

Day of Prayer and Penance – 2016
March 4, 2016 – Friday, Third Week of Lent
Hos 14:2-10, Mk 12:28-34

My friends, thank you for being here today as we come together for this day of prayer and penance. I want, at the very beginning of my remarks, to thank any of those of you who are victim/survivors for being here today. The purpose of our gathering is to repeat once again my sorrow as bishop and our sorrow as a diocese for the harm that has been done to you. We come together during Lent, the Church's season for repentance and reconciliation, to be mindful of the terrible harm that has been done by the sexual abuse of minors by clerics in the Church. It is a day of prayer and fasting in the diocese in reparation for the hurt caused to the victim/survivors of the sexual abuse of minors by clerics. It is also an opportunity to pray for you and all those who have been harmed by such sexual abuse. This day is done each year so that we can continually remind ourselves of the gravity of the harm, and the resolve we have made to be vigilant in our efforts to make the Church a safe environment for children and all those who seek in the Church a place to draw near to God.

The readings of scripture for Lent are always appropriate for the purposes of our Mass today, a Mass of prayer and penance. The prophets of the Old Testament, such as Hosea, whom we have heard today, were men who were constantly calling a people who had sinned and followed their own way and abandoned their God, to repent, reform and renew their lives. Hosea is no different. "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God". He calls to a people who have been defeated in battle, and are seeing their nation taken over by another, victorious over them. Hosea is telling them that, because of their evil ways, the Lord their God has punished them and allowed them to lose the battle. "You have collapsed through your guilt". The people know that they have failed to live as God called them to live. That is their guilt. They are experiencing the consequences of their actions.

Hosea's message is one that is announced over and over again in the scriptures. And it is repeated over and over again in the liturgy of the Church because it is a message

that is not just about a people who lived some 2500 years ago. It is about our own day and time. It is a message we need to hear. It is the message of Lent. Repent, reform and renew your lives. Particularly is that the case today as we remember what brings us together. We come together to ask forgiveness for the terrible harm that was done to so many young people by the sins of the very persons who were called to serve these children, their priests. Their mission was supposed to bring these children to know God, the one whom we are called in the Gospel today to love even as he has loved us. The fact that it was not good but harm that was done to these children of God is the reason we come together for this service of penance and remembrance. Remembering gives us resolve to do all that we can to prevent such abuse to occur, and, insofar as possible to work to heal the wounds of those who have been harmed.

In the reading today, the prophet Hosea calls to repentance but he also points out something else. He reminds the people that the resolution of their problem does not rest totally with themselves. They need God's help. "I will heal their defection, says the Lord, I will love them freely." The work of healing is truly God's work. We need to make the circumstances possible as we can, but God's grace works in its own way. Our repentance and resolve to make our Church a place that is safe for all is important but our prayer today for God's assistance is necessary. He can heal what we are unable to do. In this regard I was privileged two weeks ago to have an opportunity to talk with a victim/survivor of child sexual abuse. She has availed herself of much help and wanted to have a conversation with me. Her story was sad, but it was also quite moving, and a moment of hope. She told how the abuse she had suffered took her away from the Church. When she moved to Maine, however, some friends brought her to their Church, a Catholic community. She was uncomfortable at first but little by little she began to experience that she could pray again in the strength of the community she had found. That community became for her a place of healing. Often we don't know when God's grace is present and drawing us to his heart. We do know that, in his heart, is love and hope for all, our victim/survivors and all the faithful of our Church.

Our day of prayer and repentance this year comes in the very week that “Spotlight” has won an Oscar for Best Picture. This is a movie which gives a searing view into the way in which the early investigation of the clergy sexual abuse crisis was conducted by a team of newspaper reporters. It is a very good picture of a particular moment in the crisis. I saw the movie on New Year’s Day and was pleased to see so many people attending with me. It was a very difficult movie. The theatre was almost completely silent at the movie’s end. Even though the subject is dark it is a movie very worth seeing because it relates an important part of the whole story of the sexual abuse crisis. It tells of the making known of the story. This week, in reading articles about the movie, it is heartening that victim/survivors of the crisis are seeing themselves as validated by this movie and its success. After struggling in silence for many years they feel that the movie gives them a voice, a way of speaking of the incomprehensible crime that has been committed. In that regard it is helpful and hopeful.

As we gather today, and I speak our sorrow for what has happened in our Church, I also want to say a word to those who might be carrying this pain within themselves without talking to anyone. Here, in the Diocese of Portland, we want you to feel free to come forward and speak about these painful experiences. We will work to receive you in a manner that protects your dignity. We want to do what we can to assist, if at all possible, in a process which leads to healing. But we are not the only place to which you can bring your story. Out of the same desire to assist in healing we also encourage any victim of sexual abuse to bring that crime to the attention of the police and any civil authorities who are charged with the administration of justice. Our coming together today in this prayer, and the encouragement we have given throughout the diocese that this be a day of fasting and reparation, is an attempt to speak our sorrow for this failure on the part of members of the Church. Our prayers and our sorrow are also extended to the families of these victim/survivors. Your trust was also betrayed terribly. You, too, were harmed by these instances of abuse.

The movie “Spotlight” has reminded us most graphically that the consequences of a failure to deal with this crisis have been harmful, and have undermined trust in the

Church. That is, in a sense, the consequence of sin. Like the people of Hosea's time we will have to live with the consequences of our sin, and show by our penitence and our resolve that we are working to assure that the Church is a safe place for children and for all. We have worked as a Church to change the way that allegations of sexual abuse are handled. We have initiated tremendous work in prevention of such abuse and in the protection of children. The realization of the harm done has motivated ongoing change. And it will continue.

In thinking of the many ways in which we work to protect the young I want, in a final word, to express my gratitude to all those who assist me in seeing to it that allegations are properly addressed and assuring that our Church is a safe environment for our children. Like so many other things, it is only with the collaboration of many people, including our Review Board, and those who oversee all our safe environment programs in parishes and institutions that we are helped to be faithful to the pledge we make in this day of penance to be vigilant in our commitment to overcome this evil.

May our Loving Father, who cares for us as his children, continue to send his Spirit over us to guide our resolve to do penance and to restore trust through the vigilance we bring to the care and safety of all in our Church.