

## Homily for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time 2022 Year C

The Gospel today draws our attention to a fact that is all too painfully happening around us today. Jesus predicted that the powerful centre of order, the spiritual and moral structure of Jewish society, the temple in Jerusalem, no matter how elaborate and beautiful it was, would disintegrate and be destroyed. And so it came about. It is a timely warning to us in this present age when all around us we can painfully see the structures of moral order, stability, honesty and truth, peace, hope and optimism, all slowly disintegrating and disappearing.

It is a difficult thing to say, but one of those vitally important structures is the Church itself. At this moment in time, it is a very difficult and challenging thing to be a member of the Roman Catholic Church.

Some people are even walking away, appalled by the extent of the depth of the betrayal of trust, abuse and cover up that is now coming to light all over the world.

That trust and the implicit moral standards which accompanied it, has been terribly betrayed over decades by nuns, priests, bishops, and even Cardinals, to the extent that you can no longer know with any certainty who or what really is the figure of moral authority and holiness standing before you, and what is the extent of their guilt.

Trust like that, once betrayed, is hard to regain.

There is nothing new in all of this. We need a sense of perspective. If you know your Church's history, the same and worse moral double standards have taken place throughout the centuries. It is only now, through the extent of the mass media in our homes that we are exposed to it and have to cope with it.

Human nature being what it is, the institutional Church, beautiful though it may be, has always been a deeply flawed and dysfunctional vessel of the holiness and salvation transmitted and offered by Christ.

The Church survived down through the centuries as the beacon of moral and civil order and stability, because the great number of terrible sins and sinners have been outnumbered by the even greater number of Saints and the holiness of their lives.

The institutional Church, founded by Christ, is a graced institution, and it's a theological principle that the grace works with, and builds upon, human nature. It does not overwhelm it and does not take away its freedom.

As an organised community of faith, we have an institutional Church graced by the Holy Spirit and the promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. When we speak of the Church, we are not at the same time speaking of the people who belong to that Church. The Church is always in constant need of purification and renewal, because of the people who belong to it.

Perhaps now is such a time.

Many people of a deep and mature faith also have a very romantic and idealistic vision of the Church which shields them from the darker side of things. So now perhaps is a time when they are deeply hurt by all that is happening around them in the world, to take a more realistic but loving look at it and its future role.

It is not disloyal to criticise the Church. It can be a sign of loving and caring.

In 1988 Carlo Carretto, an Italian monk and great spiritual writer, died. He lived a large part of his life in solitude, in the desert, and he was deeply hurt and scandalised by what he knew of Church life. In one of his books, "Letters from the Desert", he wrote what might be called an 'Ode to the Church'.

He wrote as follows:

"How much I must criticise you my Church, and yet how much I love you. How much you have made me suffer and yet how much I still owe to you. I should like to see you destroyed and yet I need your presence.

You have given me much scandal, and yet you alone have made me understand holiness.

Never in this world have I seen anything more obscurantist, more compromised, more false, and yet never in this world have I touched anything more pure, more calm, more generous or more beautiful.

Many times I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face, and yet how often I have prayed that I might die in your arms.

No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even though not completely you.

Then, too, where would I go? To build another Church?

But I cannot build another Church without the same defects, for they are my own defects I bear within me. And again, if I do build one, it will be my Church and no longer Christ's.

No, I am old enough now to know that I am no better than others.

I shall not leave the Church founded on so frail a rock, because I should be founding another one on an even frailer rock, myself.

And then, what do rocks matter?

What matters is Christ's promise. What matters is the cement that binds the rocks into one, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit alone can build a Church with stones as ill hewn as we are".

In these difficult and trying times that is the mature faith we should aspire to. A faith that isn't so romantic and idealistic that it needs to be shielded from the darker side of things, a faith that isn't so cynical that it blinds itself to the evident goodness that emanates from the Church.

Ours is a Church that is both horribly compromised and yet wonderfully grace filled. Honest eyes can see both; a mature heart can accept both.

Carlo Carretto's Ode can help us all whether we are scandalised or pious.

To the pious it can show us how one can accept the Church despite its sins and failures, and how to deny that sin is not what is called for by loyalty.

To the scandalised and disappointed, it is a challenge not to miss the wood for the trees, not to miss seeing that in the Church frailty and sin, whilst real, tragic and scandalous, never eclipses the superabundant life-giving grace of God.

Christ's advice is to persevere.

What does not diminish us, only strengthens us.