

BULLETIN -- NOVEMBER 8

Going to the movies? This weekend is the national theatrical release of the film *Spotlight*, which profiles the Boston *Globe's* investigation into clergy sex abuse and the serious mishandling of many cases by the Archdiocese of Boston prior to 2002. The movie is a depiction of what happened in the past, not of how things are being handled today. It is an opportunity to raise awareness of all that has been done since to prevent the crime of sexual abuse by Church personnel. The Church welcomes anything that heightens attention about this painful issue, and continues to express profound sorrow and apology to anyone who has been affected in any way by abuse on the part of members of the clergy or other Church employees or volunteers.

We need not nitpick the content of the film, since as in most movies not everything portrayed is likely to be perfectly historically accurate. What we need to do as a Church is to provide the next chapter of the story up to the present. Journalists have done an important service in prodding the Church to achieve reform and in the protection of young and vulnerable people. As a result, the Church now has some of the strongest measures in the world in place for protecting children and young people, including safe environment training for children and adults, background checks for all personnel, and policies of zero tolerance.

After the abuse scandal broke in early 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) created a document that would guide the efforts of the Church in the United States in creating safe environments. The *Charter for the Protection of Children & Young People* (the "Dallas charter") was promulgated in June, 2002, and is currently reviewed and updated regularly. Locally, since August, 2003, the Diocese of Grand Rapids has held 741 "VIRTUS: Protecting God's Children" training sessions in which more than 19,000 clergy, teachers, staff, volunteers, and others have been trained to identify and report any abuse of minors.

Public attention for this issue can evoke traumatic memories for people, who may then choose to come forward. Our victim assistance coordinators are prepared to work with them. The Church should be grateful beyond words to victims of abuse who have come forward. Their witness has helped the healing process to begin and has made the Church safer for all families. We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted by the false claims that have occasionally been made. The Diocese of Grand Rapids encourages anyone who has been sexually abused as a minor by a priest, deacon, or church employee or volunteer, or anyone who has knowledge of any such offense against a minor to contact the appropriate civil authority or the diocesan victim assistance coordinator at 616-243-0491.

Too much of a good thing. Years ago, a big old 2-story house in our neighborhood had an upstairs water pipe burst while the family was away on vacation. Along with all the other kids, I had walked by the house every day on my way to school. No one realized what was going on inside until the family came home after a few days and opened the door. The basement had nearly filled with water, extinguishing the pilot lights on the furnace and the water heater. The homeowner had the presence of mind to go to a neighbor's house and call the utilities to come and shut off everything before anyone went inside. When they did, they were devastated at what they found.

Everything they owned was completely ruined, soaked, waterlogged. Books, photos, family papers were just heaps of soggy *papier-mâché*. Appliances were ruined. The plaster on the interior walls had broken off. Once the water had been shut off and the basement pumped out, it could be seen that the floors were warped, doors no longer swung freely, and the only habitable parts of the house were the attic and the front porch.

The incident impressed upon my young mind that, while water is a very good thing, as a part of creation it relies on us to be contained and controlled in order to be of use to us in our daily lives. I began to think about the other elements of creation in similar ways. Fire gives us heat and light. It can also destroy. Wind gives us refreshment and energy. It can also destroy. Sunshine enhances growth and mood. Too much of it can also cause severe pain and, we have discovered, have cancerous effects years and decades later. Food and drink are good. Too much food and drink can destroy health, persons, and families. Having money to purchase things is good. Too much money--well, it becomes obvious to others, if not to us, when we have more than we can handle. Food, drink, money--when they start to control *us*, big trouble is not far off.

The same thing can actually be true in the spiritual realm. Pope Francis addressed the U.S. bishops at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia on September 27. Among other things, he told them, "A Christianity which does little in practice, while incessantly explaining its teachings, is dangerously unbalanced." Doctrine is good. Too much doctrine, however, the purpose of which is merely to direct us to Love itself, can get us to forget about where we're going. In a way, doctrine is like bureaucracy: a very useful and necessary tool, but oppressive and suffocating when it becomes an end in itself. Again, too much of a good thing.

Now what about virtue? Is it possible to have too much virtue? Can one be too honest? Well, the answer is yes! I remember an illustration given us in the seminary. A 4-year-old boy breaks loose from his mom in the supermarket. Eluding her anxious search and investigating the aisles on his own, he spots an old man comparing cans of tuna and runs up to him. "You're all bent over," the boy announces triumphantly, "and you have a big wart on your nose!!" The man looks at him patiently. "What you say is true, sonny," he replies kindly, "but it isn't very helpful."

Often enough, when someone starts a sentence by saying, "If truth be told . . .," it's probably a truth that *shouldn't* be told. There are lots of things that people don't need to hear. A blabbermouth who honestly told the Nazis, "The Jews are in the basement," would not be up for Israel's "Righteous among the Nations" award just because he told the truth. Genuine virtue does not draw attention to itself, and it is oriented toward the ultimate good. True holiness does not concern itself with appearing holy or heroic. Forgetfulness of self is a hallmark of genuine sanctity. It's not practiced to put anyone else down, but to help build others up. It's like the glass of cool water that quenches thirst, not the Johnstown flood.

In good company. I was consulting my old journal from 1979 in preparation for a homily a couple weeks ago. That was the year I began studying canon law at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. In looking up other things, I found a delightful entry. On Sunday afternoon, September 23, 1979, I went from the parish where I was living out to Divine Word College near the University, which was a residence for many priest students. There, I met up with friends and schoolmates Allen Vigneron, Dennis Schnurr,

Tim Dolan, and Blase Cupich, and the five of us drove out to Potomac, Maryland, to visit and have dinner with still another schoolmate at the parish where he was assistant. Hmm. Detroit, Cincinnati, New York, and Chicago. Of the five of us in the car that day, guess who's not an archbishop? Well, I know I was in good company, but little did they know they was hangin' out with trailer trash! Ha ha ha! God bless you!

Fr. Den

Thought for the week: Bob Hope (1903-2003) on receiving the Congressional Gold Medal: "I feel very humble, but I think I have the strength of character to fight it."