



Protecting God's Children for Adults

The Power of Reconciliation for the Faith Community

As Catholics, we are familiar with the healing power of reconciliation. We seek God's forgiveness through the sacrament of reconciliation as we restore ourselves to God's good grace. The power of reconciliation can also make a difference in the faith community—particularly in times of crisis. We know God is willing to forgive us and welcome us home. How willing are we to do the same for those who disagree with us? Are we willing to demonstrate generosity and to genuinely seek reconciliation with others in the community?

Experience tells us that most of the responses to the current crisis in the Church and to allegations of abuse in our parish communities are variations on two basic themes. Some people react by expressing anger at the victims—blaming them for the problems caused by the allegations or the crisis in the Church. Others strike out in anger at the Church for “betraying our trust” by allowing child molesters to continue to function in ministry in our parishes, schools, and institutions.

Blaming the Victims

Those who blame the victims seem to believe that victims are making their claims for one primary reason—to get money from the Church. They see the allegations in the news headlines and point to the fact that there is usually a lawyer standing with the victim asking for monetary damages from the Church. They “know” the alleged perpetrators and they have a hard time imagining that *the person that they know* could ever have done anything so horrible.

Even those who do not openly “blame” the victims can say things or react in ways that leave victims with the experience of further betrayal. Adults in the community who respond to disclosures by saying, “I can't believe it” or by asking that the parish include alleged perpetrators in its public prayers often leave the victim feeling disregarded or even abused, again.

Anger at Church Leaders

There once was a time when pointing the finger at victims was the prevailing attitude within the faith community. Today, an even greater percentage of the faith community has the opposite response. They are angry, upset, and offended by the actions of Church leaders. They demand public reparation for the “sins” of the bishops—and they tend to blame *all* bishops for what happened. They seem to be offended and insulted by the fact that, in their opinion, the bishops have failed to adequately address the problem. Although they are not sure what *should* be done, they are sure that the actions currently being taken are not sufficient.

These two types of responses to the current crisis can create a new crisis of sorts in our faith communities. They can lead to an “us against them” attitude that undermines the good work of the Church and destroys the family of believers.

Reconciliation

The power and mystery of the Roman Catholic Church is that it is “at the same time holy and ever in need of purification.”^[i] One of the fundamental tenets of the Church is that reconciliation is always available to the sinner who seeks it.

The definition of “reconciliation” points us toward its power in the current crisis. To “reconcile” is “To reestablish a close relationship between; to settle or resolve.” It is derived from the Latin word “concilare” which means “to bring together, to unite.”^[ii]

The key to reconciliation in the faith community may be found in the parable of the prodigal son. Even though the father was pained by the actions of the prodigal son, he did not let that get in the way of being “reconciled” with the son. His actions as a father—and his communication with both of his sons—remind us that the spirit wants reconciliation. The *soul* wants to be connected, united with others. It is the *mind* that wants justice.

Reconciliation is the road to wholeness for the faith community. When we remember that we are all human beings made in the image and likeness of God, we can see that while God's truth is present in each of us, no one of us has *all* of God's wisdom and truth. It is up to us to call for reconciliation, to demand openness and honesty, to account for our own shortcomings, to seek reconciliation—and to love one another as God loves us!

The power of reconciliation for us as a faith community is to agree that we have differences, including our responses to the current crisis—to agree to disagree, if you will—and to reestablish our relationships with each other. We can use this crisis as a justification for taking ourselves away from the faith community and Church leaders. Or, we can tackle the challenge of helping to generate reconciliation in our communities by reminding the world of the power of God's message of reconciliation. We are one Church—one Body of Christ.

[i] *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

[ii] *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, Copyright © 2000, Houghton Mifflin Company.*

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