

Yesterday we celebrated one of the greatest saints of the Roman Calendar: St. Augustine of Hippo. Tonight, I am particularly drawn to one particular insight that he wrote upon his being named Bishop of Hippo in Africa: “What I am for you, a bishop, causes me to tremble; what I am with you, a Christian, gives me comfort.”

As we gather in prayer tonight, although not a saint but striving to be, I am keenly aware of the good St. Augustine’s state of affairs. I look out at you, the beautiful lay people of our diocese, our dear religious, and my brother priests and deacons: your presence here gives me great hope. In you, the abiding presence of the Risen Lord is present because of your baptism. Your baptism and mine, is when we were each profoundly configured to Jesus Christ; He came with the gifts of faith, hope and love to make His very home within us. That’s incredible to reflect on, no? What is more, He made an indelible covenant with us; in the biblical language of St. Paul to the Ephesians that we just heard this past Sunday, he tells us that Christ the Bridegroom “marries us” the way that a bride and groom are bound to each other on their wedding day.

And on the day He ascended into heaven, Jesus promised to remain with us until the end of time. Indeed, Christ is present tonight, in the Blessed Sacrament on our Altar, in His Word, but also in each of us. As a Christian, I am with you, and this gives me great comfort. But as your bishop, like St. Augustine, I am trembling too, at the thoughts of what all of these serious violations mean for our life in our Church.

When we hear of such abuse, particularly those of children, our hearts ache for the pain so many have suffered at the hands of those who were entrusted with their spiritual care and rippling damaging effects on their loved ones. It is a painful and horrific chapter in our history that must never be repeated.

We pray this evening for healing of all who have been directly hurt by these sins and crimes. I am sad and ashamed. I can just imagine the hurt, the betrayal of trust, I would have experienced if any of the priests and religious that I looked up to ever did anything to harm me or any member of my family. Honestly, I don't know whether I'd be standing here before you tonight.

As your bishop, I would like to share with you some of my thoughts about this crisis. I can't tell you all often enough how deeply saddened and ashamed I have been to hear accounts that one of my predecessors used his authority over seminarians and young priests for his own advantage and lustful desires, affronting their human dignity. It angers me too, that the trust of these young men, who came to the Church to follow their vocation to the sacred priesthood of Jesus Christ, was violated and what a terrible example they were shown. Making matters even worse is that some knew about this, but did not properly face it, refused to face it or simply hoped it would go away.

I am moved to ask for forgiveness of you for these terrible sins and crimes of commission and omission. I recognize we cannot change the past. It is not at all helpful to try to rationalize, minimize or deny wrongdoing, even when it is gut wrenching to look at. One serious obligation that Church imposes upon us when we seek reconciliation for our sins is to forthrightly name our sins; in their unvarnished truth.

When I was ordained a bishop on May 3rd, 2016 right here in this diocese I have been sent to serve, I was married to this Church of Metuchen, just as St. Paul referenced last Sunday. As this ring was placed on my finger, these words were prayed: "Receive this ring, the seal of your fidelity: adorned with undefiled faith, preserve unblemished the Bride of God, the holy Church."

What was in my heart at the moment of that instruction was that I desired and chose to accept being your bishop after the heart of the Good Shepherd. While, I did not know all that would transpire in my life, by the “yes” of that day, today, I am more committed than ever. In the theology of Holy Orders, specifically regarding bishops, we are consecrated as the bridegroom of our local church, which is our bride. I take that vow, that commitment very seriously. Today, I pledge anew to use all of my energy, all the grace God gives me, to be a source of healing and reconciliation, to be a source of hope. To do this I know is not simply words, but commitment to the right course of action. We cannot rest until we get this righted.

I am equally committed to promoting a healthy, wholesome presbyertate. I want our priests to know that I with them in this time of great discouragement and distress. I try to frequently remind our priests that our dedication to the ideals by which we were called to the priesthood must be discovered anew. Our people, as well as our own soul depends on it.

St. John the Baptist, whose martyrdom we celebrate tonight is a prophetic example of what we desperately need to recover as a Church. St. John the Baptist knew the person of Jesus as an intimate family member. We remember in our daily rosary that he leapt in the womb of his mother Elizabeth when they encountered each other in that first visitation of Our Lady in the ancient hill country. St. John lived his life in uprightness, and lived to make Christ known by calling everyone to repentance. Today too, repentance must be central to our ecclesial recovery. There can be no ushering the Day of the Lord, without, the gift of a repentant heart.

I feel inspired in my life to enter more deeply into a life of repentance for these sins and for our Church. I encourage each of you to enter that pathway too. What that life of repentance looks like will indeed be particular to our life circumstances. However, I would suggest that we attend to the fact that St. John the Baptist died for truth. Truth has not changed. Jesus – the way, the life, the truth - came for us, died for us, rose for us, and ascended to the Father to intercede for us, making the Church His Bride, and assuring us that the gates of hell will not prevail.

Do we truly believe these words and actions of Jesus? Are we willing die for that truth? This feast day of the Passion of St. John the Baptist reminds us that we are all called to do so. Jesus has certainly experienced death in these last years, but we are His Bride, and He is not going to let us down. I do not know how this is going to look going forward, but I do know that I am with Him and I am with you, however this is going to look. It is in doing what we are doing now, turning to Lord in prayer, that He will make it clearer for us. It is through our acts of prayer and penance, and gathering the best advice we can get, that the road forward will become clearer. I am so grateful that we are on this road together. Today is a time for holy boldness. The closer we stay to Christ and His holy teachings, we will discover the pathway forward, personally, and for the life of the Church that we love. The only way to truly live the life of a Christian is to allow Him to live more fully in us. It is He who provides us the strength to say yes to Truth and goodness. Tonight, we are gathered in the presence of Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament. He is here as He promised. As your bishop, I promise to remain with you in this crisis and walk to greener pastures. And I am convinced that communal prayer, much like we are doing tonight, around the heart of our Eucharistic Lord, is the ideal and only place that real new life begins. It is His Church, His priesthood. Jesus truly lives in His Church to make all things new.

We must not fear the days ahead, but with confidence turn to Him. Do not be afraid to be Catholic, do not be afraid to humbly, and never with pride, hold your head up as a child of God, saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I also ask for your prayers for our good priests, who labor under great pressure and scrutiny right now. They are on the front lines of the cynicism and negativity. I think you already know brothers of my love for you and that I am close with you in my daily prayers; I am also available to you should you need or want to talk with me about any of your concerns. I also want you to know, that if you are facing any personal struggles, please do not do so alone, but reach out for help. I, your brother priests and a whole army of faithful disciples of the Lord, want to walk with you in your distress. No one should face a lonely walk; we have each other in this great adventure of discipleship, and the Lord instituted an Order, a group of us to pray, work and be together in following Him.

I have prayed every day since my priestly ordination that the Lord perfect my chaste celibacy, obedience and prayer as I strive to emulate Jesus' priesthood though these great gifts given to me by Jesus and His Church on the day of my priestly ordination. I am grateful for the gift to have lived them faithfully. It is the one priesthood of Jesus which we strive to live, and He always desires to give us the graces we need to do so.

I too ask your prayers for our seminarians. We are blessed with good young men, who have made an heroic commitment to follow the voice of the Good Shepherd to be with Him in His priesthood and strive to make their hearts over in His image, so that they may feed you, His flock. We are proud of our seminarians and ask Our Lady to protect them and guide them in these very difficult times. How we need them, and we pledge our prayers for them.

The Master of the vineyard is never closer to the vine than when He is pruning it. May we never forget His closeness to us, even when it might not be so evident to us. With you I am a Christian, for you, I am your bishop. The first brings me comfort, the latter makes me tremble. I am so blessed by your encouragement as you are a sign of hope to me and a sign of the nearness of the Lord. Thank you. As I entrust myself to your prayers as we discern the road ahead, I ask you above all, to never forget to pray for those who have been abused. If it is the only prayer you are able to offer, let it be for them.

Let us remain in some quiet prayer right now before our Eucharistic Lord. Let Him speak to the anxiety in our hearts and may we hear the angel Gabriel remind us, as he reminded the Virgin Mary, “nothing will be impossible with God..” Will you join me in a prayer to our patroness....Hail Mary.....