

## PENTECOST 2023

John tells us that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit over his disciples on the evening of his Resurrection. Matthew tells us that Jesus, forty days later on the day of his Ascension, gave his disciples the “great commission” to “go make disciples” of all nations. **Nonetheless**, the disciples remained fearful and confused; at times, they doubted what they were seeing and hearing. Today Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit came to them much more dramatically fifty days after Easter. The Spirit of Pentecost **drove** them out of hiding and into action. They boldly proclaim who Jesus is and what his death and resurrection means for us all. **This is the birth of the Church**, when belief becomes witness, words lead to action, and disciples become missionaries.

**From its birth, *Church is a communion in Christ, sent by the Spirit to bring the good news of Jesus to the world.*** The church born at Pentecost is a living reality, always on the move. Its **holiness is rooted in Christ** rather than the perfection of its members, who strive to **grow** in holiness. The Church is always being **sent to carry the message of Jesus** as a sign of hope to the world. We who are the members of the church act in the grace given us by the Spirit rather than by our own graces. The grace of the Spirit continues to guide the church and its members, even when some of its members or leaders bring scandal to the church.

Several years ago, the former Illinois Attorney General initiated an investigation into the policies and procedures of the six Catholic dioceses in the State of Illinois. This followed disclosures that several dioceses in another state had continued to cover up incidents of abuse. This past week, the current Attorney General released the results of that investigation. Although some statistics in the report are in dispute, **the investigation affirms the ongoing efforts of the Catholic Church in Illinois to protect vulnerable populations and report, review, and respond to abuse allegations.**

Nonetheless, the report places before us again a painful reality that will always be a tragic part of our history. In past decades, some priests used their position of trust to cause deep harm to vulnerable individuals. Some church leaders, either not understanding the harm being done, or fearful of the consequences of open disclosure, chose not to disclose what was occurring. **We cannot minimize the harm this caused to those abused and to their families. We, as a church, continue to live with the consequences of the actions and decisions of the past and have a responsibility to those who were abused and their families.**

As a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago for over forty years, I am grateful to Cardinal Joseph Bernardin for responding quickly in 1991, when the psychiatric community concluded that **no known treatment or protocol could guarantee that an abuser would never abuse again**. Cardinal Bernardin immediately published the names and removed from ministry all priests against whom a previous allegation had been substantiated. He worked with professionals to establish:

- **Policies and protocols** to protect the vulnerable and report cases of alleged abuse.
- An **independent review board** to evaluate accusations and recommend a priest's permanent removal from priestly ministry when an allegation was found to be credible.
- An **office to assist anyone** who brought an allegation to the Archdiocese and to offer resources for their healing.
- More **detailed screening** of candidates for ordination; and requirements for priests, Archdiocesan employees, and volunteers with youth to complete background checks and receive ongoing training in how to recognize and report problematic behaviors.

In 2001, the U.S. bishops met and developed procedures for all dioceses in the U.S., based largely on the Chicago guidelines. In the two decades since, these policies and procedures have been reviewed, reworked, and refined. The training programs for clergy were extended to all employees and all volunteers who work with vulnerable populations.

**None of what the church in Chicago has done for the past thirty years can erase the harm that was done in the past.** We, the church of today, must continue to pray for those who were harmed, especially for those who struggle to find healing and peace in their lives. We who serve the Church **must remain committed to teaching, implementing, and observing the policies and procedures that provide safe environments** for the most vulnerable we serve. And **we must never again attempt to cover over rather than openly confront our faults and failures. It is impossible and damaging to deny** the wrong and the harm caused by the action and inaction of some church leaders and ministers. **So how do we move forward as church?**

I suggest that we, as a church, return to our roots on this, our "birth day." Our identity as the church is not founded on our efforts or lack of effort. We are ***a communion in Christ, diverse and united, and alive in the breath of the Spirit.*** We go out into the world to proclaim the loving mercy of God with Jesus and in the Spirit. Our failures and our sinfulness weaken our witness; but they **do not define us as church**. We openly confess our faults and

trust in God's forgiveness and the promise that Jesus remains with us. Following his command, we offer healing to those who have been harmed by the action or inaction of some in the name of the church. We witness to our trust in **God's grace at work in us**. **We are missionary disciples** who profess the love of God at work in us despite our faults and imperfections.

Luke's story of the early church in *Acts of the Apostles* is a story of a believing community united in Jesus and witnessing through the power of the Holy Spirit. They gave witness to others both in their love for one another and in their willingness to face their struggles to live Christ's command of love in all aspects of their lives. They did not run from or hide their failures. Rather, as St. Paul states, they confessed that they were but earthen vessels, imperfectly holding the precious treasure of God's love in Jesus.

**This is how we move forward. We admit** the scandal that has weakened our witness and harmed so many. **We reach out in prayer and compassion** to those who have been harmed by this scandal, whether directly or indirectly. **We commit to comply** with the policies and procedures that will keep the vulnerable among us safe, even whether or not we understand them. And **we proclaim the gift that has been given to us in this community of believers**: a communion in Christ, both united and diverse, sent with the gifts of the Spirit to profess the good news of the gospel through word and action.