

Scripture tells us today that Jesus delights in the wonder of children and that God has always happily accepted all who open themselves up to the loving power of the Holy Spirit with childlike innocence, regardless of the specifics of their religious affiliation. We, too, are reminded to esteem children's innocent, wide-open approach to the sacred and to honor what is true and good in all faith traditions. Although we certainly do believe that the fulness of truth and goodness is to be found in the Catholic Church, especially as it's manifested in the Eucharist, we're called to respond without prejudice to wisdom wherever it is found. In a sense, we're asked to be open enough to accept each other and our different beliefs the way children might innocently accept one another and enjoy each other's company in a playground,

Other folks don't see things that way, especially these days. Let me tell you about a conversation I had with a man and his wife one night not too long ago, while serving as a chaplain over at the hospital. The man described himself as a former Catholic, disgusted at what he had been hearing about the crimes against children, the inexcusable coverups and what he felt was the general corruption of the Catholic Church. His wife was equally indignant. "How can you still be a Catholic?" he demanded of me, full of righteous indignation. "In good conscience I can't justify associating with people like you anymore. What kind of games do you play in your mind that allow you to stay?"

"You sound angry," I observed.

"You bet I'm angry," he replied. "I feel betrayed by people who ought to have known better. They took advantage of the most vulnerable of us all and made a mockery of the faith. How can so-called 'holy people' abuse innocent children like that? How can all the others cover it up?! I don't want to have anything to do with anyone like that anymore and you shouldn't either, if you had any courage."

"Suppose I were to tell you that members of my own family had been sexually abused," I asked. It got very quiet all of a sudden, and both he and his wife fixed me with their eyes.

"Who?" he asked.

"Me," I replied. "and another relative as well."

They were at loss for words, so I continued. “In my case, the perpetrator was a family member. In the other it was a teacher. The only clergy involved were those who helped us come to grips with what had happened and offered us ways we could use to begin to reframe our lives. Far from abandoning our faith, we’ve gripped it the way you’d cling to a life preserver.”

The man’s wife looked at me and just said “I’m so sorry.”

I gave that statement the attention it deserves and went on. “The perpetrators were never held accountable. One, we think, met an untimely end at his own hands, and the other is not in a position to be a problem to anyone any more. But let me ask you a question, not to excuse the Church or deflect attention from anything. If it’s teachers who can be abusers, should we then never send our children to school? If it’s family members who could turn out to be the problem, should we all then have nothing to do with our families? Tell me what you think.”

They had nothing to offer, so I went on.

“An abused person has had something stolen from him or her that can never be fully recovered. No amount of money, not even the \$3 billion the Catholic Church has, for its own part, spent on abuse settlements so far, can ever restore what was taken from us. Some parts of our lives will always be painted in subdued colors, where for you the colors will always be bright and happy. The relationships we do manage to form will always be crippled by the ugliness we suffered earlier. Intimacy, if it comes at all, will be purchased at a price you probably cannot even begin to imagine. I do not know how I would have survived at all without the love of God and the support of those who share my faith. Some of us, as you well know, don’t.”

“We didn’t know,” the man said quietly. “We didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t,” I replied honestly, “there is a part of all of us, our deepest identity, that belongs entirely to God. It’s the place where God lives within us, so to speak. It’s my deepest me, and it’s untouchable by sin and illusion, beyond the reach of depravity, fantasy and the brutality of any human ego, including my own. No, you cannot hurt my deepest me. But when I heard your anger, I knew I had to respond to it directly, in a way that might help you let go of it. Although you cannot hurt my deepest me, you can easily hurt yourself with your anger. Please believe me - I know that from my own bitter experience. When Jesus spoke of gouging out eyes out and

cutting off hands – all he meant is that if there’s something about us that isn’t loving or life-giving, we need to get rid of it – not let it be part of us anymore. Anger’s like that.”

“It’s not just the sex abuse that makes me angry,” the man told me. “I experienced so many other instances of arrogance and disdain from so-called ‘religious people.’ Maybe your ‘deepest me’ hasn’t been hurt, but I feel mine has.”

“You’re probably not alone,” I admitted, “but let me share some wisdom from Max Lucado, a wise pastor from another Christian tradition, who said a while back: ‘Although I can’t say what your past looked like, I can tell you with precision what your future’s going to look like if you don’t come to terms with your anger.’ Why let disappointment in other people’s behavior cause you to turn away from the God who loves you, lives within you and sustains your being? It was St. Augustine who remarked that God has many the Church doesn’t have, and the Church has many that God doesn’t have.”

“It’ll always be a mix, but let me invite you to return to the Eucharist anyway,” I urged them. I pointed to the crucifix in his room and remarked that if Jesus could forgive those who killed him, so was I called to forgive those who had killed a part of me. So was my relative and so was everyone else, including them.

“I’ll forgive them when I see them all roasting in hell,” the man said.

“Problem is,” I replied, “you’d have to be there with them to see it, and that’s a barbecue to which you probably wouldn’t enjoy being invited.”

His wife laughed as I said that and the mood in the room lightened up a bit. We went on to discuss other topics, and I left having received a promise from both of them that they’d give the church another try. “Something tells me you’re probably right about the Eucharist, but we’ll see,” were the man’s last words to me. I hope they follow up on their promise. Life can indeed be brutal beyond comprehension, but the love of God goes far deeper than any evil of mankind can reach, and it’s a love that can never be extinguished.