

LOOKING THROUGH STAINED GLASS



A Column by Fr. Tom

Should I Stay or Should I Go? *[By popular request, today's column is an excerpt from the homily Fr. Tom delivered Oct. 7. Our regular columns will continue next week.]*

[This is Respect Life Month], and today's readings are about life – life that is born out of love. The readings for today talk about marriage and the love between husband and wife. It is no accident that in our gospel, the discussion about marriage is followed by a story about Jesus and the little children. Children are the fruit of the love that exists between a man and a woman. Respecting life is being both an advocate and a worker in the fight to respect all human life from conception to natural death. It is advocating for peace instead of war, it is working against abortion, the death penalty and euthanasia, and it is promoting the dignity of all human beings – without regard to their race, age, nationality, religion or any of the other factors that we use to differentiate ourselves from “them.” But today, I'd like to return our focus to the segment of our human family that I mentioned above – the one that needs us most at this time – children.

In the Gospels for the last three weeks, Jesus has focused on these “little ones.” Two weeks ago, he told His Disciples that a child was great in the Kingdom of Heaven and that “anyone who receives one child such as this in my name, receives me...” [MK 9:37] Last week, He warned against anyone who would cause one of these little ones to sin. [MK 9:42] And now, this week, He told his disciples, “Let the children come to me...for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Then he embraced the children and blessed them. [MK 10:14,16] If we believe all these things that Jesus says about children, we should do everything in our power to not only respect, but to protect, the lives of these “little ones.” It is no accident that these readings have come at this time in our country's and church's history. God has a plan. He wants us to be aware of our Christian duty to do our best to do exactly that – protect the children.

So what can we do? Well, first of all we have two basic options. We can leave the Church or work for change. This basic choice has been in existence since the beginning. It really came to a head during the 16th Century with the Protestant Revolution and the Catholic Reformation that began with the Council of Trent. Some chose to leave the Church and some chose to work for change from within.

That choice still exists for us today. Since the clergy sexual abuse scandal came to light, sadly some people have left the Church. However, a number of dedicated people within the Catholic Church – many of them lay women and men – have been working along with the bishops to create change. It is from this effort that an agreement of working toward an end to clergy sexual abuse was developed. The agreement became known in some circles as the Dallas Charter, and it spawned a program of education, protection and reporting called Protecting God's Children in 2002. While the work is still not done, vast improvements have been made. I believe that it is good that the states are getting involved too. They may even (perhaps unwittingly) be helping us to make our Church better. For example, some people may report to the state what they might not report to the Church. While most of the cases that will come from these investigations occurred prior to 2002, the hurt is still very real and often very fresh for the people affected.

I don't usually do this, but I want to tell you a short personal story. It's not a story about abuse; it's a story about choices. My first call to the priesthood came in the 1980's. I didn't think I was ready. So I chose to wait and God waited for me. In 2000, God called again. This time I chose to say, “Yes.” I officially became a seminarian for our Diocese in 2003, during the 10-month episcopacy of then-Bishop O'Malley. This was right after a second bishop of ours was forced to leave because of a sex abuse scandal. You might ask, “Why join at that time?” First, because God was calling me (and I had kept Him waiting long enough) and second because I chose to be a part of the solution (no matter how small). I chose to work for change. There were a lot of other men who made a similar choice too. A large increase in vocations to the priesthood was seen at that time all over the country.

Over the next weeks and months, we're going to hear a lot of terrible things and the temptation to walk away may be very strong for some. Please don't. Instead, stick around with the faithful men and women who want continued improvement in our Church. Choose to work for change.

