

2018 21ST SUNDAY

A day I will never forget was in early June 1994 when I was the Parish Priest of St. Pius Melville. Fr. Frank Scott, who was the chaplain of the Waikato Hospital, lived in the Presbytery with me. He hadn't been feeling well and was advised to have a chest X-Ray. After such an event you are not allowed to drive for a few hours afterwards so he asked me to pick him up. Which I did. On the way home he told me that the X-Ray had confirmed his worst fears- he had lung cancer and had 3 months to live.

After tea I drove Fr. Frank across town for him to tell the Bishop, Bishop Edward Gaines. Fr. Frank also wished to receive the Sacrament of Anointing from the Bishop.

After the ceremony was completed in the Chapel of the Bishop's Home we went into the Lounge for a convivial whiskey together.

But what I remember all so well is that within a couple of minutes we were no longer talking about Fr. Frank's approaching death. Instead the Bishop spoke on and on about the distress he was under concerning the sexual abuse crimes of Fr. Mark Brown. Fr. Mark Brown, who was a priest of the diocese, was about to be released from jail and Bishop Edward had no idea of what to do.

Bishop Edward could focus on nothing else. It tortured him. Two months later the Bishop would die (three weeks before Fr. Frank). I am convinced that the strain the Bishop was under concerning the crimes of Fr. Mark had everything to do with his death.

I tell you this story because these days the Bishops of the 1980's and 90's are under huge public scrutiny for their apparent callous disregard of the pain of the victims of clerical sexual abuse.

What was very apparent to me was that there was little or no mutual support between Bishops. Each was jealous of his independence from other Bishops; seeing themselves answerable only to the Pope for what happened in their diocese. Each was on his own.

And so Bishop Gaines sought guidance from his old friend, Fr. Frank, even though Fr. Frank had only six hours earlier had the traumatic news that he had only three months to live.

Thankfully in the early days of the new Century the New Zealand Bishops would come together and with the help of knowledgeable lawyers hammered out a policy which was both in harmony with the Gospel of Christ and the Laws of the Land.

But in those early days this had not happened. Bishop Gaines was afflicted by a terrible sense of guilt towards the victims. Could he have done more? Added to that was a shame for the good name of the Church and the hope that Fr. Mark might, perhaps, now be reformed. It was all too much for him.

Many priests sinned. The Church has reacted by apologising and trying to give financial solace to the victims. It has also enacted strict policies to immediately include the police in any incident when a crime is suspected. If a crime is deemed to be even likely, a priest is taken out of parish Ministry.

But for all of us who love the Church, it is all highly distressing. At the moment the media are making much of it. In a single issue of the 'Gisborne Herald' a couple of weeks back, there were three separate articles of Clerical abuse- one in Australia, one in the US and one in New Zealand. This last week there have been Articles virtually every day especially as the Pope prepares for his visitation to Ireland.

Perhaps this is God's way of purifying the Church. Certainly we priests are now ever-so careful not to cross any sort of boundaries. Here at St. Mary Star of the Sea I insist that the door of the sacristy be open and the blind right up when the altar servers are vesting. I ask certain women of the Parish to pop in and out of the sacristy- to give all of us protection.

But how has this scandal affected the Faith of Catholics?

Pretty badly, I would guess. There has been a terrible rejection of the Church by many in Ireland since the crimes against children were revealed.

I would hope, though, that the majority of Catholics would be at one with St. Peter in today's Gospel. The people were leaving Jesus in droves, totally misinterpreting His teachings on the Bread of Life. Jesus turned to the twelve Apostles and said: "What about you, do you want to go away too?" and Peter- to his eternal credit said: " Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life."

And that is what I believe about the Catholic Church. In spite of the sinfulness of some of its preachers, God's Truth is taught most profoundly

within the Church. And we know that receiving the Sacraments of the Church will bring us safely to eternal life; irrespective of the holiness of the Ministers of the Sacraments.

I love today's 1st Reading from the Book of Joshua.

It was Joshua who took over the leadership of the People of Israel on the death of Moses. He had led their successful invasion of Canaan and partitioned the land to each of the Israelite tribes.

And now as an old man he called the leaders of the tribes to the ancient sanctuary of Shechem. He did not speak to them as a military commander. Rather he spoke to them as a prophet. He knew that already some of the tribes have adopted the paganism of their Canaanite neighbours. Solemnly he asked them to choose whom they wished to serve: the God of their ancestors or the false gods of the land they now inhabited. And they cried out as one: "We will serve the Lord."

And so it is with us. The sins of some of our priests have discouraged us. But we must not be deflected from that which is all-important. Like the apostles we must keep on choosing Jesus and stay with the Church which, in spite of the sins of some of its priests, has the message of eternal life.

Joshua said: "As for me and my House; we will serve the Lord."

As for me, I will remain faithful to the Church. I will be proud of my Catholicism because I know that Jesus lives in the Church and is now working to purify the Church; making it ever-more holy.