

Ephphatha—Be opened

Ephphatha! Be Opened.

The last few weeks within our Catholic Church have been very difficult:

The Pennsylvania Attorney General's report,
former Cardinal McCarrick's abuse and resignation,
the letter of accusation of the Pope by Archbishop Vigano,
and our own local scandal with Presentation High School.

It has surely been a brutal few weeks for all of us.

As you know, I have been greatly distressed by these things
and thank you to so many who reached out to me.

I am going to speak very directly today about sensitive issues
and you may need to help your children with understanding them.

I apologize for that, but we Catholics need honesty at this moment.

Since I first preached about this 3 weeks ago,

many victims have come to see me sharing their pain
and asking me to advocate for them and be their voice.

It has been a painful few weeks for me.

It became clear to me that if I was to be their voice,
I needed to find my own voice first.

You see, I am not only speaking to you *for* the victims

I am speaking to you *as* a victim.

I, myself, was sexually abused by a priest 35 years ago and
up until 2 weeks ago, I have never shared it with a soul,
not even with my own family.

The shame was simply too much.

It happened when I was 18 years old

and the priest had spent 4 years grooming me for his final play.

I first met him when I was in Boston with my parents at age 14.

He spent the next four years writing to me regularly
and even visiting me in Ireland.

While I should have recognized the smaller inappropriate actions
throughout those four years, I never did.

I was a young boy who believed I had a vocation to the priesthood
and I trusted a priest to guide me in that vocation.
He waited until I turned 18 to make his move
so I could not call it child abuse.
He said this as he attacked me.
While ultimately he was unsuccessful in his attempted rape of me,
it left psychological scars and even more so spiritual scars.
The priest was a notorious abuser from New Hampshire and Boston
who admitted to raping dozens of boys and young men.
In 2004, he confessed in court and was sentenced to 44 years in prison.
He died in prison in 2006.
With his death I thought, as many victims do,
that my own suffering had ended.
I was wrong.

Reading the Pennsylvania Attorney General's report
traumatized me all over again.
As I read about the systematic grooming and labeling of their victims
I was transported back to my 18-year-old self
and I cried and cried for the wounds of my younger self.
I realized that I could no longer remain silent
because the Church has not learnt from the past.
My efforts to change the Church from within have been limited at best.
So I did what I have always done, go to the Lord for guidance.
At first the Lord encouraged to allow the anger to be my fuel
and sorrow to be my face;
make no sudden decisions to change
and then to stay focused on Jesus Christ at all times.
Then he said, "Listen to my word."
"Listen to my word."

In today's scripture, Jesus says, "Ephphatha. Be opened.
And immediately the deaf man's ears were opened
and his speech impediment was removed."
That was God's word to me.

It is time for the Church to fully open their ears!
And it is time for me to find my voice and tell my story;
to allow my own speech impediment to be removed.

So what now? What do I say?

To any victims out there,
whether it be at the hands of a priest or someone else,
I say to you, “try to find your voice.”

The truth will set you free.

After 35 years of darkness let me tell you
the light is so much better than the darkness.

After telling my story to my family and friends,
my true healing has begun.

The anger is giving way to sorrow and
now sorrow is giving way to peace in my soul.

The truth has set me free.

I know it seems impossible, but ask the Lord
to gently give you the strength to find your voice,
whether it is about abuse or other serious wrongs done to you.

As Maya Angelou says,

“There is no greater agony than
bearing an untold story inside you...

The price is high but the reward is great.”

To the family and friends of the victims:

if we come forward,
please just listen to our pain without judgment.

We do not expect you to solve the past hurt or
take away the suffering.

We just want to be heard;
telling the story strangely heals us.

We want you to still love us for who we are.

We are wounded but we still need your love,
probably more now than ever.

We are not broken goods.

We have wounds but we are not the wounds themselves.
Please just listen to us and hold us as we tell you our pain.

To those in authority in our Church,
as Jesus says in the gospel today,
“Ephphatha! Be opened.”
Please listen attentively to the victims.
Hear our pain and suffering;
the pain never fully leaves us.
That’s okay but your acknowledging it helps us heal.
Bishops, please personally listen to our stories.
They are so many worse off than me.
I was one of the lucky ones!

Bishops, please tell us the whole truth of the past now.
Please don’t make victims go to court or sue
to have the truth be told.
Don’t wait for every state attorney general
to force you to disclose everything about abuse in the diocese.
Please list every credibly accused priest on your website
with the details of what they are accused of, when and where.
If you already believe it is credible then tell us.
Then others can see and they can come out of their isolation and darkness.
Please do not put fear of scandal and a culture of clericalism
ahead of the protection of children and vulnerable adults.
Please voluntarily agree to an “attorney general-like investigation”
and hand over all the files to an outside qualified lay person.
Let them go through the files and fully disclose everything.
Let them verify that you are doing all you can to protect the children now.

My brother priests, please say you are sorry
for the sins of your brother priests.
We know it was not you but you represent still them.
Bishops, please say you are sorry for your brother bishops
and make some amends for the sins of the past.

Please do some act of repentance;
like promising to not wear the mitre for a year of mourning;
visit and work with abused women;
something to show you care about the suffering.
We believe it was not you who moved
these sick priests from parish to parish
but the sins of your brother bishops still weigh on us.
Share that weight, please, if only for a year of repentance.

Bishops, please work with the pope to reform the governance of the Church
so that women have a voice of authority.
I do not believe this travesty of justice would have happened
if we had mothers and fathers at the decision-making tables;
they would not have allowed other people's children to be put in harms way
because they would see their own child in them.

To all parishioners please remember the victims.
Advocate for them that they may receive justice.
Please ask our bishops to be forthright
in telling the full truth of the past.
Please support our bishops to act now
as it will be very hard to hear for all of us.
May we create in our own parish a place for healing;
a community of true belonging where all the wounded are welcomed:
as Pope Francis calls it, "a field hospital" here in San Jose.

My story is complicated.
I understand that.
I became a priest, a pastor and a vicar general.
It was a difficult journey to trust the Lord again
but he showed me the way.
After the original offense 35 years ago,
the Lord still asked me to be priest
and I can tell you I had some choice words for him:
"Seriously, Lord, you have some nerve

still asking me to join the priesthood
after what has happened at the hands of one of your clergy.
NO way! Go away.”
I told the Lord to go away many times!
But as you can see the Lord won that battle
and I am glad I lost.
I love my priesthood and love my ministry,
here in the parish and at the diocese
and I fully intend to stay in ministry as a priest.
I believe I have made a difference
in many people’s lives for the better.
I believe the Lord has put me here for this very moment.

Throughout all of the pain,
the Lord has never left me alone.
He has continued to love me, heal me and
still calls me to serve him.
I am only here today because the Lord keeps me in his heart
and has surrounded me with loving family and friends.
I am who I am because of the Lord’s abundant grace.
That despite the suffering and pain,
the Lord is still here no matter what.
He never left me then and he will not leave me now.
I believe that is true for each of you and the Church itself.
He has never left us and he will never leave us alone.
May we find our voices and advocate for the victims and change
and may the Church leaders open their ears.
Ephphatha! Be Opened.