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An attendee prays the rosary Oct. 1 during a public session on the issue of clergy sexual abuse at Our Mother of Confidence Parish Hall in San Diego. (CNS/David Maung)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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That Gospel lesson is somewhat unusual for us to hear because we're not used to Jesus being so direct and harsh, almost. We'll reflect on that a little bit more in a moment. We've been asked, every parish in the diocese, at every Mass, to read a [letter from the archbishop](#). Before we reflect briefly on the Scriptures, here is the letter:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

By now you will have learned that our State Attorney General has launched an investigation into the Catholic Church in Michigan in regard to acts of sexual abuse of minors by clergy, and the ways these cases were handled by bishops and others in authority. Once again, I affirm [a quote the archbishop made previously]:

*The Archdiocese of Detroit welcomes the Attorney General's investigation and is prepared to fully cooperate. We have worked closely with the authorities from all six counties within our archdiocese since 2002, when we shared past case files involving clergy misconduct and committed to turning over all new allegations regardless of when the alleged abuse occurred. The Attorney General investigation is the next phase of our commitment to transparency and healing.*

*We have full confidence in our safe environment policies put in place and carefully followed for more than 15 years. We remain committed to protecting everyone — especially children and vulnerable adults — and therefore look forward to working closely with officials to determine if there is more we can do to accomplish this goal.*

As shepherd of our local church in Detroit, I want to offer my most heartfelt apology for the shame I know you must feel that, because of failures in the Church's leadership, we have come to this point. While shame and embarrassment might be an initial reaction, they are not the most important. First and foremost, in the beginning and throughout, we

must keep our focus on the healing of the victim-survivors and on our efforts to keep everyone safe in our parishes, schools and all other dimensions of the Church's life. I renew to you my pledge to lead all of us in striving ever more vigorously to achieve these goals.

Most recently, our response to the sexual abuse crisis has led to establishing new action steps to hold bishops accountable for our own personal behavior and for how we have dealt with the cases of abuse. The U.S. Bishops' Conference has already shared some important decisions about this, and I fully endorse them. Further, I will meet very soon [actually, the meeting took place a week ago] with all the priests in the archdiocese to discuss further actions we can take to ensure that my pastoral ministry is characterized by integrity, transparency and accountability.

What I have mentioned so far concerns the actions that need to be taken to strengthen the organizational side of our faith-community. While not seeking to skirt the issue of the need for action, as your pastor, I need also to speak to you about the personal, spiritual response to which God the Father calls us in our current situation. I hear him inviting us to renew our faith in him: that he has raised Jesus from the dead and made him Lord of history, not least the history of our time and place; that in the death and resurrection of Jesus is the power to conquer evil, even sins as heinous as those being uncovered because of this crisis; and that in the outpouring of his precious blood he gives us the singular grace to atone for these sins and heal the wounds that have been inflicted on Christ's Mystical Body, the Church.

In that light, I ask that you enter into a moment of prayer — kneel if you wish — and in spirit join with the priest in this prayer from the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, which I've edited to focus on our community's need for mercy:

*Eternal Father, I offer you the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Your Dearly Beloved Son, Our Lord, Jesus Christ, in atonement for the sins of clergy sexual abuse and the failure of those who should have prevented it. For the sake of His sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and give healing*

*to all victims-survivors, their families, and to the whole world.*

As I close, I offer again my apology, first of all to victim-survivors and all others so grievously wounded by the sexual abuse of minors by clergy, and for these crimes and failure of leaders to prevent them. Also, I apologize to all of you, members of the Catholic community, for the hurt these sins have caused you. With the help of God, I will continue to lead us on the path toward being the family of faith God calls us to be.

Saint Anne, pray for your Church in Detroit.

Blessed Solanus, pray for us.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

The Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron

Archbishop of Detroit

It does seem timely that we're reading this letter a week late because of the Gospel lesson today, the lesson where Jesus talks about what happens when you harm one of the least of God's little ones. Do you remember last Sunday the Gospel when the disciples were trying to say who's the greatest? Jesus immediately calls a small child as a symbol because in the time of Jesus, especially under the domination of the Roman Empire, children had absolutely no rights.

## **Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

[Sept. 30, 2018](#)

Numbers 11:25-29

Psalm 19

James 5:1-6

Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

They were totally vulnerable, the most vulnerable you could possibly be. So Jesus holds this small child and says, "Here is the one who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." The least is the greatest because God is with the least most of all. That's where we get the whole idea of the preferential option for the poor in Catholic theology. The weakest, the most vulnerable are the ones whom God loves with his everlasting love.

Today's Gospel takes us a bit further, warning in those harsh terms and obviously exaggerated terms for the sake of forcefulness, that there's nothing more important than to avoid sin. So if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off, your hand — cut it off. Whatever causes you to sin, you must rid that from your life, get it out of your life. Jesus is very adamant about this.

Surely, what has happened within our church, and it's beyond our church, of course, the sexual abuse of children — other churches, schools, other places of work, even in homes sometimes, it's a most tragic thing.

In the church, it becomes especially tragic for a child because of our kind of exaggerated notion about priests and bishops in a sense that we had this theology of a priest as another Christ, the priest pastoring a parish as Jesus in your midst. Every Christian is, but we put such emphasis on the priest that we ignored the fact that everyone is another Christ. So the priest is put up higher. A little child thinking of the priest as God and then abused is hurt deeply, spiritually. The child's whole being is damaged and the ability to have any faith in God becomes very, very difficult. So it is a grievous sin.

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One thing I guess I want to say is it was a good thing for the archbishop to bring the priests together to say what can we do, but that's not enough. If we listen to the first lesson today, Moses is telling Joshua, "Look, we can't restrict where God sends God's Spirit. Those two people weren't in the group. They have God's Spirit; that's God's decision." That becomes even more important in our Christian theology.

I mentioned this before, maybe at a Mass you were present for, how every one of us when we're baptized is baptized to be, in the sacramental terms, priest, prophet and ruler. Those two men in the Old Testament became prophets because the Spirit was

on them. But God's Spirit comes upon every one of us to be prophet. Here's what the words of baptism say: "As Jesus was anointed priest, prophet and king, so may you live always as a member of his body and so you are priest, prophet and king."

That means that all of us share in spreading the word of God. That's what a prophet does. All of us have that Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of God that enables us to speak out, witness for God, speak for God, and bring God's truth into our world. I think one of the things that have made it so difficult for the church to reform is we haven't listened to people like yourselves, parish members, parents, relatives of these children.

Who else would be more concerned in trying to bring about healing, trying to bring about change in our church, changes that are necessary in order to rid ourselves of this despicable, almost unspeakable crime? I hope the archbishop, or even if he doesn't, I hope if you have ideas of how we need to change our church, reform our church, we must share them, be prophetic and speak out. Don't just leave it to the very ones who brought about the problem — priests and bishops. That's not enough. We're not going to solve them problem that way.

All of us in the church, and all of you here are members of this church. You've been anointed with chrism to be a priest — offer sacrifice — to be a prophet — speak for God — and a ruler — administrate. I invite you, going beyond the archbishop's letter, to fulfill your roles and to spread this word that all of us must come together as a church to try to understand what has brought this about and to try to find the way to rid ourselves of this curse that can destroy our church.

I shouldn't say that, because Jesus will never leave us. The gates of hell will not prevail against us. But at least that we can rid ourselves of this evil and become the holy people of God that we're called to be, and that we rid our church and our society of the kinds of despicable crimes that have gone on far too long, be the priest, prophet and ruler we're called to be, undertake your part in trying to heal our church.

We pray today as we celebrate this Eucharist that all of us will respond generously to this call and fulfill our role as baptized members of the community of disciples of Jesus.

[Homily given Sept. 23 at St. Philomena Parish, Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are [posted weekly](#) to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) to

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