

## **Merciful Discipline 6: Humbled, We Shine**

This is the sixth post of six in the *Merciful Discipline Series*. A complete list of available posts will be at the end of each article as they are made available.

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‘When You disciplined us, we could barely whisper a prayer.’ (1S 26:16)

‘Christ’s abiding presence in the midst of our suffering is gradually transforming our darkness into light.’ Pope Benedict

The sexual abuse crisis in the Church brings us to our knees. We do not kneel politely but painfully, a sprawl rather than a pose. On behalf of those felled by the weight of a priest’s perversion, we too stumble and fall. Behold the scandal we share: the Greek word ‘skandalon’ means stumbling block, a sizable obstacle in the path of another’s salvation.

Pope Benedict is right. Our ‘skandalon’ has “obscured the light of the Gospel to a degree that not even centuries of persecution succeeded in doing.”

Lent redeems our falling by redirecting it. Lent points us to another stumbling block, the Crucified Christ (1Cor 1:23), who draws us magnetically to Himself amid the suffering and shame of abuse and its cover-up. He invites us to fall forward into Himself, the sole Source that can bear the unbearable. Any momentum toward obliterating the stumbling block of sexual abuse in the Church begins facedown before the Cross. We repent for the disintegration of lives, the shattering of trust, and how abuse mocks the Church and her championing the dignity of each life.

Shame is transformed into substantial good at the Cross. Just as there is a momentum to the evil of abuse, fanning out like fissures from an earthquake, so repentance before the Crucified overcomes evil. Jesus Himself assumes the web of wounds and rouses the darkened Church, preparing her to shine once more. Our resurrection is founded on His justice and mercy. We arise

in humbled passion for the integrity of our Church.

Brimming with new life, we must act. Shame's transformation requires more than mystical transactions. Will we follow Benedict's call to bear witness with our very lives of a transparent, integrated Church who lives the truths she upholds?

From the beginning of his papacy, Benedict faced a hemorrhaging crisis of abuse. He realized that the dignity of all people, beginning with the education of children, required the transparent integrity of the Church. To him, sexual abuse was more than an isolated problem of priestly perversion; it signaled a disturbing shift in the entire culture toward sexual values that dehumanized others.

'Children deserve to grow up with a healthy understanding of sexuality and its proper place in human relationships. They should be spared the degrading manifestations and crude manipulations of sexuality so prevalent today.' (Address to US Bishops, 2008)

Degradations and manipulations like the priestly abuse of children! More than ever, we need a humbled witness from the top down of sexual integration. What does it mean to live chastely? How do we acquire self-control and pass it on to a generation already exposed to more filth than at any other time in history?

The church must reclaim its beautiful (and bravely counter-cultural) teaching on chastity--beginning with her priests. We must discover together how Jesus and His community help us to actually integrate God's will for our sexuality into the fabric of our real lives. That means more than preaching another round of conservative sexual ethics; we must also wrestle honestly with our 'ethos'--our desires and conflicts.

Jesus wants to transform our hearts--our affections, our attitudes, our motives-- that we might embody a living morality. Repentance before the Crucified is key. While sexual abuse is the ultimate 'disintegrator', Jesus' redeeming power in our lives always points to integration, toward wholeness. The stench of abusive priests must be overcome by the fragrance of those priests who live chaste lives through the cross and its community. Following their good lead, we too can embody what it means to offer our chaste selves to one another.

We the laity must do our part. As the numbers of priests are declining, we must increase our commitment to transparent service of the Church. We can ensure that our dioceses have solid systems in place for responding quickly and impartially to abuse charges, and especially to the abused. These systems must become normative!

The abuse crisis has struck an inspired blow against clericalism. It has altered her 'in-house' mentality, and she is learning to yield substantial control to empowered laity and civil authorities. As with any organizational shift in values and praxis, this will require time and vigilance on the part of

all.

Change takes time. Change is taking place. We now have a better grasp of the horror of priestly abuse and how to prevent it than we had 10 years ago. In spite of our problems, the US Church has exemplified candor for the worldwide Church whose abuses are just beginning to be revealed. Their 'skandalon' is ours; we have much yet to endure. We can do so through the One who endured all in order to transform our shame into glory.

Abuse has struck us down, but we are not destroyed. (2Cor 4:9) Our dying is not fatal. We see life-signs--the fruit of God's purifying, disciplining hand. He is judging clericalism, and inspiring a more humble, candid hierarchy; He is weeding out ill-equipped candidates for the priesthood and empowering solid clerics and laity; He is calling the Church to a new integrity in how she embodies her truth.

Merciful discipline. God is having His way with His Bride.

'The truth must come out; without the truth we will never be set free. We must face the truth of the past; repent it; make good the damage done. And yet we must move forward day by day along the painful path of renewal, knowing that it is only when human misery encounters face-to-face the liberating Mercy of God that our Church will be truly restored and enriched.' Dublin Archbishop Martin, 2010

'We must be confident that this time of trial will bring a purification of the entire Catholic community, leading to a holier priesthood, a holier episcopate, and a holier Church.' John Paul II

'For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake, I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines forth like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch.' (IS 62:1)

**MORE:**

The *Merciful Discipline Series* of Posts (updated with each new post as they become available):

- [Merciful Discipline 1: Broken, We Pray for the Abused](#)
- [Merciful Discipline 2: Broken, We Repent for the Church's Mishandling of Abuse](#)
- [Merciful Discipline 3: Broken, We Endure Shame](#)
- [Merciful Discipline 4: Hopeful, We Rebuild Trust](#)
- [Merciful Discipline 5: Hopeful, We Fight for the Dignity and Integrity of Our Priests](#)
- [Merciful Discipline 6: Humbled, We Shine](#)