

We are the Church

Last week I had a very encouraging and thought provoking meeting with the Directors of Clergy, Life and Ministry at their national meeting. These Priests are responsible for overseeing the welfare, professional development and well being of all Priests.

We live in a challenging time for the Directors of Clergy, Life and Ministry as they watch with horror and sadness as fresh allegations of Clerical sex abuse are featured almost daily in the media. During our meeting we discussed a number of difficulties facing the Priesthood. Issues like ageing priests and the impact isolation has on the many Priests living on their own. We also talked about the opprobrium of Clerical sex abuse and the impact this has on them personally when, although innocent and hard working, they are often grouped together with the appalling actions of some Priests in the past.

I came away from meeting with the Directors inspired, and admiring of their commitment to what it means to be a Priest today and their dedication to serve and enrich the lives of their fellow Priests.

There is no doubt this is a testing time for Priests and anyone who identifies as Catholic. However, it is at times such as these that we embrace the challenge as adults. Priests need to relate to other adults in their Parish, not as a Priest, but as another adult asking questions and sharing views and opinions with people in an atmosphere of trust and support. It is a time to open up the lines of communication. We know it never helps to ignore problems, or put aside difficult conversations, so why should Clerical sex abuse be any different?

People in our parishes and faith communities need to talk openly about the ramifications of this Clerical sex abuse scandal and how the Church is handling it. We need to confer with one another about the sort of Church we are trying to create, because ultimately we are the Church.

This is an important point. Many people, particularly in the media, focus on the institution of the Church, but it is the people, you and I, who are the Church. That is the real difference. We the people need to grasp a sense of responsibility and ownership for the Church we are, and the Church we are becoming. The more we concentrate on our role in the Church, the more people will have hope and confidence in the Church, rather than focusing on the institutional flaws of the past.

This is what I believe Pope Francis is saying in his recent homily. His words spoke to me about the courage and conviction we need for change and the strength required for repair and restoration. Pope Francis is encouraging us to engage with the Church and not feel confined by the past to define our future Church. I will leave you with Pope Francis' words.

Let us ask for the grace of not being afraid of the newness of the gospel, of not being afraid of the renewal that the Holy Spirit brings, of not being afraid to let go of the passing structures that imprison us. Pope Francis – Homily 6 July 2013.

Francis Sullivan