

Homily for 8/26/18 – 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Fr. Stephen Sledesky

This weekend we end our reflection on John, chapter 6 – the Bread of Life Discourse – with a call to commitment. We've heard Jesus remind us that he is the bread come down from heaven; the bread of life; and this bread is his FLESH for the life of the world. If we eat his flesh and drink his blood we will have eternal life!!!

But we find out in this part of John 6, that many found Jesus' teaching hard to accept – and they walked away. When Jesus' apostles were asked if they too wanted to leave, Peter speaks up: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life!"

Recent news stories of the Pennsylvania Attorney General's report about the magnitude of abuse of children by priests there, and the revelations about the inappropriate behavior of Cardinal McCarrick may leave us wondering if we too should walk away.

I "intellectually" know that such abuse has occurred at the hands of my colleagues and superiors – it's been a part of the news for the past 16 years. But with each new revelation, my anger is rekindled and my heart broken once again that the most innocent and vulnerable members of our communities have been so violated. And I know that many of you may be angry, disillusioned, hurt, and any number of other feelings because of this news, and because similar abuse occurred here at St. George a number of years ago.

Last week in the bulletin we included a letter from Archbishop Blair regarding this issue, and this week he is mailing a letter to every registered household in the Archdiocese along with a letter from our Office of Safe Environment outlining the procedures in place in the Archdiocese to protect our children.

I wish to add my own perspective to his, and I make the disclaimer that these are my own personal views and "may not reflect those of the management."

The victims: The most important part of our consideration is to remember the victims of these crimes – and they are CRIMES. Again these are most innocent and vulnerable among us whose lives have been permanently affected by the actions of these priests and bishops. My heart goes out to any and to all who have been victimized by clergy, and I express my own profound apology that you have endured such mistreatment by those you should have been able to trust. And while our church has mandated training and put protocols in place for all clergy, employees and volunteers in order to prevent such abuse from happening in the future, it does not take away from the devastation and pain that has already been caused by those who have experienced such abuse. So to those who are victims of this abhorrent behavior on the part of clergy, I can only say I am deeply sorry on behalf of my colleagues in ministry and in the church.

The abusers: They are sick men and they are criminals, who ought to be prosecuted.

The leadership: That the leadership in our church has been more concerned with safeguarding the reputation of the church and its savings accounts, than standing in solidarity with the victims to offer support, resources for healing and a sincere apology to the victims, is as criminal as the abuse itself. When these victims turned to church officials who should have immediately acted to prevent further abuse and compassionately cared for these individuals, they received the cold shoulder. No wonder there are so many lawsuits! Pope Francis, in his recent statement regarding this abuse sums it up well when he says, "We showed no care for the little ones; we abandoned them."

The Church: Here I am speaking not of the institution but rather the PEOPLE OF GOD—YOU AND ME who are victimized too by the behavior of these predatory priests and superiors who protected them. Are you embarrassed to admit you are Catholic these days? I don't blame you. This is our beloved Church – the Church that Christ himself founded and a faith in which we believe deeply. No human being has the right to diminish our faith – yet that's what has happened! We've been made to feel ashamed to be who we truly are: Catholic Christians!

So what can we do?

Our first response might be to just leave...I've thought of that myself at times. I find myself embarrassed sometimes to wear the clerical collar and to be part of an institution that would rather protect its own self-interests than minister to the victim – like the Priests & Levites who passed the Samaritan victim on the road to Jericho, more interested in preserving their ritual purity than helping a fellow human being, beaten and bleeding on the side of the road.

What prevents me from leaving?

1. Jesus – He's the reason I'm here, the reason I was ordained & the reason I stay. Our relationship with Jesus must be the first and most important reason to be part of Church – not the priest's homilies (as good as they may be); not the music (as excellent as it is); not the structure or institutional nature of the Church -- JESUS is the reason.
2. YOU – the People of God. You are wonderful people of faith, who are searching for that relationship with Jesus that will lead you to eternal life! If the good guys go, who will be here to care for those who desire to follow Jesus?
3. The good things the Church does – The Church is a leader in offering services to the poor and needy, offering education and healthcare. There would be a huge hole in society without these great works of the Church.

Fr. Mike Schmidt, in a video addressing this issue used the phrase, "Don't leave, LEAD"

So the alternative to LEAVING is LEADING – to take LEADERSHIP in these troubled times. Vatican II reminded us that WE are the CHURCH – not just the Pope, the bishops, the priests & religious – but ALL of us TOGETHER!!!! We must rise up to take our rightful place in LEADING this church --which belongs to US!

How can we do this?

1. Without sounding pietistic or sappy...we need to recommit ourselves to follow Jesus! There have been some suggestions to pray and fast. I don't believe this is the only way, but whatever way works to strengthen our faith in and commitment to follow Jesus – let's pledge to do that. We have the Rosary for Healing and Protection every fourth Sunday of the month. Perhaps we can attend that. We have just planned a Prayer Service for Healing being held this Wednesday night at 7pm in our Healing Garden.
2. Need to insist on ACCOUNTABILITY of our leaders and true REFORM in our church. In the history of the church - many other ages encountered scandalous behavior on the part of church leaders, and people within the church rose up to demand reform, e.g. St. Catherine of Siena.
3. On this particular issue of clergy abuse, we must demand that our church leadership be transparent with us and cooperate with civil authorities in any cases of abuse, to ensure that the victims of abuse are our primary concern and not the reputation or treasuries of the Church. Our reputation and our financial well-being will be just fine if we choose to do the right thing and care for the victims instead protecting the perpetrators.
4. Dallas Charter and Safe Environment policies need to be reviewed and evaluated – do they do enough?
5. We have a parish synod meeting coming up Monday evening in preparation for the Archdiocesan Synod which is taking place in 2020. (A Synod is a coming together of the local church – the Archdiocese – to plan for the future.) I would hope that in light of what's happened these past several weeks, we might be moved to attend and share our thoughts and ideas into how our Archdiocese operates in the future. And although this issue is not the only one we should be commenting on, I do think it certainly should be part of the discussions of the Synod.

As the Israelite people in today's first reading were challenged by Joshua to recommit themselves to follow the LORD, and as the Apostles in today's Gospel were challenged by Jesus to recommit themselves to following him, we too are challenged to reaffirm our faith and commitment to following Jesus...

Let us pray to HIM who is the BREAD OF LIFE, whom we receive in the EUCHARIST,  
for FAITH to continue to believe in HIM and the vision HE has for us, his Church,  
for PERSEVERANCE in this troubled time,  
for COURAGE to meet the challenges we face head-on,  
for STRENGTH to be the LEADERS in this Church that is OURS,

so that we may recommit ourselves to following JESUS and his GOSPEL,  
making our Church and our world reflect more clearly – the Gospel values of Christ!

For to whom else can we go? – JESUS has the words of everlasting life!!!