



**Christ's Passion, headlines, reminds us that sin is real,
within, outside of Church**

March 23-24, 2002
Homily, Palm Sunday

Dear friends in Christ,

One of the first lessons a young priest learns is that the crucifixion happened for a reason. The Holy Week we begin today with the reading of Christ's passion reminds us that sin is real, that we were redeemed at a price, and that the price of our ransom was the blood of God's Son.

The Gospel is a book for realists. Christ came to live and die for sinners, and in this world, that means each of us: priests and religious, single persons, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, deacons and bishops. Week after week, every priest encounters the reality of those sins in the confessions he hears from his people, and in the confessions he makes of his own sins -- because another early lesson every priest learns is his own unworthiness to do the work God calls him to.

The mystery of the priesthood is that God calls men who are still sinful to sanctify His people. The mystery of the Church is that God calls people who are still sinful -- each of us, and all of us -- to sanctify the world. We're unworthy. We fail. We shame each other and ourselves with our sins. But still God asks us to follow Him.

This has been a Lent we'll remember for a very long time. The headlines have reminded us that sin isn't just something outside the Church. It can also live in the actions of her pastors and her shepherds. Nothing can diminish the suffering of the victims of sexual misconduct in the Church or explain away the seriousness of the sin, especially when committed against a child.

This is a source of huge sorrow and regret for me personally, and for anyone in leadership in the Church. No apology is adequate, but I do apologize sincerely and humbly on behalf of myself and our priests, for any hurt inflicted on our people over the years by clergy or lay employees of the archdiocese. Moreover, for the sake of peace in your hearts and to be worthy of your confidence in the Church now and in the future, I want to speak directly to you today.

In his letter to priests for Holy Thursday this year, the Holy Father writes that "as priests we are personally and profoundly afflicted by the sins of some of our brothers who have betrayed the grace of ordination in succumbing even to the most grievous forms of [the mystery of evil] at work in the world." Any sexual misconduct by any priest of the Church is a grave sin and does serious harm to innocent people. Therefore Church leaders have an equally grave duty to act on allegations quickly and fairly.

The Archdiocese of Denver has had an effective sexual misconduct policy in place since 1991. We make this policy available to anyone. Every member of the clergy must review and sign it as a condition of service. So too must every lay archdiocesan employee. Any violation is grounds for immediate termination or suspension.

We live that policy honestly, consistently and diligently, and because of this, I believe that no priest dangerous to children serves in any ministry in the Archdiocese of Denver. We do not, and will not, assign any known pedophile to any form of ministry. Denver District Attorney Bill Ritter and his chief deputy reviewed our policy last week, found it effective, and publicly praised it. We have promptly notified, and will continue to notify, proper local authorities of any suspected child abuse, and we cooperate with those authorities.

We treat every allegation of sexual misconduct by any member of the clergy or archdiocesan lay employee seriously. We are unequivocally committed to compassionate care for any victims and their families.

I cannot promise that those who serve us in the Church won't sin. But I can and do promise that we will act promptly whenever we become aware of it. We do and will take every reasonable measure to prevent sexual misconduct before it occurs. Additionally, all of our seminarians -- the men who will serve our Church as priests in the future -- take part in careful psychological screening and spiritual formation.

I've had many gifts in my life, but surely the greatest is the gift of my priesthood. For 31 years it has been my privilege to serve the people of God, to experience your love and to see your goodness. It's also been my joy to minister alongside so many good priests who have taught me what it means to be unselfish and a person of character. Support your priests. They need you. Our priests are good and dedicated men who bear the burden of these scandals in the Church in a very personal way. Pray for them, encourage them, and lead them by the witness of your own holiness.

The Epistle today tells us that Christ "emptied Himself [and] humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." For American Catholics, this Lent has surely been an emptying and a humbling experience. The cross this Holy Week will have a deeper meaning for all of us. May God grant us an Easter that restores us with His light and love.

Your brother in the Lord,
+ Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.
Archbishop of Denver