



August 24, 2018

Statement of Ave Maria University President Jim Towey to students, faculty, administration, staff, alumni and donors regarding the crisis of clerical sexual abuse and its cover-up by Church authorities:

On Monday our beloved Sovereign Pontiff issued a letter to 1.2 billion Catholics worldwide apologizing for the sexual abuse scandal “perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons.” Our Bishop, Frank Dewane, in his August 17th letter to the faithful of the Diocese of Venice, conveyed his sorrow over how “Church officials contributed to a culture that too easily excused predatory behavior.” The Ave Maria University community shares their grief.

Some of you are like me and know of a family member or friend who numbers among the victims of sexual abuse by the clergy. I hasten to add that there are many holy bishops and priests who now must bear the burden of a scandal they had no part in creating. My heart goes out to them and in particular to the six wonderful Ave Maria priests on our campus. These men need our friendship, support and gratitude more than ever before.

But in this hour, we face the awful realization that ecclesial officials allowed what Pope Francis described as “spiritual corruption” to take root in the Church. Some abused their authority and inflicted grievous harm, and others covered up or enabled it. The diocesan structures that were in place to protect children, identify predators and hold them accountable, again failed. The horror which the Pennsylvania report described would never have happened if moms had been part of the diocesan decision process on how to handle allegations of sexual abuse and whether to reassign priests. One lesson for us is that the Church is enriched when the complementary gifts of women are respected and engaged.

If Mother Teresa were alive today she would be heartbroken. Monday was the 33rd anniversary of the day I first met her in Calcutta. I had the privilege of observing this saint regularly over the 12 years I did legal work for her, and on occasion, accompanied her when she traveled. It was clear to all who knew Mother Teresa that she never wanted to be a priest. She wasn’t angling for ordination and she didn’t feel her vocation as a religious was a second-class calling. She knew that her equality within the Church was derived from Our Lady’s motherly, feminine role from the time of Christ, and she claimed it as her own.

The comprehensive reform that is needed today will consist of a Church that properly balances authority within it and allows the laity, particularly women, meaningful participation in governance within the male hierarchy. This does not suggest a power grab. It simply recognizes that the system of governance now in place is fundamentally flawed. The pervasive clericalism the Holy Father decries can never deliver a balanced Church.

We can look across the Atlantic to see one model approach that would radically restructure how authority in the Church might be exercised. Under lay woman Kathryn Clarke's leadership, the Kilmore diocese in Ireland has launched an initiative called *Mothers of the Church*. She is working with her bishop to establish a formal structure for women to be welcomed by the diocese with the goal of offering human and spiritual formation programs to help Catholics, lay and clergy, match their exterior lives with their interior lives. Ultimately, this type of balanced and rigorous formation may be the only remedy that will successfully eradicate the scandalous practices we are now discovering. The alternative is the phenomenon of priests living double lives, preying upon the sheep, and when exposed as hypocrites, scattering the flock in all directions.

Ave Maria University comes to these challenges in the Church with a unique perspective as a Catholic institution founded by a lay man and primarily governed by lay men and women. We were not founded by a religious order and are not beholden to one. We were not founded by a diocesan bishop and do not receive financial assistance from the diocese. And we aren't a Pontifical college with the attendant ties to the Vatican. We simply are faithful sons and daughters of the Church and intend to actively participate in its reform as the Holy Father has asked. Only by committing ourselves as members of the laity to the pursuit of holiness, as Pope Francis challenged us in *Gaudete Et Exsultate*, can we have anything to offer.

The "heinous history of abuse and cover up" as described by Bishop Dewane validates our concern that the Church's systems of forming seminarians, overseeing priests, promoting accountability at all levels of authority, and meaningfully involving the laity in its governance, demand a thorough overhaul.

Pouring new wine into an old wine skin does not work. Ave Maria University will host a conference in January 2019 and invite scholars who share our loyal love of the Church and a desire to reform it. The constitutive elements of a new wine skin will be woven of the laity, priests and religious sharing the authority and responsibility for the life and future of the Church, under the proper authority of the local bishop and in communion with the Bishop of Rome.

The parable of the corrupt judge in Luke's Gospel teaches us that we need to pray and not lose heart even when we see the damaging actions of those in positions of authority within the Church "who respect neither God nor man." We firmly believe the Risen Lord is with us, just as He was with the discouraged, disillusioned disciples of Emmaus.

Our youth hunger for God. They long for high purpose. An authentically Catholic liberal arts education can form a new generation of hopeful, joyful Catholics who can discover the richness of their lay vocations and genuinely participate in the building up of the Church and sharing its governance in the years ahead. There is no other way forward.

Our patroness, the Blessed Mother, will guide us in this dark hour in the Church, and we entrust our efforts to her Immaculate Heart.

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