

Welcome, everyone, as we gather to celebrate this Eucharist. A special welcome to those who are visiting us here today – we are very happy to join with you in worship of our heavenly Father.

Today's gospel has a simple message: be pure of heart. The Pharisees were more concerned about being pure for their rituals, which is why they objected that Jesus' disciples were eating with unclean hands. Jesus explains to them that eating with unclean hands does not make you unclean. What makes you unclean is any sin that you hold onto in your heart. Therefore, be pure of heart, and your offering will be pleasing to God.

As the Church of Christ, we have taken that to heart. We do not have ceremonial washings to prepare ourselves for worship. We have the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass when we call to mind our sins and ask God for forgiveness. We have the sacrament of confession for those times when we have separated ourselves through mortal sin. We ask God to purify us on the inside, so that when we make our offering, it will be acceptable to Him.

It is not hard to find examples of what happens when we *don't* do this, when we allow sin to remain in our hearts and take root, including within the Church. One of the many things that's been going through my mind when I think about those priests and bishops who were involved in the scandal is: Did they go to

confession? And if so, what did they say? Did they have any sense for the gravity of the sins they'd committed, let alone that they were crimes? Or were they so far from the Lord that they felt no remorse, no sense for the sin that had taken hold of them? Were their hearts so hardened that they could go about their lives without any fear of the judgment that awaited them?

Jesus tells us to be mindful of our hearts so that they don't become so hardened that we can't even recognize our sin. That is why he was so intentional in teaching us his Father's will, through parables and through his way of life. That is why he founded his Church, to be our mother and our guide. That is why he has given us the sacrament of confession, so that the sins we commit don't take root in our hearts and corrupt us.

Yet another layer to the harm that the abuse scandal might cause is that it might lead the faithful to stop going to confession. After all, it is clear that being a priest doesn't make them any holier than anyone else, so why should we go to them and confess our sins? It's an understandable reaction. But it is important to remember that when we go to confession, it is not the priest's forgiveness that we are seeking – it is God's. God has given His children the gift of having a way to be sure of His forgiveness through His ordained ministers by giving us the sacrament of confession, just as He has given us the gift of receiving his body and blood in the

Eucharist through his ordained ministers. The forgiveness we receive does not depend on how holy the priest is. God will work through the most sinful of His ordained ministers for our sake, for the sake of His children, so that the faithful can know that their hearts *have* been made clean, regardless of the priest who is on the other side of the screen.

And we are *all* in need of that cleansing. Jesus says in today's gospel, "Hear me, all of you, and understand. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, greed, envy, arrogance and the like. All these evils come from within and they defile." The enemy does not attack us all in the exact same way. What was tempting to those clergy is abhorrent to most others. So he will come at us with different temptations, probing us for our weaknesses and exploiting them. None of us is immune to sin, so if we don't want *our* hearts to grow hardened, and *our* eyes to become blind to the sin that we commit and the judgment that is coming, then we need to go to Jesus and ask for his mercy.

And wouldn't it just enrage the devil if this scandal that is rocking the Church led us to examine our own hearts and brought us to confession? I have to admit, that thought brings a smile to my face, because that is exactly how the Lord works! Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more; in other words, where sin is having its way, God pours even more of His grace so that that sin can be overcome

and destroyed. The world thinks this is the death knell for the Church. No. This is a purification, because that is what God does. He will make His Church holier, and that includes us. Absolutely, we have important work to do bring to justice those who harmed children and those who covered it up. We also have important work to do to root sin out of our hearts and out of our Church.

So let me conclude by especially encouraging you to come to confession if you have been away for a long time, or if there is something on your heart that you want to finally let go. Be a part of the purification that God is effecting in His Church. Don't worry if you're not sure what you're supposed to do when you go to confession. People come into the confessional all the time who aren't sure what to do, and that's fine. I talk them through it. As I've said before, those confessions bring me the most joy, because it is a giant leap forward. It is a sign that this person has just taken a huge step in discipleship, and my job is to honor them for that step, encourage them, and try to express to them how much God rejoices at forgiving their sins for them. Please, do not be afraid.

Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. God is pouring His grace into the Church right now. Let us open ourselves up to that grace, and let Him purify our hearts.