

Scripture insights for difficult days

By Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI

“The recent revelations (again) of sexual abuse by priests and the cover-up by church authorities have left many people wondering whether they can ever again trust the church’s structure, ministers, and authorities,” Father Ronald Rolheiser, O.M.I. wrote in September 2018. “For many, this scandal seems too huge to digest.”

Recent events in the church have been overwhelming for many, and as leaders, ministers, and the faithful ponder and seek a right course of action, Rolheiser’s reflections on Scripture in light of scandal may be helpful. The following piece is derived from “Carrying a Scandal Biblically,” an edited text of his 2002 Henry Somerville Lecture in Christianity and Communications, delivered at St. Jerome’s University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

AS CHRISTIANS WE’RE ASKED TO CARRY this scandal biblically. What does that mean? Carrying something biblically means a number of interrelated things that I’d like to look at one at a time.

Name the moment

Not everything can be fixed or cured, but it needs to be named properly. Jesus called this “reading the signs of the times.” This scandal, this particular time in our history as a Catholic Church in America, is a moment of humiliation, a moment of humbling, a moment of pruning. We must begin the process of healing by clearly, and with courage, naming that—and then not, through an overdefensiveness or personal distancing, try to escape the humiliation and what that calls us to.

The call to compassion

Our faith is biblical. So the question is: What does our biblical tradition ask of us at this moment, in this painful situation?

First of all, to radiate the compassion of Christ. That sounds obvious, but, so many times, when we are in crisis the first thing that goes is the compassion and understanding of Christ. Simply put, we too often end up bracketing the fundamentals because we think that our cause is so great and our indignation so justified that we may disregard some of the essentials of compassion, namely, respect, tolerance, patience, graciousness, and understanding. To carry something biblically means, first of all, to reground ourselves in the non-negotiables of Christian compassion—respect, tolerance, patience, and graciousness. Wild anger, disrespect, bitterness, personal distancing, and viciousness will not help carry this to any kind of meaningful closure.

And our compassion must, first of all, go out to the victim. The cross itself teaches us this. It highlights the excluded one, the one who has been hurt. Empathy must always move first toward the victim.

Usually, though, we are pretty good at this. Empathizing with a victim generally brings with it a good feeling. This crisis, however, asks us to take compassion to another level: We are asked too to have compassion for the perpetrator because this person was also a victim and he or she is ill ... and ill with the most unglamorous of all sicknesses. No sickness is glamorous but most sicknesses don't have horrific moral connotations to them. It's easy to be selective in our sympathy, offering our compassion at those places where we feel good and clean when we give it and withholding it from those people and places where we don't get a good, clean feeling when we offer it. Compassion for the pedophile is, I believe, a biblical test as to the real measure of our compassion: Can we love and offer empathy when our love doesn't feel (or look) clean?

Healing, not self-protection and security

To carry this scandal biblically means too that healing, not self-protection and security, must be our real preoccupation. Sometimes for bishops, provincials, religious superiors, and church officials there's a real (and understandable) danger of losing perspective in the face of accusations of sexual abuse. Many times, in fact, we have lost perspective.

In the vortex of this crisis, what has to be our primary preoccupation? To protect the innocent and to bring about healing and reconciliation. Everything else (worries about security, lawsuits, and the like) must come afterward.

Carrying this crisis is now our primary ministry and not a distraction to our ministry

Henri Nouwen used to say, "For years I was upset by distractions in my work until I realized the distractions were my real work!" That is also true for this sexual abuse scandal. This is not a distraction to real ministry in North America: it is the real ministry for the church in North America.

Carrying this scandal properly is something that the church is invited to do right now for the sake of the culture. It is easy to lose sight of this. The church exists for the world (not vice versa). Jesus said, "My flesh is food for the life of the world [not for the life of the church.]" In essence, Jesus came "to be eaten up by the world." That's why, symbolically, he is born in a trough and ends up on a table, an altar, to be eaten. The church exists for the sake of the world, and we must keep that in mind as we are faced with this crisis. What does that mean? Right now priests represent less than one percent of the overall problem of sexual abuse, but we're on the front pages of the newspapers and the issue is very much focused on us. Psychologically this is painful, but biblically this is not a bad thing: The fact that priests and the church are perhaps being scapegoated right now is not necessarily bad. If current events help society by bringing the issue of sexual abuse and its devastation of the human soul more into the open, then we are precisely offering ourselves as "food for the life of the world," and we, like Jesus in his

crucifixion, are helping to “take away the sins of the world.” And as stated before, this is not a distraction to the life of the church; it’s perhaps the major thing that we need to do right now for the world and our culture.

There are very few things that we are doing as Christian communities today that are more important than helping the world deal with sexual abuse, abuse of power, and cover-up by institutions. If the price tag is that we are humiliated on the front pages of newspapers and that the Roman Catholic Church in various places ends up financially bankrupt, so be it. Crucifixions are never easy and they exact real blood! It might well be worth it in the long run if we can help our world come to grips with this.

Painful humiliation as a grace-opportunity

This is a moment of purification for the church. Granted the rest of the culture is also guilty, but, for too long, we falsely enjoyed clerical privilege. The chickens have come home to roost. Now we’re being pruned, humbled, and brought back to where we’re supposed to be, with the poor, the outcasts. That’s where we are meant to be. Jesus resisted all power other than moral power. Too often we bought into power. Today the Body of Christ is not just being humbled, it’s being humiliated, and we have the chance to come to humility through that. This is an important grace-opportunity for all of us inside the church. Biblically, it’s our agony in the garden.

What does this imply? Two things: First of all it implies the acceptance of being scapegoated. In the Garden of Gethsemane, before Jesus has his life-and-death conversation with his Father, he invites his disciples to “watch.” He wants them to learn a lesson. He has just come out of the Last Supper room, and he invites his disciples to go with him into the garden. “Watch and pray!” he tells them. But they sleep through it, overcome not by wine or the tiredness that comes at the end of a day, but, as Luke says, “they fell asleep with sorrow.” They fell asleep out of disappointment, as we also often do. And they missed the lesson.

What is the lesson? Luke captures it in one phrase: “Wasn’t it necessary!” There is a necessary connection between humiliation and redemption. We can only carry this scandal biblically (offering ourselves up on the altar of humility for the sake of the culture) if we recognize and accept this connection: redemption comes through this kind of pain. And we learn that lesson through “watching” how Jesus did it: “Stay awake, watch, pray!” Unlike the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, we must not let ourselves fall asleep because of disappointment.

Second, this scandal is putting us, the clergy and the church, where we belong, with the excluded ones. When Jesus died on the cross he was crucified between two thieves. There wasn’t just one cross at Calvary, but three. The onlookers weren’t looking at the scene and making distinctions, sizing Jesus up as innocent while judging the other two as guilty. Jesus was painted with the same brush as the others, seen as compromised and tainted.

Carrying this scandal biblically means precisely to accept that kind of judgement and humiliation without protest. Let me offer an example: A young priest that I know recently went into the pulpit and protested to his congregation: “This thing is very unfair to me! I’m not a pedophile and now people are watching

me and sizing me up! I'm scared to wear my collar in an airport, knowing that people will stare at me and wonder: Is he one too?' I can't hug your kids any more and can't be spontaneous in relationships. This simply isn't fair!"

He's right, it's not fair, but, on the cross, Jesus is not protesting his innocence, saying: "This isn't fair to me! I'm not guilty like the other two! Don't get me mixed up with them!" Jesus helps carry their sin, the sin of the world.

The incarnation still goes on: Christ is always hanging, crucified, between two thieves. That's true too for the young priest whose protest I just quoted and it's meant to be true for us. The invitation to us as adult Christians is to help carry this scandal—and not, first of all, to protest our own innocence and distance from it. Carrying it also means that we don't simplistically project it onto the hierarchy, shrugging and saying: "They have a real problem on their hands!" If we do that then we are doing exactly what that young priest did in his self-serving protest. But his was not really an adult response. What should be the response?

We are the church, all of us, and we need to carry this, all of us. We stand within a tradition that stretches back in time for nearly 4,000 years (of Judeo-Christian revelation and grace). We carry that tradition, but we need to carry all of it, not just the wonderful parts. Yes, we stand in the tradition of Jesus, Paul, the great martyrs, and all the grace that has entered history through the historical church. But, we also stand in a tradition that carries murder, slavery, the inquisition, popes who had mistresses, racism, sexism, infidelity of every sort, and pedophilia. We can't claim the grace and then distance ourselves from the sin—"This is unfair to me!" We need to carry it all, as Jesus carried everything, grace and sin, good and bad, without protesting his innocence, even though he was innocent.

To carry this scandal biblically asks of us "a new song"

Sing to the Lord a new song! We are invited to do that often in Scripture. Have you ever wondered what the old song is? If we are to sing a new song, what's the old one and how is the new one to be different than the former one?

Jesus specifies this quite clearly: He tells us that unless our virtue goes deeper than that of the scribes and pharisees (the "old song") we can't enter the kingdom of heaven. What was the virtue of the scribes and pharisees? Actually it was quite high. It was an ethic of justice and fairness: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, give back in kind to everyone. What's wrong with the simple virtue of justice? Jesus, in his most important homily, one which lays down the central criterion for orthodoxy within our faith, points out the defect within an ethic of justice alone.

What's wrong with the ethic of justice alone? It's too easy! Anyone, he submits, can live the virtue of strict justice at a certain level. A paraphrase of Jesus might read like this: "Anyone can be nice to those who are nice to them, anyone can forgive those who forgive them, and anyone can love those who love them. But can you go further? Can you love those who hate you? Can you forgive those who won't forgive you? Can you be gracious to those who curse you?" That's the real test of Christian orthodoxy. And it's what is being asked of us in this scandal: Can we love, forgive, reach out, and be empathic in a

new way? Can we have compassion for both the victim and the perpetrator? Can we have compassion for our church leaders who made blunders? Can we give of our money when it seems we are paying for someone else's sin? Can we help carry one of the darker sides of our history without protesting its unfairness and distancing ourselves from it? Can we carry a tension that's unfair to us for the sake of a greater good? Can we help carry something that doesn't make us feel good and clean?

We need to “ponder” as Mary did

Inside of this, we must begin to “ponder” in the biblical sense. How do we do that?

To “ponder” in the biblical sense, as Mary did, does not mean what it means in the Greek sense (from which our common sense takes its notion), namely, that the unexamined life is not worth living and that we are, consequently, meant to be reflective and introspective. When scripture says, “Mary pondered these things in her heart,” it doesn't mean that she thought all kinds of deep thoughts about them. What does it mean?

Let's begin with an image, Mary at the foot of the cross. What is Mary doing there? Overtly nothing. Notice that, at the foot of the cross, Mary doesn't seem to be doing anything. She isn't trying to stop the crucifixion, nor even protesting Jesus' innocence. She isn't saying anything and overtly doesn't seem to be doing anything. But scripture tells us that she “stood” there. For a Hebrew, that was a position of strength. Mary was strong under the cross. And what precisely was she doing? She was pondering in the biblical sense.

To ponder in the biblical sense means to hold, carry, and transform tension so as not to give it back in kind. We can be helped in our understanding of that by looking at its opposite in scripture. In the gospels, the opposite of “pondering” is “amazement,” to be amazed. We see a number of instances in the gospels where Jesus does or says something that catches the crowds by surprise and the gospel writers say, “and they were amazed.” Invariably Jesus responds by saying: “Don't be amazed!” To be amazed is to let energy, the energy of the crowd, simply flow through you, like an electrical wire conducting a current. An electrical wire simply lets energy flow through it and give it out exactly in kind—220 volts for 220 volts.

Being amazed and giving back in kind is wonderful at events like rock concerts or sporting matches, but it is also the root of all racism, gang rapes, and most other social sicknesses. Nobody holds, carries, and transforms the energy and everyone simply gives back in kind. That's the flaw that Jesus points out in the virtue of the scribes and pharisees, they simply give back in kind, justice for justice, love for love, hate for hate.

In the gospels only two people aren't amazed—Jesus and Mary. Mary ponders and Jesus sweats blood. They take in the energy, good and bad, hold it, carry it, transform it, and give it back as something else.

Jesus models this for us. He took in hatred, held it, transformed it, and gave back love; he took in bitterness, held it, transformed it, and gave back graciousness; he took in curses, held them, transformed them, and gave back blessing; he took in betrayal, held it, transformed it, and gave back forgiveness. That's what it means to ponder and this is the opposite of amazement.

Two images can be useful in understanding this: To be amazed, biblically, is to be like an electrical wire, a simple conduit that conducts energy, taking in and giving back in kind. To ponder, biblically, is to be like a water purifier; it takes in all kinds of impurities with the water, but it holds the impurities inside of itself and gives back only the pure water.

That is what Mary did under the cross; she held, carried, and transformed the tension so as not to give it back in kind. And that is what we are called upon to do in helping to carry this scandal biblically, namely, to hold, carry, and transform this tension, so as not to give back in kind: hurt for hurt, bitterness for bitterness, accusation for accusation, anger for anger, blame for blame.

And this might mean that, like Mary under the cross, sometimes there is nothing to say, no protest to be made. Rather all we can do is “to stand,” in strength, silent, holding and carrying the tension, waiting until we can transform it so that we can speak words of graciousness, forgiveness, and healing. That’s not easy. Luke, in his gospel, tells us that the price tag for that is “to sweat blood.” There are few phrases, I submit, more apt right now in terms of describing, biblically, what we are called to do in response to this scandal than that cryptic phrase from Luke’s gospel: “to sweat blood.” The author of Lamentations puts it this way: Sometimes all one can do is to put one’s mouth to the dust and wait!

We must re-affirm our faith in God

This too will pass. There will be resurrection, even from this. God is still God and firmly in charge of this universe.

Our prayer in times of crisis must be a prayer that precisely affirms that God is still Lord of this world. When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, at his most anguished moment, he began his prayer with the words: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you!” In essence he is telling God, “You are still firmly in control of this world—even though, tonight, it doesn’t appear like that!”

We need, in the midst of this crisis, to affirm our faith in the lordship of God. God is still firmly in charge, the center still holds. The church isn’t dying. Crucifixions don’t end life, they lead to new, enriched life.

We must patiently stay with the pain

This is a dark night of the soul which is meant, like every dark night of the soul, to stretch the heart. To be stretched is always painful and our normal impulse is always to do something to end the pain, to make it go away. But the pain won’t go away until we learn the lesson that it’s meant to teach us. Pain of the heart never leaves us until “we get it,” get what it is meant to teach us, and get stretched in the way it’s meant to stretch us. This pain will stay with the church until we learn what we are meant to learn from it.

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