Bishop Fabbro’s Homily for the Memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows

Mass for Survivors of Clergy Abuse – 13 September 2018

The media has given much attention to the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report which was recently released. The report investigates clergy sexual abuse of minors in six dioceses in Pennsylvania dating back to 1947. It found that 300 priests engaged in the abuse of more than 1000 children. The extent of the abuse is shocking. People have reacted with anger and shame, and grief for the many victims.

It is devastating to read the accounts of profound evil that occurred in our Church. Since I have been bishop, I have met with survivors of clergy sexual abuse and their families. It was heart-wrenching to listen to their stories of the pain and the sufferings they have endured throughout their entire lives – sometimes for 30, 40 or 50 years after the abuse occurred.

The Grand Jury Report details the failures of the bishops who covered up the abuse by moving priests around. The cover-up was terribly wrong. Catholics are rightly outraged that the bishops failed to put a stop to the abuse. How could they have failed so grievously in their calling to be shepherds of their people and in their responsibility to protect the most vulnerable among us?

The report investigates what happened in the Pennsylvania dioceses over the past 70 years. Our Church has learned from the mistakes that were made in the past. Bishops have acknowledged these tragic mistakes. We have apologized to survivors and asked their forgiveness. We have compensated them for the harm they suffered and provided counselling.

Since 1989, our diocese has implemented a strong, comprehensive Safe Environment Policy. It is periodically updated and improved – and is available on our diocesan webpage. It includes a number of sound procedures to prevent abuse from happening. A priest who commits an offense against a minor or any other vulnerable person is removed from ministry.

The clergy abuse crisis has brought to light the brokenness in our Church. For these wounds to heal, we must first acknowledge our brokenness before the Lord. We must do penance in reparation for the grave sins committed. And, we – bishops, priests and lay people – must be courageous in carrying out the reforms needed in our Church.

In his recent letter to the People of God, Pope Francis said:

☐ “no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening, but also to prevent the possibility of their being covered up and perpetuated”.

The pope calls all of us to penance and prayer which, he says:

☐ opens our eyes and our hearts to other people’s sufferings;
opens our ears to the cries of pain felt by children, young people and the disabled;

makes us hunger and thirst for justice;

impels us to walk in the truth;

leads us to be committed in truth and charity with men and women of good will to combat all forms of abuse.

This Eucharist, the votive Mass of Our Lady of Sorrows, honours Mary who stood at the foot of the Cross. She remained with her Son in his agony and death. In our times of suffering, we can turn to Mary, our Mother, and know that she stands by us. Furthermore, she is a model for us of standing with those who are suffering.

Today, people across our diocese are gathering in our parishes in union with Mary at the foot of the Cross. We acknowledge the horrible pain and suffering of the victims of clergy sexual abuse. Together, we join in prayer for them and their families, for the perpetrators and for healing in our Church and in our communities.