

I am not brave enough, or perhaps stupid enough, to spend today's homily time on the NT lesson from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians: "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord." But I would like to share with you a brief portion of a homily I gave at a niece's wedding some years ago, a niece who actually *chose* to include this passage in her wedding liturgy.

At that liturgy, I said, "One of the reasons we find this passage so jarring is that the verse before it is omitted. There Paul says, 'Live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us.' Out of love for the Father and the world He created, **Jesus** was subordinate. His love was so perfect that he accepted the cross and death, a punishment that, of course, he did not deserve. And by doing that, he modeled how we too are supposed to live our lives, in perfect love.

"Subordination in a Christian sense is never one person *over* another. It is not about power and abuse, but rather service and living for the other. Subordination is really the *essence* of love—putting someone else before myself, just like Jesus—not in power, but in service. And that message is not just for married people. All of us—married, single, vowed, ordained—*all of us are called to subordination.*" [Perhaps this makes Paul's words a little more palatable.]

But I really want to spend the homily time today on the Gospel we just heard—in my mind, one of the most touching passages in all the Scriptures.

This Gospel passage follows the Bread of Life discourse which we have heard for the past five weeks, where Jesus reveals the truth of the Eucharist—that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood if we are to have life within us and then *eternal* life. That

was, is, a hard teaching to comprehend and to accept. Those who heard Jesus were puzzled; some were outraged. They thought they had been taken in; this man is a joke. Many of them turned away. And these people weren't just casual observers. John identifies them as *disciples*, followers. They had been intrigued by this man—his words and his miracles. They had begun to hope that finally the Messiah was among them. But this was too much, and many began to turn away.

Jesus then asks his closest followers, the Twelve, if they will leave too. Of course it is Peter who speaks up, and his response is telling. Peter doesn't claim to understand what he has been taught. Nor does he offer some explanation for how it is easier for the Twelve to accept this teaching than for the many who have turned away. Peter says simply, "Master, to whom shall we go?"

I don't think Peter said that out of desperation or hopeless resignation—"we've left our jobs, our families, what other choice is there? We've hooked our wagons to you." No, Peter has seen that Jesus offered them the truth, and he is not willing to exchange that for something more convenient. "You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

"To whom shall we go?"

In this moving passage, Peter asks a question that must haunt every believer who is disappointed in their church. Like the disciples of old who abandoned Jesus, thousands have simply walked away from the Church.

Yet millions of us stay with no plans to leave. Why? It is a question that so many of us surely ask ourselves every time there is a headline about some new sexual, fiscal or historical scandal/cover-up. I think Peter's response to Jesus—which must

have warmed his heart—speaks to a troubled and hurting Church. Where else would we go that would satisfy our deepest needs, especially in times of personal trouble?

I was born into the pre-Vatican II church where nuns in our Catholic schools (many of yourselves included!) taught us that we alone had the truth. We were proud and certain and perhaps a little smug about being Catholic. But Vatican II forced us to look at our Church and the world far less simplistically. Thank God! Modern scandals have forced us to face far more unpleasant truths. And as we wait for desperately needed reforms to take hold, we suffer shame and anger.

But meanwhile, those of us who will never leave, ask ourselves where else can we go. I was formed amid a background of rosaries, First Communion, May processions and Forty Hours, but more importantly by a deep sense of community and social justice. My Catholic identity is far too deep to be uprooted by the corruption of any church leaders. This isn't about bishops and bad priests. It is about Jesus and the community he called, and in whom he remains still.

At every Mass, right before the sign of peace offered before Holy Communion, the priest says a prayer about that peace, asking the Lord Jesus to “look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and graciously grant her peace and unity according to your will.” If you notice, most priests when they pray that sentence, will emphasize the word “Church.” It may seem a small thing or a matter of semantics, but I always emphasize “sins” and “faith” in that sentence. For two reasons... if you contrast our sins with Church, it makes it seem that the Church makes up for our sins. No, *we are the Church*. (2) That contrast also makes it seem like the Church is above or beyond sin. Hardly. The Church is made up of sinners, as well as saints, and it is **faith** which leads us out of the abyss.

A lay person I know once said, “On days when I am particularly upset with our leaders, I try to imagine life outside the Church, and frankly, I can’t. I think of my beloved parish and the wonderful things we do together that none of us could do alone. I think of the heroic church workers in Third World countries and the saints who are my heroes. I think of how I have always turned to my faith in times of personal crisis and found strength and comfort.”

“To whom shall we go?” asks Peter. Then he supplies the answer that is so critical to us today 2000 years later. “We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.”