

**O**n Wednesday, August 15 we gathered to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, body and soul into heaven—a feast which proclaims that the human body, our flesh and blood is sacred.

You may remember the striking image from the Book of Revelation we saw on that holy day of “a huge red dragon, with seven heads and seven horns...standing before the woman about to give birth, to devour the child...” I reflected then that the “dragon” seems to be closer that we might like to imagine still seeking to devour, with its might and power, the innocent, the trusting and so many in need.

Children, the innocent ones, being devoured at our border today, and in our churches and parishes in our own country and throughout the world, by dragons dressed in clerical clothing and sacred vesture, devouring the innocence of children, unhindered for decades by those who carry the shepherd’s staff. We have endured these evil deeds for too many years, close to home and far away. We are angry (I am angry), we are hurt, disgusted and perplexed. We have had enough! And for some of us, faith is tested again, belonging is questioned and trust is almost abandoned even as we hear from St Paul today that “*we are to watch carefully how we live...and not to continue in ignorance.*”

Watch carefully and do not continue in ignorance! Those words demand a new action, a new perspective, a new determination and deep abiding change....change of heart, change of attitude and change of ways. Real change for the whole church.

In the midst of all of this, Jesus speaks: “I am the LIVING bread, which is my FLESH for the LIFE of the world....For the life of the WORLD. This is my body, this is my blood—my body, my flesh, my blood being poured out, separated, abused, discarded. It is the flesh of Jesus, the body of Christ, separated from parents. The body of Jesus is every child or person, abused, used and scarred for life.

As at the time Jesus first spoke these words, many quarrel, disagree and would prefer silence, no change or a rapid retreat into times gone by.

The flesh and blood of Jesus is given for the world, for all who suffer, for all who are used. Given for the world...for the world. Given to nourish us, to nourish the church to change, even as we quarrel among ourselves about that work.

Cardinal D’Nardo, the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote these words this past week: “We are faced with a spiritual crisis that requires not only spiritual conversion, but practical changes to avoid repeating the sins that are so evident in the recent [news] reports.”

Cardinal DiNardo, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: Statement Announcing plan to address ‘moral catastrophe’ of abuse, August 15, 2018.

Change, yes! But in my view the change must be more than “practical.” The problem, the evil, the sin, is systemic. It happens because of the system, the silence, the protection, the persistent cover-up.

It happens because the “clerical separation” built into the system, creates an environment of perceived safety from the implications of evil actions.

While pedophilia is a worldwide epidemic, a sickness experienced in every profession and situation, in families, schools, sports and society at large, it’s presence in the church is a horrible scandal and an even more devastating crime because it makes the proclamation of the Gospel, the mission of Christ and the meaning of the Eucharist suspect to many and a lie to some. “Spiritual conversion” may be necessary, even essential; “practical changes” are certainly required, but those two things alone will not transform or heal the church. The system itself must be changed.

The renewal begun at the Second Vatican Council must be reinvigorated, highly valued, effectively taught and genuinely lived. Resistance to that vision, so common in the church today, even among some of its leaders, must be challenged. The full, conscious and active participation of ALL the people in the life and ministry of the church is a fundamental principle of the Council yet to be fully implemented and sometimes today actually resisted.

The whole meaning of the Sacrament of Holy Orders (episcopate, priesthood, and diaconate) must be re-examined and renewed in light of

Council teaching and the current crisis. Who is ordained and who is not allowed to be ordained is a question which must be asked again and again in ever new ways to meet the challenges and aspirations of the real church of which are all to be vital part. The persistent fear of women and the resistance to their equal share in the ministry and leadership of the Church must be both challenged and changed. We live in the twenty first century, not in the Middle Ages! The Scriptures tell us that “there does not exist among you male or female, all are one in Christ Jesus.” That is either true or untrue.

As we have heard there is quarreling among both the people and the leaders today when such questions are raised. These are systemic questions which some even say cannot be discussed.

“Clericalism,” which creates an environment of separation, exclusion and protection...makes some people in the church appear more special than others, and creates a sense of being privileged and distinct. The council attempted to move the church away from this so-called “clerical culture” and for a while it began to happen.

In our day, sadly, we see some of our more recently ordained priests (and some older) embracing this clerical attitude; wearing long black cassocks in church and at public events, and returning to a 1950 style and approach to worship and liturgy. Too many Catholics support this retrenchment, this nostalgic approach to Mass and Eucharist, as they kneel and watch in silence.

Clericalism is a systemic problem and challenge which creates an environment of perceived exclusivity, safety and protection. Like in the gospel, there is quarreling among both the people and the leaders when such questions are raised.

As we face this horrible crisis again the question of how and where those desiring to serve the church as priests are prepared. The notion of separation, specialness and distinction from the baptized begins and is all too often nurtured in the seminaries. The whole structure and location of seminary education, formation and a developed sense of privilege and exclusivity must be reviewed

and changed. This is not just practical, it is systemic. It is part of the problem. Much of this crisis has been about leadership.

Today we are invited to pray for the selection of our next Bishop, but we are only asked to pray. The needed wide consultation and collaboration with all the faithful of the Diocese is not part of the selection process, yet we are all part of the Body of Christ. We eat and drink at the Lord’s table, equally, at his command. We all have life because of him. We all share in the ministry of discipleship. This is not a practical change that is needed but a systemic one. Yet there is quarreling among both the people and the leaders when such questions are raised.

But still we are here, and most of us, God willing will not go away. Nourished by the Eucharist of Christ, whose body and blood, flesh and spirit we become, we will watch carefully how we live, even when the days are evil, even when dragons with seven ugly heads roar before us, even when the sickness of pedophilia cannot easily be healed. We will make the most of every opportunity and we will hold to account those who both lead and serve us, trying to understand what is the will of the Lord, still giving thanks, still “doing” in the memory of Christ, still longing to heal the sick and hear the cry of the many. Still hoping for change, waiting for Wisdom to build *her* house, still waiting to advance from foolishness to the way of understanding.

In the words of our last Bishop, George Thomas, “all members of the Church, lay and ordained, need to educate themselves, weed out the alibis and denials, and embrace the truth of this twofold scandal to help heal the abused child now living as a wounded adult. Our wounds are still open. We need to believe we are valued human beings and know that our lives are no longer defined by the egregious acts perpetrated [both] long ago [and not so long ago]. With our now watery eyes and wrinkled skin, we say in one voice, “Let justice come, but the truth be heard.” Bishop George Leo Thomas, Diocese of Helena “Healing Journey:” September-October 2015

AND WE MIGHT ADD: LET A NEW HOUSE OF WISDOM FINALLY BE BUILT, FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD!

