

Betrayal

For the last month, I have been sickened by reports of ex-Cardinal McCarrick's long history of sexual abusing male teens and adults; more deadening still is his denial of the allegations (how so when a diocese settled a couple of these cases years earlier?). Most crucifying are reports that some leaders around him knew of his atrocities and turned a blind eye.

Each Christian bears the shame of this. Those aware of the devastating impact of sexual and spiritual abuse bear more. How could a religious system betray her most vulnerable over and over again? The Church's structure lends itself to cohesion (for which I am grateful) and cover-up (for which we must become stubbornly intolerant).

Scripture guides me here. As the McCarrick allegations unfolded, I completed a Bible study on the Gospel of St. Mark with my children, using a commentary written by Dr. Mary Healy, a Catholic biblical scholar whom I esteem as one of the greatest gifts to the Church today. St. Mark is the leanest of the Gospels and thus fails to soften much of anything. His account of the events leading up to the crucifixion broke me; I shuddered as demonized men abused Jesus rapid fire, relentlessly. He suffered betrayal on every side, as if dark forces had captivated all men and made them violently stupid. On the cross, Jesus' only words conveyed forsakenness ('Where are You, Father?'), ending in a death cry.

Thank God for the cross, the Father's inner logic that boomerangs wickedness into divine power and wisdom! Yet in St. Mark, even Christ Resurrected is hidden from witnesses who are either too dull or too afraid to believe the Risen Jesus at all. Mary Magdalene 'gets' Him but her report to the disciples falls on deaf ears and blind eyes. And this from the Gospel I most associate with spiritual power: St. Mark's blazing witness of the Word confirmed by signs and wonders.

St. Mark reveals the cross as God's strength, glory just waiting to shatter the husk of clueless men. If God truly works through human impotence, then we the Church have given Him a lot to work with—the ex-cardinal whose dazzling gifts obscured a predatory double life, dutiful men who doubted their guts and settled on hiding gangrene rather than amputating it. To quote Pope Benedict: 'In the Church, Jesus entrusts Himself to those who betray Him again and again.'

Eloquent and true. Yet humanly-speaking, how are we to trust the Church now? We must grieve for persons abused by clerics who cannot help but gag at pics of McCarrick gazing effusively at Pope Francis. And what about the innocent clerics who fight for chastity and who urge us to integrate our own, priests now complicit in the eyes of the public who see 'cover up' in every Roman vestment? We must cry out for the abused who need justice, and for clergy who should not be maligned because of a cowardly few. And for the unbelieving world who needs to know that the Church is not a secret, self-protective refuge for perverse men who enjoy the theater of religion. Rather, she is a beautiful Mother, served by amazing Fathers.

Power in impotence—the cross, the gist of the Gospel, St. Mark’s especially. And that is what we are beholding as Pope Francis, with the help of friends, acts decisively and strongly to no longer tolerate clerical abuse. He is wielding the surgical knife, as evinced by the resignation of 34 Chilean bishops last month who participated in an extensive cover-up of ongoing abuse, and the conviction of an Australian Archbishop on similar grounds. Most resoundingly, Pope Francis stripped McCarrick of his cardinal status and removed him from public ministry. That is huge, a first, and needs to become standard practice for shepherds who eat sheep or look the other way while others do.

A trustworthy Church? Yes, when she verifies the truth of abuse, disciplines abusers, while making every effort to heal the abused and ensure the sexual integrity of her leaders. Strength at work in weakness: our faith is founded on nothing less. We’ve miles to go. Still, when lived in her members, the cross on which God was betrayed overcomes the sting and stink of this most intimate human betrayal.