

PENTECOST

Pope Francis has agreed to meet with a group of victims sexually abused by Catholic priests. Pope Benedict had several such meetings during his papacy, but Francis has never personally met with victims, as far as we know. When he sits down with them, he will get an earful. Victims are justifiably angry at what happened to them. The abuse has affected their ability to trust the church, to hold their faith, and to relate with others. The pope will probably hear something like this: “I know that Jesus says we should forgive, but I can never forgive my abuser for what he did to me.” Many people have similar sentiments when they feel betrayed by someone they trusted.

On Pentecost Sunday we commemorate the day that the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples with many gifts, empowering them to bear witness to the gospel. Jesus promised this Spirit early in John’s gospel when he said, “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink.... Rivers of living water will flow from within [the one] who believes in me.” Jesus was referring to the Spirit whom they would receive after he was glorified. At the end of John’s gospel, the risen Jesus appears to the disciples and says, “Peace be with you.” Then he said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

Elsewhere Jesus says you should forgive your offender 70 times 7 times, but at the end of John’s gospel he says something different. There may be some sins you retain. This passage is often linked to the sacrament of reconciliation in the Catholic Church. It is seen as the place where Jesus instituted penance, giving the disciples authority to forgive. But he also seems to inform them that some people commit sins that will always hurt.

Forgiveness doesn’t mean pretending that nothing happened. It doesn’t mean treating someone as if everything should go back the way it was. The old adage “Forgive and forget” does not come from the bible. It comes from Shakespeare’s King Lear. If anything, you could say, “Forgive and remember.” Remember that someone who betrayed you may not be trusted again. This is especially important for victims of sexual abuse. They can forgive if the abuser repents, but they don’t have to trust again. Trust is not the same as forgiveness.

Victims of clergy sexual abuse have a steep hill to climb. They should have gotten better treatment from the Church. Now the Church is striving to help them through counseling, prayer, and financial assistance. If you have been sexually abused by a Church leader, you can call our diocesan victims’ advocate, Mary Bultmann. Her contact information is on the cover of our bulletin every week. I’ve met her. She is excellent.

Whether you forgive or retain the sins against you, the Holy Spirit who came to the Apostles when Jesus breathed on them longs to share with you the same gift of peace.