

A REFLECTION ON BEING CATHOLIC TODAY-FR. JIM HEWES

In recent weeks we are hearing more and more about the crimes of sexual abuse committed by some Catholic priests in the past. This may lead some faithful Catholics to feelings of negativity toward the goodness of the Catholic Church and its leadership. In the midst of this darkness that has come over us, and without diminishing the need for the Church for repentance for such serious deeds (as well as making amends, and bringing healing where its leadership has caused hurts in the past), I would like to share with you some of the Good News of the Catholic Church.

The church and its members have sinned throughout history beginning with Peter, but over these 2,000 years the church also through the process and Sacrament of Reconciliation has been an instrument of God's forgiveness for untold numbers. It has reminded so many people of Christ's mercy and second chance to become a new creation again. I personally have witnessed the incredible healing power of Christ in his church over and over again through the process of Project Rachel, with men and women who had given up hope that they would ever find again forgiveness and healing after their abortion.

Think of the unfathomable number of people that have been helped throughout history in prayer through the treasure of the church's spirituality from the desert fathers, through giants like John of the Cross, St. Theresa, St. Ignatius, as well as through monks and spiritual directors in our present day. For centuries the Catholic Church and its members have prayed for those in need, educated those who thirst for knowledge & wisdom, reached out to the poor & suffering, and protected the most vulnerable.

It is important to remember that the Catholic Church started hospitals to care for the sick. In fact today, the Catholic Church has the largest private non-profit health care system, with 620 hospitals, which account for hospital treatment of 1 out of every 6 people--not just Catholics--in the United States today. Just as important has been the endless number of people that have found healing and strength through the Anointing of the Sick, as well as from pastoral visits from lay ministers and parishioners throughout the history of the church, right up to the present day.

Catholic supported education has been the one sign of hope and encouragement for people in poverty or who have been marginalized in so many countries, including our own. The Catholic Church founded the university system. In the U.S. the Church has 230 colleges and universities with an enrollment of 700,000 students. The Catholic Church educates more children than any other scholarly or religious institution. In the United States, Catholics have the largest private school system. The Catholic Church educates 2.3 million students everyday at the cost to that Church of 10 billion dollars, and a savings on the other hand to the American taxpayer of 18 billion dollars. 97% of graduates go on to college.

It was the Catholic Church which established orphanages, and other places of hospitality. The Catholic Church is the largest charitable organization on the planet. Catholic Relief Services alone reaches more than 100 million people in more than 100 countries. In this country the Catholic Church has the largest private social service system. Catholic Charities has 1,700 agencies nationwide and helped over 8.5 million people of all faiths last year. The Catholic family has had its share of members that have lived contrary to the Gospel, but where would our world or civilization be without the incredible inspiration of a Francis of Assisi, Vincent de Paul, Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day, to name a few?

In our time, there have been serious mistakes made by priests and bishops, which is nothing new for our Church (think of the time after Constantine, the Inquisition, the Crusades or the time before the Reformation, to name a few). It is a reminder that because the Catholic Church has its flaws and because it is a human institution, its members are in constant need of conversion and its structure is always in need of reform. What is constantly missed whenever the abuse issue surfaces is that 97% of priests day in and day out minister to God's people. Today, they visit the sick, comfort the grieving, and try within their frailty as human beings to make visible in their lives, the best they can, the presence of the God who loved them and called them as earthen vessels to be His servants, as the Lord did with his first disciples.

