

Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



‘Christ is in the Boat’

“And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him saying, ‘Save us Lord: we are perishing.’ And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?’ Then he rose and rebuked the wind and the sea; and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, ‘What sort of man is this that even winds and sea obey him?’” (Mt 8:23-27).

This powerful passage from St. Matthew’s Gospel speaks volumes to us in the midst of the storm of the sexual abuse scandal plaguing our Church: the abuse of minors by clergy reported in the PA Grand Jury Report, the abuse and harassment by a now former Cardinal of the Church, the failure of some bishops to protect children, and the abuse now catalogued in various nations. We are in the midst of a storm.

Matthew’s Gospel passage is masterfully captured by Rembrandt in his 1633 painting “Storm on the Sea of Galilee.” Often, great religious art can not only vividly bring a scene to life, but can speak to the soul. I believe Rembrandt’s painting is speaking to our soul. The Greek word for “storm” which St. Matthew uses (*seismos*) is the same word used for “earthquake.” And in his version of this scene, St. Mark has Jesus rebuke the wind and the waves with the same words with which he exorcises demons: “Peace! Be still!” For members of the Church, it is as if the Church has been hit by an earthquake, and it is clear that we are in need of purification from evil.

In Rembrandt’s interpretation of this biblical scene, the power of the raging storm elicits varied reactions in the disciples depicted. As the waves crash into the boat, a close look reveals some desperately trying to keep the sails from tearing. Another



'... in the midst of the storm, we can never tire of making our words count by showing that our resolve is backed up with action. We can never tire of saying "we are sorry" to those who have suffered abuse. We can never tire of intense prayer and penance, in reparation and for purification.'

tentatively holds onto the rigging. One has his hand on his head, gazing at the viewer as if in disbelief and desperation. One sits turned away from Jesus, almost ignoring the scene, as if nothing is happening. One appears to be vomiting over the side of the boat. One hovers in the darkness of the background, is he about to jump overboard? One holds firmly on to the rudder attempting to steer the boat. Two actively wake Jesus, one gesturing to the storm to which Jesus seems oblivious. Jesus himself appears to be just waking from sleep, looking intently at the disciples.

Rembrandt's depiction of the disciples in the boat with Jesus might well serve as a metaphor for all of us, disciples in the present storm - lay faithful, consecrated religious, deacons, priests and bishops - who as members of the Church can find ourselves in the various reactions and characters Rembrandt's depicts. But amidst the chaos of the scene, and amidst the chaos of the present moment for the Church, only one factor is constant: Christ is in the boat.

Whenever the disciples are together in the boat in the Gospel, scholars often see this as the "Barque of Peter," a symbol of the Church. The boat is the Church, and Christ is in the boat! And he is gazing intently at us. Fr. John Riccardo writes: "It wasn't the sound of the raging wind or pelting rain that woke Jesus from his slumber in the boat. It was the voice of his friends whom he loved. So in the midst of this storm may he hear our voices and save the ship which is the Church."

Since August, I have heard people say, "We are tired of words, tired of apologies, tired of prayer." I understand why. But in the midst of the storm, we can never tire of making our words count by showing that our resolve is backed up with action. We can never tire of saying "we are sorry" to those who have suffered abuse. We can

never tire of intense prayer and penance, in reparation and for purification. Prayer and action will take us forward. The US Bishops' Administrative Committee recently shared [action steps taken on handling allegations](#) of abuse or misconduct by a bishop (<http://www.usccb.org/news/2018/18-152.cfm>). The Diocese has published a [Q&A regarding the sexual abuse scandal](#) so that our faithful have and can share the facts about how we work to prevent abuse (<https://goo.gl/YvBku1>). And this weekend, all our parishes are [encouraged](#) to begin praying the [prayer to St. Michael the Archangel](#) after all Masses, as another spiritual initiative to combat evil and restore holiness to the Church.

At this moment in the storm, we don't have the luxury of looking on from the outside. We are in the boat together but Christ is also in the boat. No matter how we feel or how we are reacting to or handling this storm, it is not for us to give up, to ignore what is happening or to despair. No. This is the time for us to firmly recognize the presence of Christ in the boat, to recognize that he is intently gazing on us. Despite our fears, this is the time to hold fast to our Catholic faith, to be nourished by Christ in the Holy Eucharist, even if it feels like he is asleep, and to rouse him for the sake of his Church: "Save us Lord." This is our confidence, this is our reassurance, this is the source of our strength: Christ is in the boat!



Most Rev. Daniel E. Thomas
Bishop of Toledo
September 25, 2018

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