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## **“Rebuild My Church!”**

### **Looking at the Crisis with Catholic Faith**

In his stirring homily at his installation Mass on July 30, Archbishop Sean O'Malley of Boston told a story from his days as the head of the Hispanic Catholic Center in Washington DC. A Salvadoran refugee came to his office weeping as he handed him a letter. In it his wife was accusing him of having abandoned her and their eight children. The man had come to Washington as the wars raged in his country to make whatever money he could to send home to support his family. His wife wrote that it was now several months and she had not yet received any money nor even heard from him. The refugee told Padre Sean how he washed dishes in two restaurants, eating the scraps from the dirty dishes rather than spend money on food and how he walked to work rather than spend money on bus fare. He sent all of his earnings to his family each week. Padre Sean asked him if he sent checks or money orders. The man responded, “I put cash in the envelope and drop it in the blue mail box on the corner.” The young Capuchin looked out the window and saw that blue box — it was a trash bin, part of the District of Columbia's beautification project. To the future Archbishop, the episode brought back to him how hard the lot of immigrants is in a strange land, how not knowing the proper language and customs can disorient and alienate and lead to very costly mistakes.

In reflecting 25 years later on this man from El Salvador, Archbishop O'Malley, the man chosen by Pope John Paul II to turn around the place at the heart of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, saw a parable for the Church today. In great part the man's problems came from not knowing the language and the ways of the land. The problems of believers in their relationship with God, the archbishop wrote, often flow too from having too small a vocabulary of faith and an unfamiliarity with the ways of the Lord. The language of faith is prayer and the way is a supernatural outlook, looking at things from God's point of view and seeing God even in the midst of difficulties and crises.

There have been many commentaries written, in books, magazines, Catholic and secular newspapers about the various causes of the clergy sexual abuse crisis that was brought to light in 2002 and the proposed solutions. But relatively few of them have seemed to come from the language of prayer or from a supernatural outlook on both the sins that caused the crisis and the faithfulness needed to bring the Church back. Just a few days ago, someone emailed me an article from the former managing director at the famous McKinsey and Company Consulting Firm, in which he looked at the Church's predicament in the classic terms of a large multi-national corporation that needs a dramatic turnaround. Now, insofar as the Church has institutional and human organizational elements to it, some of the advice from consulting experts will of course be helpful. But the Church is much more than an institution. To analyze the Church's situation merely from these optics would lead to some of the same errors that confronted the El Salvadoran Refugee, because when we don't know the language and the ways of faith, we're capable of making costly mistakes, even when our intentions are laudable.

In today's address, I'm hoping to explore the present crisis the Church faces from within the language and the ways of faith, from a supernatural point of view, one that explicitly asks the question of where God was during the crisis, where he is now, and where he wants us to be. This angle is not the only way to look at this situation, but in my opinion, it's a crucially important way — perhaps even the most important way. To bring the Church back, to effect the full turnaround desired by the former director of McKinsey, this ecclesial metanoia must involve the Church's greatest assets: God, his grace and help, our prayer and faithful response.

### **God's action and man's reaction**

To begin our looking at the crisis from the eyes of faith, we need to begin with the acknowledgement that this is not the first time the Church has ever been in crisis. The Church was in great crisis during the first persecutions, especially in determining what to do with those who had lapsed in the face of persecution. It was in crisis soon after the legalization of Christianity, when people were flocking into the Church because they thought it would lead to greater secular positions from the Christian emperor. It was in crisis due to the early heresies about the nature of God and the full divinity and humanity of Christ. It was in crisis during the Middle Ages, when many leaders in the Church were more concerned with temporal possessions than their supernatural mission. It was in crisis due to the lax morals of members throughout the Church as the Renaissance was just beginning. It was in crisis due to the challenge of the Protestant Reformation, due to the French Revolution, due to the militantly-atheistic communist regimes.

But in each of these eras, God was not asleep. The history of the world is a chronicle of the mysterious interrelation of God's action and man's response in faith. Crises in the Church ensue when people say no to God, when people sin. Oftentimes those sins have consequences and the Church and society suffer. But in all of these epochs, God continues to

act to bring his Church back. But he never does it all by himself. He always involves his people, giving us the dignity of being co-redeemers, co-reformers with him. During each of these times of scandal, certain men and women responded to God's summons, by saying yes to Him and his plans. These people we call the saints.

In studying the actions of the saints, we first see that God always acts to bring his Church back to holiness. In the saints' yes to God, and in their carrying out the missions God has given him, we also discern a paradigm for reform that comes from God, one that should guide the Church in every age in which it faces the urgent need for reform. We can also see very clearly in the lives of the saints how much God can do when one says yes to God. Any reflection on the saints should lead us to the question St. Ignatius of Loyola in the early 1500s, as he convalesced from a leg injury as a young man: "Why can't I do what they did?" "The greatest crises facing the world are crises of saints," one of the most recently canonized saints, Josemaria Escriva, wrote. In every age marked by crisis, God will raise up saints to combat it and bring his Church back. In focusing on this paradigm of ecclesial conversion, however, each of us is also called to ask, as a lay Ignatius asked before us, "Why can't I do what they did?"

Let us take a brief walk through a few episodes in Church history and try to learn from the Lord lessons to give us a proper vocabulary and vision to address the present crisis that faces the Church in our nation.

### **The First Crisis**

The first crisis in the Church happened within the first group of Christ's followers. Before he chose his first apostles, as we know, Jesus went up the mountain all night to pray. He had at the time many followers. He talked to his Father in prayer about whom he would choose to be his twelve apostles, the twelve he would himself form intimately, whom he would send out to preach the Good News in His name. He gave them power to cast out demons. He gave them power to cure the sick. They watched him work countless miracles. They themselves in His name worked countless others. Yet, despite all of that formation, one of them was a traitor. One, who had followed the Lord, who had had his feet washed by the Lord, who had seen him walk on water, raise people from the dead, and forgive sinners, betrayed him. The Gospel tells us that he allowed Satan to enter into Him and then sold the Lord for 30 pieces of silver, handing him over by blistering his cheek with a kiss. Jesus hadn't chosen Judas to betray him. He chose him to be like all the others. But Judas was always free, and he freely allowed Satan to enter into him, and betrayed Jesus unto death.

So right from the first twelve that Jesus himself chose, one was a terrible traitor. The crucial and sad truth is **SOMETIMES GOD'S CHOSEN ONES BETRAY HIM**. That's a reality that we have to confront. It's a fact that the early Church confronted, but one which they overcame. If the scandal caused by Judas was all the members of the early Church focused on, the Church would have been finished before it even started to grow. Instead, the Church recognized that you don't judge something by those who don't live it, but by those who do. Instead of focusing on the one who betrayed, the disciples of the Lord focused on the other eleven, on account of whose work, preaching, miracles, and love for Christ, we are here today. The other eleven brought them Christ, who is the Good News. It's on account of the other eleven — all of whom except St. John was martyred for Christ and for the Gospel they were willing to give their lives to proclaim to us — that we ever heard the saving word of God, that we ever received the sacraments of eternal life, that we're here this morning.

We're confronted by the same reality today. We can focus on those who betrayed the Lord, priests and bishops. Rumors are that when the Jay study is published at the beginning of next month, the numbers will be very high, maybe even about 4% of priests, 1 out of every 25, will have been accused of abusing rather than loving those whom they were called to serve. There will also be bishops who would have known about it and not done enough. We can focus exclusively on that, or we can choose to keep the whole thing in perspective by looking at it supernaturally. Like the early Church, we can remember that sometimes God's chosen ones will betray him and, without forgetting about the need to repair the damage and do what is possible to prevent recurrence, we can focus on the others — the "eleven" or the 24 out of 25 — and pray for and in gratitude for those priests and bishops who have remained faithful, who are still offering their lives to serve Christ and to serve you out of love. Even if some of those the Lord has chosen have betrayed him, he will call others who will be faithful, who will serve you with the love with which you deserve to be served, just like after Judas' death, the eleven apostles convened and allowed the Lord to choose someone to take Judas' place, and they chose the man who ended up becoming St. Matthias, who proclaimed the Gospel faithfully until he was martyred for it.

### **Rebuilding the house of God**

The next crisis I'd like to turn to was happening about 1200 years later. The Church was again in trouble. Many bishops and priests were absent pastors. Those who were in residence oftentimes were causes of scandal to others by their lax morals and bad example. A man named Giovanni Bernardone was praying in a Church named after St. Damian, in

front of a crucifix. The figure of Jesus on that crucifix suddenly called out to him by his common nickname, which came from the fact that his Father was French, and said "Francis, rebuild my house!" The man who became eventually the great St. Francis thought the Lord was asking him to repair the dilapidated Church of St. Damian. So he went to his father's clothing store, took some valuable fabrics and sold them along with a horse in order to start repairing the Church. Over the course of a couple of years, he finished the job. But little did St. Francis know that he had misinterpreted the Lord and that the Lord had another rebuilding project in mind. That project started with Francis himself, who responded to God's grace to follow the Lord Jesus completely, uniting himself to the Lord by means of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. Soon, many others joined Francis in this pursuit. Eventually they went to Rome to seek the approval of their statutes. The night before they were going to have an audience with Pope Innocent III, the pontiff had a dream and saw a man in a simple, poor man's woolen habit holding up the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the Pope's Cathedral, next to papal residence at the time. The next day during his audience, Innocent III saw the very friar from his dream come on in with his closest followers. Pope Innocent III properly interpreted the dream he had received: St. Francis of Assisi was being called to rebuild the Church as a whole, symbolized by the Cathedral of St. John Lateran. He was being called to rebuild the entire household of God.

How did St. Francis rebuild the Church? He helped bring the Church back to her foundations so that the Church could be rebuilt stone by stone on the foundation of Christ. St. Peter gave the Church's architectural plans in his first letter: "Come to [Christ], a living stone, rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Jesus Christ himself is the foundation of the Church, the cornerstone. And the Church is the spiritual house built of living stones on this foundation. These living stones are those who build their life on Christ, those who are trying to become saints. The Church is made of men, not marble.

If you go to St. Peter's basilica in Rome, you'll notice some very important symbolism. Outside the basilica, in St. Peter's Square, you find the beautiful arms of Bernini's colonnades. 140 saints are there, mainly from the early Church and from the time of the Counter-Reformation. They're all standing directly on top of the columns. When you look at the façade of the basilica, you'll find the apostles standing directly on top of the façade's pillars and pilasters. When you go inside the basilica, you find the saints of the religious orders that were crucial in the counter-Reformation in huge niches standing inside the pillars that are holding up the vault of the basilica. Why in those places? Because the architectural design was intentionally meant to teach a central truth of how the Church of God is built, a fundamental truth in response to the scandals of the era. The Church is ultimately made of men, not marble, specifically of saints, living stones, built on the cornerstone who is Christ, into a spiritual house. The saints are the foundations, they are the pillars that hold up the Church. All authentic reform involves a radical return to Christ, the cornerstone. All authentic reform goes to the soundness of these living pillars.

The restoration of the Church in the United States needs to go all the way to the living stones, to a restoration of the people in the Church on Christ the cornerstone. A new "sexual abuse policy" — important in restoring trust and preventing recurrences of abuse — is not enough, because the problem didn't come from the lack of a policy. Bishops and priests who recognized the horror of abuse did not need a policy to tell them what was going on was wrong and sinful. That such a policy needs to be written, to have to state what should be obvious to anyone acting on behalf of the Lord in a position of responsibility in the Church, exposes the fact that the problem goes much deeper. Therefore the solution must go deeper too. The solution must go to helping all people in the Church — bishops, priests, religious, laity — base their life completely on Christ.

Of course, that's easy to say conceptually. To base one's life completely on Christ is to be a saint. All of us are called to be saints. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council proclaimed it very clearly in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. But bringing that sanctity about in practice is not easy. That's what the call for reform is all about. As the Holy Father pointed to when he convened the US Cardinals in Rome last April, we must understand the crisis in terms of the mystery of sin (*mysterium iniquitatis*) and the call to conversion, fidelity and holiness. The roots of the crisis are, I'm convinced (with many others), a general infidelity to the Lord and a widespread acceptance of that infidelity. Bishops, priests and lay people, together, have, over the course of the decades, been unfaithful to our end of the covenant with Jesus and grew to be all right with it, our consciences deadened. The needed and urgent solution is to repent, to come back to the Lord, to recommit ourselves to being faithful to him, and to allow him to start to sanctify us into the living stones in the Church he wants to rebuild.

The present crisis is, like every crisis, a great call to sanctity. As we see so clearly in the history of Israel, Israel was often unfaithful to her covenant with the Lord and the Lord made use of catastrophes to bring her back. The

destruction wrought by the Assyrians in the 8th century BC or the Babilonians in the 6th ultimately led Israel to repent of her sins and turn back to the Lord with all her heart. Just as the Lord used the Assyrians, so he can use the media and lawsuits to bring his Church back to Him with all her heart.

Pope Pius XI said during the late 1930s, when Hitler was rising to power, when there was a very serious economic depression in much of the world, when Italy itself was suffering from all types of political difficulties, "Let us thank God that he makes us live among the present problems. It is no longer permitted to anyone to be mediocre." Mother Teresa went further, a few years before she died: "Today the Church needs saints. This calls for our combating our attachment to comforts that lead us to choose a comfortable and insignificant mediocrity. Each one of us has the possibility to be a saint, and the way to holiness is prayer. Holiness is, for each of us, a simple duty." That duty is even greater during this era. The authentic renewal of the Church after this crisis will come about through a rebirth to holiness built on fidelity to Christ, the cornerstone.

In looking at the process of reform, I think we can learn much, again, from the saints who said yes to God when the Church faced great crises in the past. Those who helped God "rebuild his Church" by first basing their lives on the foundation of Christ and then calling others to do the same. In their yes to God, the saints were, in some sense, putting into effect a divine paradigm, which I think are still applicable today. There are many eras in Church history we can choose from and many saints from each era. But I'd like to focus on four saints from relatively modern times, three from the time of the Counter-Reformation and one from slightly afterward. These were saints who were called by the Lord to be successors of the Apostles and the reforms they implemented were all similar — and were all effective. I'd like to focus on the work of St. Charles Borromeo, St. Frances de Sales, St. Robert Bellarmine and St. Alphonsus Ligouri. After we discuss the reforms they effected, we'll apply the lessons we learned to our present situation.

#### **St. Charles Borromeo**

In the history of the Church, one of the greatest reformers who ever lived was St. Charles Borromeo. He was made a Cardinal by his uncle, Pope Pius IV, in his early 20s, but, at least in his case, this nepotism was a great gift of God. He was the crucial figure in the last session of the Council of Trent and in the implementation of the Council at a universal level, supervising the compilation of the Catechism of the Council of Trent as well as the reform of liturgical books and Church music. He was named administrator of the huge archdiocese of Milan in his 20s and Archbishop in his early 30s. While the Pope wished to have him by his side, St. Charles Borromeo begged to be allowed to go to his see to effect the needed reform. Eventually his wish was granted. Milan was in a deplorable state. The sheer magnitude of the task facing him was enough to paralyze an average man, but he had trust in the Lord and trust in the Holy Spirit's guiding the Church.

When he arrived in 1566, he preached his first homily on Jesus' words, "I have earnestly desired to eat the passover with you," a symbol of his great love for his people already and his desire for communion with them, but also an indication that, like the Lord who said those words to the apostles at the beginning of the Last Supper, he knew he was likewise going to suffer. His first action was to call a provincial council of his ten suffragan bishops, to implement the decrees of Council of Trent for the discipline and training of the clergy, the celebration of divine service, the administration of the sacraments, and the giving of catechism. He regulated his household, which had a staff of about 100 clergy, opposed all ostentation and luxury and sold most of his effects for the relief of the poor and needy. He arranged for retreats for his clergy and himself went twice annually on retreat. He confessed every morning before Mass.

Despite the fact that he was very short and spoke with a speech impediment, he preached constantly and gave catechesis to the people. He was the inaugurator of Sunday schools, teaching many of the lessons himself in the various parishes of the Archdiocese. He confronted the lax religious orders and forced them to reform, with the help of the Pope on some occasions, with the help of the civil arm on others. He displaced unworthy clergy and replaced them with priests who were capable of restoring faith and morals. He founded three seminaries for the training of holy and zealous clergy.

When there was a famine, he himself fed 3000 daily for three months. When the plague hit in 1575, he exhausted his resources to feed 60,000 people daily, personally ministering to the dying for three years. And he was willing to suffer and die for his flock. One of the religious orders that didn't want to be reformed got one of its young priests to swear an oath to kill Charles. The man snuck in on Charles while he was praying — as he often did — and shot him, point blank, in the back. Charles thought that he was about to die, but the bullet which struck him, miraculously didn't penetrate his skin or clothes and simply fell to the ground.

He died at the young age of 46, but he had accomplished so much. His work shows that for him the reform began with a zealous bishop, who got other bishops on the same page, reformed his clergy and eliminated those who would not lead their people to holiness, who focused very much on the formation of new priests, who realized that it was crucial to catechize and teach the laity with the solid nutrition of the faith, and to care for all those in need, washing others' feet, loving others with the same self-sacrificing love Christ himself showed.

### **St. Francis de Sales**

Slightly after St. Charles was effecting this turnaround in Milan, a young priest was chosen to do the same in and around Geneva. The Chablais region of eastern France had become almost entirely Calvinist and very hostile to Catholicism. The Bishop of Geneva asked for a volunteer to go to the region. At 24, Francis said that he would be happy to be chosen. Off he went. He knew it might mean martyrdom. Early in his apostolic journeys, he was waylaid twice by assassins who had sworn to take his life; he survived both times, seemingly by miracles. The area itself was naturally hostile, with brutal winters and wild animals. But Francis entrusted himself to the Lord through the intercession of Our Lady and went courageously. Even when it seemed his labors were bearing no fruit, he continued. "We are but making a beginning," he wrote to a friend. "I shall go on in good courage, and I hope in God against all human hope." He sought new ways to reach the people when obstacles were thrown in his path. He took up writing pamphlets on the controversial issues. He took up loving service whenever anyone would let him, saying "whoever preaches with love is preaching effectively against the heretics, even though he does not say a single controversial word against them." He knew that to convert heretics, he needed to do more than to convince them of their errors, but to let them experience God's love.

His message was very bold. In one of his pamphlets, he took on directly the clerical scandals that had led so many people to become Calvinists, and very boldly challenged them to recognize the reality of what is given by Christ in the Church he founded. His words are as compelling today as they were then. "Those who commit these types of scandals," he wrote, "are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder," destroying other people's faith in God by their terrible example. But then he warned his listeners, "But I'm here among you to prevent something far worse for you. While those who give scandal are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder, those who take scandal — who allow scandals to destroy their faith — are guilty of spiritual suicide." They're guilty, he said, of cutting off their life with Christ, abandoning the source of life in the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. He went among the people around Geneva trying to prevent their committing spiritual suicide on account of the scandals. We need to preach the same to our contemporaries.

St. Francis labored preaching and ministering in the confessional with unremitting devotion. He organized the teaching of the catechism throughout the diocese and, in his see city of Annecy, gave the instructions himself. He knew how important women religious were to the work and apostolate of the Church, for the care of the poor, for the teaching of children, but also for their prayer and their example of living for the Lord and founded the Sisters of the Visitation. Like the Good Shepherd he went after the lost sheep and tried, with great meekness, to bring them back, treating each one as a potential future St. Paul.

He had spent all the life God had given him by the age of 56 when he was welcomed into heaven as God's "good and faithful servant," but by that time, he had modelled a way of living the episcopacy and the priesthood that had attracted many others to carry on the torch. The Apostle of the Chablais risked and gave his life for his sheep, sparing no effort to show that discipleship means full fidelity to the Truth Christ has handed on to the Church and full fidelity to Christ's command to love others as he loves us.

### **St. Robert Bellarmine**

Our third model is St. Robert Bellarmine, who was a towering figure in the counter-reformation especially in his work in the Curia putting into effect the decrees and wishes of the Council of Trent and writing in clear and devastating response to the doctrinal controversies of the age. He wrote two celebrated Catechisms, to feed people with the true knowledge of the faith. He was appointed a Cardinal and served on almost all the dicasteries of the Curia and was a genuine scholar and advisor to the Popes in spiritual and theological matters. But there was a huge problem with the Archdiocese of Capua and, not knowing to whom else to turn for reform, Pope Clement VIII appointed St. Robert archbishop, entrusting to him the turnaround.

Even though he was shocked by the appointment, he left within four days of his consecration to take up his new charge. The great scholar, with little pastoral experience, took up the reform of his immense flock, evangelizing his people with all the zeal of a young missionary, despite the fact that he was 60. He initiated the reforms decreed by the

Council of Trent. He preached constantly, he made pastoral visitations, he exhorted the clergy, he catechized the children, he sought out the needy, whose needs he supplied and won the love of all classes.

In 1605, after only three years as a bishop, he was summoned by the new Pope, Paul V, back to Rome to work at the Pope's side. But we see in St. Robert the same pattern of reform: a zealous holy bishop, who led by example, in evangelizing, in catechizing, in visiting and trying to turn around each parish, in reforming his clergy and inspiring the lay people to real holiness.

### **St. Alphonsus Ligouri**

The last figure we'll encounter came about a century later. Like St. Robert, St. Alphonsus Ligouri was one who had spent most of his life doing other work, first as a lawyer, then as a priest-chaplain and parish mission preacher, founder of the Redemptorists and then the Redemptorists, famous moral theologian and spiritual writer. When he was 66 years old and very frail, Pope Clement XIII named him bishop of the Diocese of St. Agatha of the Goths in Italy. St. Agatha was a relatively small diocese, but, as one historian said, "that was about all that could be said in its favor." It had about 30,000 Catholics, 17 religious houses and 400 secular priests, of whom some did no pastoral work at all (living on the proceeds of an easy benefice) and others were not only slack but positively evil-living. The laity were to match and rapidly getting worse; there had been great neglect on all sides.

Alphonsus started with the fundamentals. The very Sunday after his arrival, he opened a mission in the cathedral church and gave a retreat for all the priests of the region. He then called for a general mission throughout his diocese over the course of the next three months. He instructed the missionaries to do two things as he sent them out: to preach simply about Christ in the pulpit and to be charitable in the confessional. Every priest who tried to make an excuse about why they couldn't host the missionaries, the bishop personally found an answer. To those who said they couldn't afford the cost of the mission, the bishop arranged donors who even paid for the missionaries' travel and even for the candles to light the altar. To those who said there wasn't room to house them in the presbyteral house, the bishop found other lodgings. Because of the deplorable state of priestly life, the new bishop made the dramatic move of removing ordinary confessional faculties for his priests for the time of the mission, so that the missionary priests would be able to guide the people back more assuredly to the rule of faith. He commanded his priests to attend the mission and authorized someone to record the names of those who were absent without a just cause and to send those names to him. During this time, the bishop himself went out to preach missions at the parish and to confess his people, to their great edification. As one priest wrote at the time, "People could not understand how this weak old man could hold out against such fatigue, which was enough to exhaust the most vigorous. What a consoling sight it was to see those multitudes of men and women of all ages and conditions thronging to the church, exclaiming, 'Let us go and hear our holy bishop.'" The mission was a huge success. It was followed up by "renewals" in all the parishes six months later and decreed that a parish mission must be held every two years.

He himself did pastoral visitations, which are personal examinations by the bishop of all the parishes and institutions under his care. He set out from St. Agatha, not in the episcopal carriage, but mounted on a donkey. Those who saw him traveling like a poor man were edified and surprised. As they traveled on the road, the bishop would lead those accompanying him in prayer. At every parish, he looked at the spiritual care being given and the state of the material goods of the parish. He personally would eliminate vestments and chalices that were unfit for use in the celebration of the Mass. He would preach to the people and lead them in devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. He conducted catechetical classes for the children, giving them the final preparation for the sacrament of confirmation. If there were sick children unable to attend the class, the bishop would make the pastor take him to the house where he would instruct and confirm the child. For his people, he wrote many catechetical treatises to be read by them, and to be read to them by their priests, seeing in that type of teaching a crucially important part of his pastoral activity.

He turned to priestly discipline. He noticed that many of his priests were in the habit of saying Mass in fifteen minutes or less. These he suspended until they amended their ways. Quoting St. Cyprian, St. Alphonsus said that "The priest at the altar represents the person of Jesus Christ. But whom do so many priests today represent? They represent only mercenaries, earning their livelihoods. Most lamentable is to see [them] say Mass with such haste and such mutilation of the rite as would scandalize even the heathen.... Truly the sight of Mass celebrated in this way is enough to make one lose the faith." He reiterated the Church's clear expectations for priests and then kept his priests accountable. He stressed the devout recitation of the divine office, the teaching of catechism to children, the preaching of the word of God, staying within the parish to care for souls, mercifully dealing with penitents, priestly dress and conduct and the dignified celebration of holy mass with proper preparation and thanksgiving. He wrote to one priest-collaborator, "We have made but a small number of regulations and these only after long

deliberation, but in them we must be obeyed. Whoever will not obey will inevitably be punished." Before any opening for a vacant parish, he gave examinations to those who were applying for it. The one who most satisfied the requirements received the appointment. That alone led to whole new ambitions among the ambitious!

He knew that that reform needed to be taken to the seminaries. Like everything else, the seminary of St. Agatha had been rather sadly neglected. There were plenty of candidates for the priesthood, but St. Alphonsus soon found that many of them had for their ideal, not the salvation of souls, but the leading of easy, comfortable lives like those of some of the priests whom they saw around them. He soon remedied that. He interviewed each seminarian personally, consulted with others who knew them, and then ordered a general examination for all at which he himself presided. After this, he sent them all home early for vacation and readmitted only those who had satisfied the requirements of the bishop on their moral conduct, talent for study and zeal for their own sanctification and for the salvation of souls. His action brought him many complaints from relatives and friends of the men dismissed, but St. Alphonsus was inflexible when the honor of the priesthood was concerned. From then on, he personally supervised the examination of candidates who presented themselves for admission to the seminary. He reorganized the seminary staff, replacing unsatisfactory professors and teachers with those whom he knew to be zealous, learned and conscientious. Most of all, he introduced a program of daily spiritual life that made his seminary the admiration of all the surrounding dioceses. The day began with a half-hour's meditation, then Mass. Special time was set aside each day for a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, for the rosary, spiritual reading and twice daily for an examination of conscience. Every seminarian had to go to confession once a week. On Saturdays, the bishop himself would come to the seminary to give a conference. There was a monthly day of recollection and an annual eight-day retreat. Even when they were on vacation, the bishop gave them a strict rule of life to be followed at how. So concerned was he that the seminarians learn how to preach Christ in simple terms so that the people could apply them to their lives that he took upon himself the task of teaching the seminarians how to preach. He had each seminarian practice preaching once a week in front of a group of priests, so that he could judge whether they had adopted this simple, Christocentric style. Before any of his seminarians was ordained, he had to be examined by the bishop himself to see if he had adequate knowledge of moral and dogmatic theology, and lived a blameless life. If they could not do it, they would not be ordained. "My conscience will not let me do it," he said.

Alphonsus' loving care for his flock as his children was well-known and admired. He had been prophesizing for two years the advent of a famine and its associated plague, but no one took him seriously. When it arrived, the people found not only that their saintly bishop was right, but that he had been making provisions, like the Patriarch Joseph in Egypt, to save his family in faith, storing up food in the episcopal residence. Once that was exhausted, he sold everything he good to buy food for the sufferers, down to his carriage and mules and his uncle's episcopal ring. He even did the unprecedented move of getting the Holy See's permission to use the endowment of the diocese and take out loans to feed the people. Such was his love for those victimized by the famine, that he would do anything he could. Often, his charity was abused and some of his collaborators accused him of having been "taken in" by his people. When told he had made a mistake in giving to someone, he would reply, "More than likely I have, but what does it matter after all? It is better to be cheated into giving too much than to lose one's soul by giving too little."

The bishop was most vigorous in his concern for public morality. He always began with kindness, trying to persuade the sinner of his sinful ways, pleading with them in the name of Jesus Christ. But when amendment was not promised or relapse occurred, he took strong measures, even, on occasion, invoking the help of the civil authorities to put an end to the scandalous behavior. This made him many enemies, and several times his life was in danger from people against whom he was inveighing.

Finally, while he delegated most of the temporal concerns of the diocese to his two competent vicars general, he demanded that all important diocesan business pass through his hands.

### **What do we learn from all of this?**

I think we can learn a great deal from these saints about the crucial elements for any reform.

- 1) They start with a holy, zealous bishop. The buck stops there. Personal fidelity. Not "politician with a theology degree."
- 2) It involves bishops who are courageous, risking their lives for their flock, risking their almost homicidal displeasure in calling them to conversion. Good shepherd. Calling them to give up sinful ways. May lay people say that as a whole haven't been challenged in this way enough. Calling them to prayer. The natural tendency of fallen human nature is to go downwards when not continually urged in the opposite direction. Sheen.

- 3) It involves bishops who teach their flock with the true nutrition that comes from the Church. All of these bishops taught even the children the catechism. The laity need formation. So much they do not know.
  - 4) It always involves a reform of the clergy — Immorality wasn't tolerated. The way they celebrated Mass is important. Their moral and doctrinal foundations. As Pope John Paul II said to the US Cardinals assembled in Rome in April, "It must be absolutely clear to the Catholic faithful, and to the wider community, that Bishops and superiors are concerned, above all else, with the spiritual good of souls. People need to know that there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young. They must know that Bishops and priests are totally committed to the fullness of Catholic truth on matters of sexual morality, a truth as essential to the renewal of the priesthood and the episcopate as it is to the renewal of marriage and family life."
- That they're faithful to their promise to pray, to be chaste, to be obedient, to model their lives on the mysteries they celebrate.
- 5) It involves a thorough reform of the seminary and looking at candidates to the priesthood — Great need today for this. Not a question of quantity, but of quality. There's a story told of St. Leo the Great, who once was fearing his own particular judgment, especially with all the weight of the Church on his shoulders. So he prayed for 40 days in front of the tomb of his predecessor, St. Peter. At the end of 40 days, St. Peter appeared to him and told him that the Lord would be merciful with him in general, but that he would hold him strictly accountable for only one thing, the men he ordained.
  - 6) It involves great accountability among all those in the Church, beginning with the bishops themselves.
  - 7) It involves personally getting involved with the charitable work of the Church — each was involved in the care of the sick and plague victims, those who treated their flock as a family, and, like a father of the family, cared about every suffering child.
  - 8) It involves a great confidence in what the mission of the Church is, the salvation of souls, and a great commitment to give one's life to preach it, come whatever may. Everything geared here.

### Conclusion

"Francis, rebuild my house!" This appeal to the young *povorello* of Assisi is now being addressed to each of us. "Rebuild my house!" St. Francis led the way for the entire Church to come back to Christ, by following him in minute detail, he who was chaste, who obeyed God unto death on a Cross, who was so poor he didn't even have a pillow to lay his head. St. Francis' enthusiastic following of the Lord, his own example of holiness, led to a tremendous rebirth in the Church as a whole, as people desired holiness once again and saw that it was possible.

This is a time in which all of us need to focus ever more on holiness. We're called to be saints and how urgently our society here needs to see this beautiful, radiant face of the Church again. You're part of the solution, a crucial part of the solution. This scandal can be something that can lead you down to the path of spiritual suicide, or it can be something that can inspire you to say, finally, "I want to become a saint, I want to follow you all the way, Jesus, I want to become fully who you created me to be."

Jesus is with us, as he promised, until the end of time. He's still in the boat, telling us to be not afraid, to trust in him, to put out into the deep water with him and lower our nets for a catch. Just as out of Judas' betrayal, he achieved the greatest victory in world history, our salvation through his passion, death and resurrection, so out of this he may bring, and wants to bring, a new rebirth of holiness, a new Acts of the Apostles for the 21st century, with each of us — and that includes YOU — playing a starring role. Now's the time for real men and women of the Church to stand up. Now's the time for saints. How do you respond?