

Talk #1 "Struggling to Feel Welcome in the Church that Struggles to Welcome You"
St. Mary of Sorrows Historic Church

Good morning, and welcome. I cannot express enough my gratitude for your gathering together here today. Of making the step, once more, to bring your wounds to Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician. It is a bold step, an uncomfortable step. It involves handing over control over the trauma that too often can control you, and giving yourself to the God who renews all things, restores all things.

I'm proud of you. I'm in awe of you.

And, to be honest, I am also intimidated. Intimidated by my inadequacy in speaking to your experience of abuse and the damage it has done to each of you. There is nothing in my life I can compare it to. I can speak to you what I know of God, who knits us together in our mother's wombs, who knows us and loves us more intimately than anyone. But I speak these words as someone who has not suffered as you. Someone who has not had to wrestle with these truths. Someone who has not had their trust in God and his Church taken away from them by someone who was supposed to represent Jesus Christ and his love.

I have been praying for you, that this day will be fruitful. That the Lord may enlighten you. That you may come to know that you are so loved.

And I have been praying that I might be a vessel through which Jesus Christ desires to speak to your hearts. I know what he desires for you: peace, wholeness, love, healing. May he grant this to you as you courageously inch closer to him today, no matter how small that step is. He does not need a lot of space. His mercy is endless, and it flows in abundance....

In preparation for today, I have been trying to immerse myself in first-hand accounts of your experience. I have listened to interviews and read articles and testimonies. The Lord has been good to me as he pointed me from one resource to another. As it

happens, in God's timing, the Catholic University of America is releasing a series on the abuse crisis in the United States. I have heard many of the voices of those brave enough to share what has damaged them so deeply. It added to what I had heard from my experience with the victim-survivors I have known. I know words can never capture what you have known. I know that many are not ready to speak about it, and We pray for them as well.

But what I have heard has been eye-opening and heart-changing.

And I thank God for this, for it has continued to transform me, and, to be fair, has led me to recognize my own shame in how I have not always responded best to the your trials, and the trials of so many other victim-survivors.

I entered the seminary in 2003. This means that I discerned my vocation when the Spotlight reports were coming out of Boston and the U.S. Bishops were meeting in Dallas to address what needed to be done.

During that time, my brother seminarians and I were inspired to bring about a change. In a way, we saw ourselves as fireman rushing into a burning building. We wanted to be the heroes that saved the Church. We were sickened by the priests who had done such harm to our beloved Church, and we wanted to be better, to be holier, to be trustworthy.

This has led to seminarians and priests to be more committed to prayer and obedience, willing to follow the new processes set in place – fingerprinting, mandatory classes on recognizing and reporting abuse, formation sessions covering the importance of protecting others – and ourselves – from dangerous situations.

The horrible revelations of 2018 have brought about the same sense in our seminarians today. They, like me and my classmates, entered formation for the priesthood at a time when people questioned why. Why be a priest now? Why be a

part of a Church that has caused such pain, and been corrupted by such grave sinners?

It is because God was calling worthy men to take up the challenge and serve him faithfully. We wanted to be those men. We believed that we were up to the task. We would be the change that the priesthood needed.

We thought that we were being noble, but really, what we focused on was only half-noble. We were focused on ourselves. We were looking inward.

From my experience, I can see that through it all, I had isolated myself from really trying to understand the suffering and the wounds of victim-survivors – your suffering, your wounds. I foolishly believed it had nothing to do with me. I wasn't one of those priests. I would never be like those priests. I would never cause such pain.

But this crisis requires so much more than that from me and my brother priests. It requires that we go beyond our own selves and recognize the wounded among us in our parishes – knowing that many suffer silently, wounds from clergy as well as within their family where you should experience safety as well.

It requires the compassion to suffer with you on your journey, that we listen to you – to your pain, to your anger, to your disappointment.

It requires that we remind you, over and over, that it is not your fault, that you are the victim and survivor, not responsible for what was done to you.

It requires the humility to apologize to you for what you have experienced at the hands of our brother clergy whose violence is beyond our imagining, but not yours.

It requires our apologizing for our actions and those of other members of the Church. To our indifference, our fear of addressing the issue, our turning in on

ourselves, our false judgment, our hoping that it would all go away. It requires our apologizing for not listening, not believing. It requires our apologizing for not making you feel welcome, our making you feel like you were not worthy to be shoulder to shoulder in the pews as equal in dignity and deserving of love as the next person.

It requires revealing the Lord to you who have been violated and wounded. And it requires walking with you - patiently, cautiously, lovingly – in an effort to bring you to the One who heals, the one who restores, the one for whom nothing is impossible.

It requires so much more than our just avoiding evil. It requires that we be Jesus Christ to all, especially to you, the vulnerable, the wounded, the searching....

There is no doubt that your experiences have left you uncomfortable, and even unwelcome in the Church. Too often the Church wants to avoid your suffering, as we see in how we have moments of crisis that lead to a visible response from the faithful – such as happened in the early 2000s with the Boston scandals and the Bishop's response in Dallas. And real change has happened to the structure and policies of the Church that have led to safer parishes and institutions.

But after such periods of reformation, too often we seek to return to normal and get past the pain and suffering. Yes, things will get better, but what about those who have already been violated? What about you who have been so damaged by the sins of a member of the Church, whether an ordained priest, hired employee, or a member of your family who sat with you in Church, but harmed you at home?

In our diocese, we have been blessed by the efforts of Bishop Loverde and Fr. Mealey, who sought to reach out to victim-survivors. Priests like Fr. Fiorelli who have walked along with you with compassion and patience. Laypeople like Pat Mudd who lovingly listened and organized events like this to bring you together

so that you can come into God's presence to converse with each other in a common language of pain that so many of us cannot speak.

We are blessed to have this foundation, continued by Bishop Burbidge, Dr. Moncher, Alejandra and those who work minister with them.

But even with these beautiful efforts to welcome you, we know that there is so much more that does not make the church feel like home.

There is the righteous anger of the grave injustices you have suffered at the hands of her clerics.

There is the feeling of helplessness when you are afraid to speak the truth for fear of not being heard, not being believed. The fear of being judged.

The pain experienced when you attempted to share your concerns and were told, explicitly or implicitly, to “offer up” and move on.

There are the wounds you bear that are still raw that they can be triggered by a smell, an image, a sound, ... and take away your peace and plummet you into terror. Wounds that make you uncomfortable around clergy, uncomfortable around other parishioners, uncomfortable in the pews.

There are those who want to minimize your pain, who want you to move on, who doubt your faith ... all without cause, all without charity, all without knowing what you know and feeling what you feel.

There are so many reasons to keep you away from the Church. I do not know them all, but you do. You know them too well....

But the church needs you. We need you because you are a vital member of her. You are a beloved child a God. An essential part of her mystical body.

In addition to the manifold gifts you bring apart from your trauma experiences, You draw out the compassion of the Church's sons and daughters (your sisters and brothers in Christ). You challenge them to humble themselves, to confront evil, to expand their hearts to be like Christ. Your presence with us is a visible sign of our need for conversion and reparation, a signal to her for her need to constantly convert, a sponge to soak up her grace and mercy.

You remind us of what still needs to be done in the name of Jesus Christ. You lead us to who we are called to be – who are meant to be, who we need to be if we are to be called disciples of Christ.

Many of us have failed you, and your presence among us must drive us to holiness as we face your suffering and strive to walk with you and strengthen you, and as you teach us what perseverance and fortitude are. You show us what it is to completely trust in God's mercy. You show us what it is to rely on God because there is nothing else to rely on.

You inspire us, even as you struggle. You inspire us even as you may want to remain hidden. You inspire us when you strive to bring about justice.

You inspire us because you remain with us, because you remain with the Church, because you remain with Jesus Christ.

And there is an essential gift you offer the church because of your pain, because of your brokenness, because of your wounds. You bring a compassion that so many of us cannot.

Compassion. It comes from the Latin com-passio. Passio meaning suffering. Com meaning with or together. You know how to suffer with those who suffer.

You are able to walk with those who have suffered deeply because you have suffered deeply. You are able to strengthen those who have been violated, those

who have been ignored, those who have had their trust stolen from them because you know how that feels. You have lived it like no other.

You provide this for each other, which is why these gatherings are so vital. You can understand each other, uphold each other. You can grieve together, inspire one another, encourage one another, and speak of God's love and mercy to one another with a depth that cannot come from anyone else. Because you have lived through so much, and suffered so much, and still strive to step closer and closer to Jesus Christ each and every day – walking together, listening to each other, embracing each other, loving each other.

And as you walk together, and as you walk with us, let us walk in faith and confidence that we are heading in the same direction – towards justice, towards peace, towards conversion, towards healing, towards salvation ... towards Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

We will stumble along the way. We will reveal our sinfulness and our brokenness. But we will always walk with each other. And we will always walk with the angels and saints who intercede for us, and with the Holy Spirit who inspires and guides us.

May we never lose hope, even when all seems hopeless. May we never lose faith, even when the evil one tempts us to. May we always know that our home is the Church, even when we don't feel comfortable or welcome.

This is our home because this is where we know we will find Our Lord, in the Word, in the Sacraments, in the priests who listen and love, in the faithful who embrace you and cry with you; in each other, who bear the wounds of Christ on the Cross.

Let us pray for each other, for those of you here and those who are still looking for the grace to return. Our Lord desires to draw you close and restore you. May we step towards him today, together, in faith.