in sharing with us a lot of the corruption of, you know, priests and bishops and popes over the ages. And I think a lot of us originally were scandalized by this. But I think really it was a kind of immunization. It immunized me against this view that, um, ‘Oh, the Church has to be just pristine across the centuries.’ No, it’s been marked by corruption at almost every stage of its life.”

Who in history has stood up against this type of corruption in the Church?

- St. Peter Damian, a hermit and monastic founder from the 11th century, was “kind of a spiritual wisdom figure at the time. He spoke about many things, but he put his finger on corruption in the 11th century that was very much like corruption in our time—namely, sexual misbehavior among priests. But also bishops themselves not properly monitoring the priests and in some cases...bishops abusing younger clergy and seminarians. So, 11th century, St. Peter Damian raises his voice in eloquent and very clear protest against these behaviors.”

How does the Church endure despite these scandals?

- “I would say that one of the surest signs that the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit—the Church has Christ as its heart—is the fact that it *has* survived for twenty centuries despite massive corruption on the part of Church people and Church leaders. I mean, God help us if we relied on our own moral excellence to keep the Church going.”
- “Here’s what’s really interesting to me about all these different moments of scandal and corruption. It’s usually at those times when the great reforming movements arise....the great reforming figures have emerged precisely during times of corruption, often corruption at high levels and among the clergy. I would read that as the movement of the Holy Spirit.”
- “God intervenes to repair His Church, and He uses the great saints to do it. That’s the sign that we’re guided by the Spirit—we’re still here despite the corruption.”

Chapter 4: Why Should We Stay?

What is the indissoluble treasure of the Church?

- “Well the treasure is Christ crucified and risen from the dead. The treasure is what Paul recognized 2,000 years ago. [It’s] still the same treasure. We carry it in very flawed vessels.”
- “We stay in the Church and we fight for the Church because of the treasure. And we must never fall into the trap of saying, ‘Because the vessels are so fragile and so flawed, I’m leaving’. No, no, you stay and fight because of the treasure.”

How do the Sacraments remain valid despite the corruption in the clergy?

- “The Donatists [heretics from the 4th and 5th centuries] were those who said priests and bishops who had abandoned the Church during times of persecution eventually come back—they were unworthy, they were unworthy to distribute the sacraments. The Donatists were kind of a purist movement that said corrupt clergy were not capable of administering the sacraments. The great Augustine, um, got involved in this controversy, and thank God he did, because he resolved, ‘No, it’s not because of the virtue of the cleric, it’s because of the grace of the sacrament, uh, that it has efficacy’. And so even the most unworthy cleric can legitimately distribute and administer the sacraments. It’s a very important principle, and thank God for it because it’s sustained the Church up and down the ages.”
- “The sacraments are not compromised in their integrity by the moral turpitude of priests and bishops, thank God.”

What is the most important reason to stay faithful to the Church despite these scandals?

- “The most important reason to stay in the Church and fight for it is the Eucharist....The greatest gift Christ gave us, the greatest gift He left us is the Eucharist. So Thomas Aquinas says that the *virtus Christi*, the power of Christ, is present in all the sacraments, but only in the Eucharist, he says, is *ipse Christus*, Christ Himself present. There’s no greater gift, there’s no greater reason for staying in the Church than the Eucharist. Uh, when people leave the Church for another denomination or they wander away, that’s always my first response is: But what about the Eucharist? That’s the reason to stay and fight.”

Chapter Five: The Way Forward

What steps has the Church taken to address these scandals?

- “It’s most important to emphasize that the Church has taken very important institutional steps to deal with the crisis, and they have indeed been very effective.”
- The “Dallas Charter” (2002) included reforms that have been “massively successful in addressing this problem.”
 - They include background checks, careful screening of seminarians, and the immediate reporting of accusations.
 - These reforms have reduced the number of cases of abuse “to a trickle.”

Does the Priesthood need a spiritual reformation in response to clericalism?

- “What’s needed, first of all, [is] a real spiritual renewal of the priesthood.”
- “Who can deny that there has been something like a rot in the priesthood and the episcopacy over these past decades?”
- There is a need for reform in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Dominic, and St. Peter Damian.
- On a much deeper level, spiritual renewal is needed even more than institutional reforms. There is a need for “re-dedication to the priesthood as a life utterly devoted to Christ...that every aspect of our lives belongs to Him.”
- “A renewal of holiness is key, I think, for the reform of the priesthood.”

What about quick fixes like allowing priests to marry?

- “Well I don’t agree with them. I don’t think that sort of superficial institutional change within the structure of the priesthood is called for, nor do I think it would be efficacious. What’s needed is a return to the roots of the priesthood, a return to its essential nature and structure. It’s a renewal of it, not a change of it. I think it’s the key to this moment.”

How is this scandal our problem?

- “I’m not for a moment denying that there is—as I said, there was a rot in the priesthood and that we should focus on priests and bishops who engage in this behavior. I’m not going to deny that for a second. But I’m also saying, uh, priests and bishops come out of Catholic families. They’re conditioned by a culture that, uh, that surrounds them. If we play the game of us against them and good guys / bad guys, I think we won’t make progress. We should see that all of us are implicated in the solution.”
- “Is there a need for the laity to be reformed spiritually? I’d say yes. Holy priests come out of a holy laity.”
- “Something I point out in the book: the fact that poll after poll shows that on most major issues, Catholic laity track with the general secular consensus. I guess that’s a problem that Catholics don’t profile themselves as distinctive over and against the reigning culture.”
- 75% to 80% of the Catholic laity don’t come to Mass any more on a regular basis. Increasingly, they are not seeking marriage in the Church and baptism for their children.
- “The holiness of priests will come from the holiness of the laity. The holiness of the laity comes from the holiness of the priest. And so this problem we have to address together before we’re going to solve it.”

What would be some steps the laity can take to fight for the Church?

- “Well, I think going back to Mass is a good starting point. Um, how about a Holy Hour dedicated every day to the purification of the Church? How about the sanctification of the secular culture, which is what Vatican II called the laity to—their special arena, the arena of economics and

politics, communication and business and finance and education. That's the world that the laity move in. Sanctify it. Don't blend into it and be like everybody else in that sphere, but rather become distinctively Catholic within the secular context and you'll live up to your calling as Vatican II saw it. I think that's key to the transformation of the culture."