

*A Final Reflection by Father John Celichowski*

*18 June 2013*

The Feast of the Holy Innocents (December 28), which occurs in the Octave of Christmas, calls us to remember a horrific and deadly abuse of power: the slaughter of infants and toddlers in Bethlehem and the surrounding area under the orders of King Herod (Matthew 2:13-18). It presents a stark contrast to the more quaint and comforting scene at the manger brought to life in the Nativity sets many people put up at Christmas.

It's also a reality check. It reminds us that Jesus, God's eternal Word, was made flesh in a world where the ugliness, sin, and worst crimes that human beings are capable of exist along with the faith, strength, and courage of women and men like Mary and Joseph. It is a world where terrible acts are too often visited upon the innocent, the vulnerable and the marginalized. A young woman in India is so brutally raped by a gang of men on a bus that she dies of her injuries. A dictator in Syria clings to power by bombing his own people as they line up for bread. A gunman kills his mother and then murders over two dozen other people, most of them first graders, at a school in a small town in Connecticut. It is difficult to comprehend such inhumanity.

Children all over the world, like the little ones of Bethlehem two millennia ago, are still used, abused and disposed of by those who should be protecting them: parents and other relatives, teachers, coaches, scoutmasters, priests, religious and other spiritual leaders. Because sexual assaults, incest and other forms of abuse are greatly under-reported, many of these young people carry their wounds with them into adulthood, even as they try to get on with their lives. Most of them will suffer alone, in silence, and without any help.

For those who have been abused by members of the clergy and religious, their suffering is spiritual as well as physical and emotional. Some wonder what they did to deserve such suffering. Others feel abandoned by God and the church. Some are so overwhelmed by their abuse that they engage in self-destructive behaviors or even commit suicide.

Those who have harmed them and have abused their power may, like Herod, seem oblivious to their crimes. Some offenders, driven by sheer pathology and evil, view even the most vulnerable as objects of their pleasure and startlingly see themselves as victims. Those who have a conscience and are overcome by the enormity of what they have done, along with the possible or real consequences of their actions, can often take refuge in denial, minimization, blame-shifting and other rationalizations. Some who were victims themselves and later become victimizers never really discover what it means to have healthy and appropriate relationships, especially intimate ones.

Then there are the rest of us, the witnesses: family members and friends of the abused who walk with them in their struggles; communities of faith who wonder how someone they love

and thought they knew so well could do something so wrong; priests and religious who have lived and served with integrity but now feel as if they have targets on their backs; others who have been falsely accused and feel the system and its leaders have let them down; therapists who want to help victims, survivors, and offenders but are sometimes at a loss at how to do it; bishops, religious superiors, and other leaders who can feel inadequate and grow weary carrying the burdens of the sins of the past as well as the challenges of the present; and many others.

From the time we are children and are disciplined by our parents we learn the power of shame. It is a necessary pole in the development of our moral compasses. In the best of all worlds we would do what is good and avoid evil solely through our knowledge and embrace of the good, regardless of the cost or consequences. But human nature being what it is, we do not always desire what is good and right, especially when avoiding them and doing what is wrong seem more rewarding or expedient. That is where shame has a role. Sometimes the experience or even the fear of disapproval, rejection or punishment can spur us to do what is good and avoid what is evil when the better angels of our nature cannot.

But like other medicines shame and fear can sometimes be toxic. At times they are administered to or internalized by those who do not deserve them. Many victims and survivors of sexual abuse feel shame over what has been done to them, especially when it is perpetrated by someone they trust, admire, and even love. It is hard for a child or teen to make sense of how an adult to whom they looked for guidance, affirmation or affection could hurt them and do so in such a personal way. Too often they blame themselves. Sometimes the offender blames them and reinforces the shame with threats or a pact to keep the abuse secret.

Many offenders also feel ashamed of what they have done. That—in addition to fear of the consequences of being discovered and held accountable for their crimes—is part of the reason that their denial, rationalization and minimization can be so maddeningly strong. This shame can be particularly intense in people like priests and religious, where the abuse that they have committed is in such contrast to their public personas, the vows they have made, and the values they profess to live. It can be a barrier not only to coming to admit what they have done and to accept the consequences but also to living a life of prayer and penance and engaging in the process of rehabilitation.

The shame of the witnesses can also feel overwhelming. For a few it is because they knew of abuse but felt powerless or did little to stop it. For others it is more the shame that comes with hindsight and the sense that there must have been something they should have seen or done. Sometimes it takes the form of “survivor’s guilt.”

There is also a collective shame that groups, organizations and institutions experience in the wake of revelations of sexual abuse. It is the shame of “guilt by association,” the kind of shame that has been experienced by the Boy Scouts of America, Penn State University, the Roman

Catholic Church, our own province, and many others. It is experienced by families who deal with incest.

Everyone likes to be associated with others who are admired, give them a sense of identity and purpose, and are powerful. The multi-billion dollar popularity of branded and team-licensed clothing is but one testament to that desire. Those senses of admiration, identity, purpose and power can evaporate with revelations or even accusations of sexual abuse. A sign of pride is transformed into a scarlet letter. Members of these various groups and those associated with them often respond to this collectivized shame by denial, silence, avoidance, and finger-pointing—whatever they can do to avoid being labeled “one of them.”

The disorienting and destabilizing experience of having to deal with such matters publicly inhibits effective and healing responses. People often prefer dealing with—or ignoring—the devil they know instead of the one they fear.

How can we overcome the power of this toxic shame and fear to deal more effectively and pastorally with sexual abuse? The first reading that the church provides for the Mass for the Feast of the Holy Innocents, 1 John 1:5-2:2, offers a way:

*Beloved:*

*This is the message that we have heard from Jesus Christ and proclaim to you:*

*God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say, “We have fellowship with him,” while we continue to walk in darkness, we lie and do not act in truth.*

*But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another, and the Blood of his Son Jesus cleanses us from all sin.*

*If we say, “We are without sin,” we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*

*If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing.*

*If we say, “We have not sinned,” we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

*My children, I am writing this to you so that you may not commit sin.*

*But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one.*

*He is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world.*

While we cannot forget or ignore the reality of sin and must hold ourselves and each other accountable for it, we need to remember that God is light, grace, and love. God knows better than anyone the weakness of his children, and God’s compassion is so great that the world was blessed with Jesus, who “though he was in the form of God...emptied himself...humbled himself” for our salvation (c.f. Philippians 2:6-11). This same Jesus, God’s Son, is our advocate with God.

So as far as God is concerned we need not fear to bring sin, even and especially our own, into the light and deal with the truth. God knows it, anyway. Bringing that sin into the light is the best hope we have to overcome it. A doctor has a much greater chance of aiding our healing if we are honest about our symptoms; a lawyer can better represent us if we share all of the relevant facts, even those that may not reflect well on us; a priest can better counsel us and give us a helpful penance if we name our sins; a mechanic will have a better idea of how to fix our car if we can identify where that strange noise is coming from; and the light of God's grace has the best opportunity to work in our hearts and minds when we open them up to that light.

That does not make exposure to the light any easier. It will not take away the pain, the ugliness, or the embarrassment. It will not shield us from the criticisms or condemnations of others. Generations of people who have benefitted from 12 Step programs know that recovery is difficult if not impossible without "a searching and fearless moral inventory;" admitting their wrongs to God, themselves and others; making amends where possible; taking an inventory on an ongoing basis; and trusting in God's guidance and grace. It is in such recovery, however, that we can become better able to share God's light, grace and love with all who must deal with sexual abuse and other abuses of power and human dignity.

This audit, whatever its limitations, has been an attempt to take such an inventory and to admit where we as friars and a province have harmed those entrusted to our care. Personal and institutional transformation, making amends for harm done, and building trust and hope for a better future are ongoing efforts. These are not easy things to do. They are often painful. Our natural human tendency, it seems, is to want to avoid them.

However, the terror attacks at the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013 revealed another, humane, tendency: the desire to help and heal. While some were fleeing in panic after the blasts, others—police officers, fire personnel, and even some runners who had just completed the 26.2 mile race—were rushing in to help, comforting the injured and attending to their wounds.

We are invited to rush in where others would flee and to walk in the light, trusting in the One who walks with us and is the light—the light that no darkness can overcome (John 1:5).

—John Celichowski, OFM Cap.