

A Message to Secular Franciscans Regarding the Recent Scandal in the Churches of Pennsylvania

From the National Executive Council of the Secular Franciscan Order USA (OFS-USA)
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Sisters and Brothers of the Secular Franciscan Order, United States:

The release of the Grand Jury report in Pennsylvania is a cause of sorrow, pain and agonizing self-scrutiny for the Catholic Church in the United States. We are again face to face with the tragic reality of sinful abuse perpetrated on the most vulnerable of our faith family. How, we ask, can we trust those shepherds with our lives, our children and our faith? Can the victims find peace and healing in the Church that betrayed their innocence? Can we, as professed Secular Franciscans, stand as mere bystanders watching this tragic play unfold before us? What are we to do? What can we do?

It saddens all of us that a small minority of men who made a commitment to serve the Church betrayed the promises they made to serve, and used their positions of being an authority figure to aid predatory behavior; truly we have wolves in sheep's clothing. (Mt 7:15) If it were only a case of a few parish priests, the trust of Church leaders may more easily be re-established; but when it is demonstrated that our chief shepherds, the bishops, were involved in secrecy, cover ups and pay outs, the trust, respect and moral authority of the Church as an institution suffers great damage. We must all face the truth and make no excuse for those who are guilty of these crimes against the living stones of the Church, the mystical body of Christ; those who have been unfaithful spouses to the Church as the Bride of Christ!

St John Chrysostom, a fourth century bishop, described pastors as the "salt of the earth". (Mt 5:13) He said of pastors, "If others lose their savor, then your ministry will help them regain it. *But if you yourselves suffer that loss, you will drag others down with you.*" Sisters and brothers, we have witnessed many being dragged down by those shepherds who have lost their savor as salt of the earth.

As a Secular Order, we are in a unique position to help those who feel abandoned, threatened and fearful of the clerical hierarchy that betrayed their trust. We are an order of people in the pew. As people in the pew we can listen to our broken sisters and brothers. We can listen without judging, without trying to immediately heal them of their pain. We can listen to them and acknowledge their pain without defending or making excuses for the institution that betrayed them. We can “with a gentle and courteous spirit accept them all as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ” (OFS Rule, Art.13). We can make contributions to support the counselors who will help heal the wounds of those suffering souls.

We were founded as the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. All of us in our individual life, in our fraternities, in our regions and our national fraternity must do penance for this great sin. Some demons can only be cast out through prayer and fasting. (Mark 9:29) *This is our call to action!* Our Lord asked St. Francis to rebuild the Church which was falling into ruin. Are we called to do anything less as followers of Francis? Francis lived his vocation authentically as a living example of Gospel Life. We must do the same. Only by living an authentic Gospel life will our light shine and the Church be rebuilt.

We must also stand with our brothers and sisters who have and are serving the Church as good and faithful servants. These men and women who are faithful to their call are now called to be suffering servants. They are guilty by association with the Church institution that has betrayed their trust. How difficult it will be for them to preach the Gospel as representatives of a Church that has lost its moral authority in the public square and in the pew. We must stand by those faithful servants and help them continue to look after the well-being of others.

Sisters and Brothers of the Secular Franciscan Order, we stand in support of the victims and in favor of holding those responsible for these crimes accountable for their actions. We pray for healing, forgiveness, peace, reconciliation and a Church that will be rebuilt and with God’s grace, and the movement of Holy Spirit, one day, will once again be a beacon of light, hope and refuge. Let us go forth and witness to the light of Christ and rebuild the Church so that it may once again be full of grace and truth.