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HOMILY FOR THE PENITENTIAL VIGIL ON THE OCCASION OF THE SYMPOSIUM “TOWARDS HEALING AND RENEWAL”

FEBRUARY 7, 2012
CHIESA SANT'IGNAZIO

My venerable brother bishops and priests and my dear brothers and sisters,

In the context of the reflection that is taking place during these days of the Symposium “*Towards Healing and Renewal*”, we remind ourselves that we are here this evening not only as believers, but also as penitents.

The tragedy of the sexual abuse of minors perpetrated by Christians, especially when done so by members of the clergy, is a source of great shame and enormous scandal. It is a sin against which Jesus himself lashed out: “It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to stumble” (Lk. 17:2). Abuse is a crime, in fact, which causes an authentic experience of death for the innocent victims, whom God alone can truly raise to new life in the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, with profound conviction and awareness of what we do, we turn to and implore the Lord.

This gesture of purification involves the entire Church, and each one of us - Bishops, Religious Superiors, educators, all Christians - feels the pain of what has occurred. We ask that the Spirit of God, who heals and radically renews all things, come down upon us.

As members of the Church, we must have the courage to ask humbly for God's pardon, as well as for the forgiveness of His "little ones" who have been wounded; we must remain close to them on their road of suffering, seeking in every possible way to heal and bind up their wounds following the example of the Good Samaritan. The first step on this road is to listen to them carefully and to believe their painful stories.

The road of renewal for the Church, who will continue to educate people and establish proper structures to help prevent similar crimes, must include the sentiment of "never again". As Blessed John Paul II said, "there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young" (*Address of Blessed Pope John Paul II to the Cardinals of the United States*, April 23, 2002, n. 3). It is intolerable that the abuse of children would take place within the Church. Never again!

Sadly, we observe all too well that the sexual abuse of children is found throughout modern society. It is our profound hope that the Church's commitment to address this great evil will foster renewal among other communities and agencies in society who have been affected by this tragedy.

In this new path, we Christians should be aware that only faith can guarantee an authentic work of renewal in the Church: faith understood as personal, as a true and life-giving relationship of love with Jesus Christ. Mindful of our own lack of living faith, we ask the Lord Jesus to restore us all and to lead us through the agony of the cross towards the joy of the resurrection.

Sometimes the violence was committed by deeply disturbed persons or by those who had themselves been abused. It was necessary to take action concerning them and to prevent them from continuing any form of ministry for which they were obviously not suitable. This was not always done properly and, once again, we apologize to the victims.

The Shepherds of the Church, having learned from this terrible and humiliating experience, have a grave duty to take responsibility in the discernment and acceptance of candidates who seek to serve within the Church, most especially those seeking ordained ministry.

Still shocked by these sad occurrences, we hope that this Vigil liturgy helps us to view the horrible sins that took place among the People of God in the light of salvation history, a story which we have retraced together here tonight. It is a story that speaks of our misery, of our repeated failures, but most of all of God's infinite mercy, of which we are always in need.

And so we entrust ourselves entirely to the powerful intercession of the Son of God, who "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:7) in the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption, and who has taken upon himself every evil, even this evil, destroying its power so that it would not have the last word.

The Risen Christ, in fact, is the guarantee and the promise that life triumphs over death; He is capable of bringing salvation to each person.

As we continue with our prayer service, we pray, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, for a more profound appreciation of our respective vocations, so as to rediscover the roots of our faith in Jesus Christ and to drink deeply from the springs of living water

that he offers us through his Church (cf. *Pastoral Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland*).

May the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who is always at work in the world, descend and help us through the prayers of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, whose powerful intercession sustains and guides us to be obedient and receptive to divine love. Amen!

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