

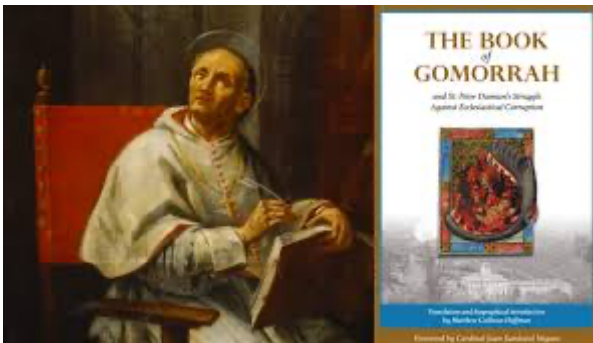
Homily

23rd Sunday OT - A

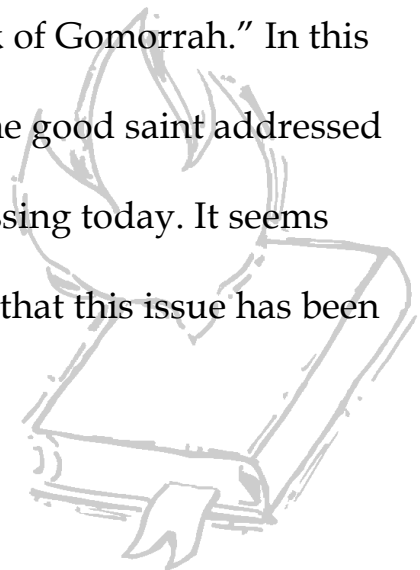
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
September 05-06, 2020

Ez 33: 7-9
Ps 95: 1-2, 6-7, 8-9
Rm 13: 8-10
Mt 18: 15-20

This is not going to be an easy homily to preach. When I was hospitalized these last two weeks, I had told those who had offered me great care that my life would become much more difficult for what I need to do. “The children are so vulnerable,” I said to them, “and with the Black Lives Matter or Me-Too Movement and with the COVID problems that we are addressing in this country, they kind of are providing a smoke-screen to the child abuse crisis in the Church that is still pervading our society.”



A thousand years ago, St. Peter Damian published a work called “The Book of Gomorrah.” In this writing, the good saint addressed the same sex abuse crisis that we still are addressing today. It seems that, even though the leaders of the Church say that this issue has been



thoroughly vetted and addressed and that they have come into full compliance with protecting kids, in reality, *we have not*, and we have a long way to go.

If advocates or whistleblowers like me do not come forward to protect these children, even though we have come a long way, then we are just as held as accountable as everyone else, as is stated in our first reading from Ezekiel, as discussed by today's second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, and certainly in today's gospel... which means that what I am about to do is not easy. What I am about to say is not something that is going to be popular and probably is fraught with danger. As I told the people in the hospital, if I do not serve as an advocate, that I am held just as culpable for my actions as the perpetrators are for theirs.

I honestly think after my stay in the hospital, I realized that God had chosen this particular mission for me. As I recall in the story of the Lukan beatitudes (Lk 6: 20-26), to enter heaven we must act like we are poor in spirit, that we be hungry, sad and hated (as opposed to rich, fat, happy and loved). If we do what is right and necessary according to the

gospel, we are not going to be popular; one does not climb the ecclesiastical ladder when they “fight city hall” (or as I call it, the “Mother” ship) so to speak. That said, our ultimate goal is to get to heaven, we have to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of another.

On September 3, the clerics of the Joliet Diocese received the following communication from the bishop’s office. The letter reads as follows...

Dear Fathers, Deacons and members of religious orders,

In your prayers, please remember James Nowak who passed from this life on September 3, 2020 in Downers Grove, IL. Mr. Nowak served as Priest of the Diocese of Joliet from 1967 until 2007 when he was placed permanently on Administrative Leave.

The Diocese of Joliet expresses its heartfelt apologies to all the victims and families affected by Mr. Nowak's deplorable conduct (Note from me... If I am correct, there was a newspaper that talked about \$4.1 million in settlements due to the actions of the former Fr. Nowak and possibly others).

The Diocese has developed across the years a robust plan for the prevention of future acts of abuse by Church personnel in compliance with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. More information regarding reporting abuse, and information about the Diocese of Joliet policies regarding the protection of children are available on the diocesan website.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

When I was in the hospital these last two weeks, I was sharing with some of the nurses and others who took care of me about some of my struggles as a Catholic priest. I told them that the first year of the priesthood was probably the worst of my priesthood because of what to which I was introduced. When you get out of the seminary and you get thrown into parish life, ministry becomes like night and day. The practical experience of what you encounter as a newly ordained priest often is not exactly what the seminary teaches you.

In my case, I was reassigned two days before my ordination to a parish where no other priest would serve, a parish that I myself asked not to serve either. Alas, newly ordained priests do not have much say about their first assignments; this was one of my first lessons about how obedience sometimes gets mistaken as abuse. As a result, my first four years of the priesthood relegated me to driving priests to AIDS clinics to

get tested, to deal with alcohol problems of those with whom I served, as well priest sex problems that bishops chose not to address.

At the end of my first year as a Catholic priest (when I hit my lowest point in ministry), I visited one of the diocesan bishops for confession. During that sacrament, I told the bishop about my struggles as a priest and how I was taking a freefall from life, not being able to handle the grave sins that other priests had inflicted on me and my poor way of responding to these grave sins. I told the bishop about all that dirty laundry that I had encountered in the priesthood with clergy as well.

I guess because my details were so juicy, this bishop could not help but to reveal my confession to his superior. When I found out the bishop had squealed on me, I went to the other bishop of the diocese. I said to him, "Why would you do something like that to me?" The bishop's response to me was the following: "If I had to do it all over again, I would do it the same way."

The day before his official retirement, the bishop who revealed my confession called me to his house. Once there, the bishop said to me, "I have made a lot of mistakes as a priest and bishop but I have never

broken the seal of the confessional *except this one time*. For this one time, I apologize to you.

The problem is once you break the seal of the confessional, there is an automatic excommunication that goes with it (see the Code of Canon Law, Canon [983.1](#) and Canon [1388.1](#)). If you commit an abortion, there was an automatic excommunication that goes with it ([Canon 1398](#)). That is the deal. Especially as priest, each one of us is held accountable to keep sacred these sacraments, the most intimate way through which God works through us to confer grace on others. When we priests violate the sacraments, we are held more accountable because we have made a calling to sacrifice and confidentiality and what we take advantage of others, we gravely violate this sacred trust.

I am more than aware that there are many times in my life where I also have fallen and I have been sinful. I also have come to realize that when you are an adult and you make adult decisions (good or bad), you have to be held responsible for every decision we make. Whatever the decision, we adults make adult decisions and we consciously choose to commit these acts by following the gospel or abandoning it.

That said, when it comes to children... children do not often have that luxury of being able to decide. Children do not have the right to vote; in the family, children are required to be submissive to their parents up to a certain age. Children are very young and very fragile serve as the most sacred gifts that we have in this world. To violate a child is to violate the gospel of Matthew, Chapter 18, Verse 6: "It is better to have a millstone wrapped around your neck and thrown into the sea than to cause a little one to sin."

I think about this passage from Matthew and the subject of child protection because when I had to endure these problems my first year as a priest, I realized I have been fighting this battle for the last twenty-four years... and continue to fight this battle today. I also realized that clerics would not help me in this cause, either because they are afraid to suffer the same fate as me or, as one cleric said to me (summarizing the feelings about a good number of clergy in the diocese), "Friendship trumps the Church." To this cleric and to others like him, to protect the priest is more important than to protect the Church or the children the Church is trying to serve.

It is that sentiment that offends me to the core, because if that is the case, that cleric and others like him have no business being ordained. If I remain silent to this kind of abuse, I have no business to remain a priest, either.

Throughout my ministry, when I watched these predators walking in and out of the parishes I served uncontested, my blood would curdle. As I was told by one of our bishops, because the victims of these predator priests had been paid off and, as a result, the predators were never convicted, those predator priests were able to wander freely into any parish or public institution, including my church back in 2008.

In the last parish that I served, former Bishop Daniel Ryan attended a 50th Anniversary Mass in his bishop clerics, engaging with families and children. I believe that Ryan was removed from active ministry in 1999 for credible accusation against children, yet showed up in my parish, wearing his clerics, standing next to diocesan personnel and intermingling with children.

I also came to find out that the former Bishop Daniel Ryan and the former Fr. James Novak (whose funeral notice I read today), both were



Bishop Dan Ryan attending a 50th Anniversary Mass in Full Clerics on September 7, 2008.

living at the time at the St. John Vianney Retirement home in Naperville, IL, right across the street from St. Margaret Mary Parish and Kennedy Junior High School.

I was told by my sources that both were engaging with the students and parishioners often, with no one knowing of their past histories

(because, technically, neither

were convicted of any crimes). I believe that Mr. Nowak's victims received over \$4 million from the diocese (and parishioners' monies) for him and possibly others violating too many children to mention.

I had previous experiences with Nowak's shenanigans. My priest colleagues used to tell me how Nowak visited family's homes and played with the kids if the parents were not around. A person who wish

to climb the ladder in the Joliet Diocese had a child sexually compromised by Nowak and was promised by a bishop that Nowak would never serve a school again, only to find out that he was placed in one of the largest schools in the diocese. A person once interested in entering the seminary was cajoled by Nowak; this person told me that Nowak wined and dined him and then brought him to his personal quarters to take pictures of him, which was when this person ran from the house and decided not to enter the seminary as a result.

So in 2017, I asked that an article run in The Chicago Tribune as a way to document some of the abuses against children that I experienced at the parish I served. I wanted something to document that, despite the resistance of the clergy to protect kids, I was trying to follow the gospel message. That night at an anniversary dinner, I was told that many priests gave a standing ovation for those who compromised the safety of children, priests who called me “dead to the diocese” because I had broken some unwritten code of silence.

A few weeks later at a Red Lobster Restaurant, a friend of mine overheard priests bashing me mercilessly for what I had documented in

the Tribune. I understood their wrath – when you break the unwritten code, there is going to be a backlash against you; this happens in all kinds of occupations. The priests again called me dead to the diocese; they hoped no one would ever help me in my ministry.

When I confronted one of the priests about this dinner (who happened to be a high-ranking priest on the diocesan totem pole), he *did* apologize to me in writing and said he went to confession and received absolution for what he had done. The absolution was good; the collateral damage from the discussion was not. I had to keep reminding myself that if I did nothing for kids' protecting, then I am condemned just as much by today's readings as they were.

In January 2018, I wrote to the pope and asked him why I should remain a priest if these abuses against children were so prevalent. I guess the bishop took this letter as a "priesthood crisis" and forced me out of parish ministry and on to a year sabbatical. The bishop also reminded me that if any abuses took place while I was a pastor – even if I did not commit the abuse – that he would hold me personally responsible. This is the same bishop who wrote me (and I paraphrase),

stating that it took years after the 2002 charter for the bishops to be in compliance, even though my experience told me that was far from the truth.

On my forced sabbatical, I kept reminding myself that a precedent in the Church was established in the bible and in Church history for going after superiors when abuses take place. As Pope Francis once said, if you are going to attack a bishop, *be a man* and speak your peace – he also said to be ready for the repercussions for going after your boss. I reminded myself that in Saint Paul’s Letter to the Galatians (Chapter 2), he chastised the first Pope of the Church because St. Peter did not minister properly to the Gentiles. In the 11th Century, St. Peter Damien wrote a book that chastised the leaders of the church about the sex abuse crisis (I have to remind myself that he was one of the most influential clerics of his time and no one heeded his warning about sex abuse, either). I remind myself that a thousand years after St. Peter Damien, we still are fighting this battle with sex abuse and we still have not gotten it right.

So when I was forced on sabbatical in 2018, one day I received a letter from Mr. James Nowak, who had no idea about my connection to what he had done. Not only did he send me a letter, he sent me words of support and five dollars so that I could buy a Happy Meal or something. He also included a business card which stated that he lived at the St. John Vianney retirement home next to the junior high school and next to a Catholic Church.

When I found out that Mr. Nowak was living in close proximity to children, and, according to my sources, intermingling with the kids, I asked myself, “What was I supposed to do? Was I supposed to stay silent and complicit?” I knew that the bishops and his vicars for priests intentionally placed Ryan and Nowak (among others) in a place with close proximity to children. After knowing their history and what they were capable of doing, I also knew that neither the bishops nor the vicars had told anyone about the history of these former clerics. In my twenty-four years as a priest, I had experienced this type of deception (in so many different ways) over and over and over again .

As a result, I got in contact with a parent at the neighboring school named Jennifer Bramschreiber (whose kids mingled with these former clerics). She had contact with a producer from Channel 2 News in Chicago as well as investigative reporter Brad Edwards. Jennifer and I met with this producer and Brad Edwards in Bolingbrook, Illinois to talk about what was happening at John Vianney.

Subsequent to that conversation, the news station was able to produce stories about these predators living near children, unbeknownst to the parents of the area (you can check out these broadcasts online via YouTube). After Nowak was exposed to living at John Vianney, the diocese transferred him to the Portiuncula Center in Frankfort, right next to a high school retreat house. Subsequent to that, Nowak lived at an Extended Stay motel next to a Catholic Charities building.

I was - and am - very tired of these deceptions against the protection of children. I tried to follow the gospel's mandate - I tried to deal with these abuses quietly but to no avail. When Dan Ryan showed up to my former parish in full clerics, knowing what he had done, my heart sank.

After this incident, I read the bishop the riot act, telling him that to allow predator priests onto a property in the middle of a sex abuse crisis was asking for trouble and that I was not going to be blamed for others allowing them on to the property. The bishop said to me that even though I was not responsible for allowing these predators on the property, if anything happened, I was going to be blamed, nevertheless. A warning to all priests in this diocese, country and world - you need to know if something happens on your property, you will be held accountable.

So I ask again - what do I do? How am I supposed to protect these children, knowing that there would be a great push back by even the clergy in my own diocese? After my two-week stay in the hospital for medical problems I wish no one to experience, I decided that I have no choice to move forward in this direction and write a book about what I have experienced

All I ask you to do is to pray for me that I have enough strength to do what I should have done two decades ago. More importantly, I ask you to pray for our kids, ask them to be protected and loved.

If the diocese is going to say they have a “robust plan” for protecting children then, rephrasing what St. Peter Damien’s wrote a thousand years ago, let us try the following suggestions as a “robust plan” ...

- Expose all the files of the priests who have violated children. If the bishops do not do this, they should be excommunicated.
- If a priest violates a child, they should be excommunicated and taken off the payroll.
- If a bishop hides a priest in residential neighborhoods while being paid by parishioner monies, the bishop should be excommunicated.
- If a pope enables bishops to hide priests without warning neighbors about their presence, the pope should be excommunicated.

A hundred years ago, we had what was called an “Oath against Modernism” by Pope St. Pius X, who wanted to make sure that sure that clerics held fast to the teachings of the church. We should enact an “Oath against Child Abuse” in this age to hold fast with the protection of children by having clerics sign this type of decree; then, if any cleric breaks their oath, they should be excommunicated. We need to tell people that we are not using Black Lives Matter, Me-Too or COVID as a

smoke screen to enable child abuse. We have endured this problem for more than a thousand years. It is time that the abuse should stop.

At the end of my hospital stay this last week, I found a note that one of the nurses placed in my belongings that I had not previously seen. I want to conclude this homily by reading this note and to thank the nurse who wrote it. This is what she wrote to me...

Thank you for being a champion for truth and justice. Thank you for being brave enough to face a trying and seemingly impossible issue. I am sure there are many more who are grateful than those who seek to tear you down. Continue to be brave. Remember your worth, hold on to what is important. I wish you the very best and pray for your continued strength.

I very much appreciate this note because my road has just become that much more difficult. I asked you to pray for me, pray for the children, and let us pray that bishops become enlightened to do what's right, so they are not subject to the punishment from today's scriptures, that none of us are subject to the punishment from the scriptures. Each of us are held accountable if we do not protect the most precious gift that God has given us - the gift of the child. Let us dedicate ourselves to

protecting them and offering this life of sacrifice to all people that we meet. This is our prayer.



September 3, 2020

Dear Fathers, Deacons, members of religious orders,

In your prayers, please remember James Nowak who passed from this life on September 3, 2020 in Downers Grove, IL.

Mr. Nowak served as Priest of the Diocese of Joliet from 1967 until 2007 when he was placed permanently on Administrative Leave.

The Diocese of Joliet expresses its heartfelt apologies to all the victims and families affected by Mr. Nowak's deplorable conduct.

The Diocese has developed across the years a robust plan for the prevention of future acts of abuse by Church personnel in compliance with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. More information regarding reporting abuse, and information about the Diocese of Joliet policies regarding the protection of children are available on the diocesan website.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

*Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.
May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.*

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "David Castronovo". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D".

Dr. David Castronovo, JD, JCD
Chancellor

Thank you for being a champion for truth and justice. Thank you for being brave enough to face such a trying and seemingly impossible issue. I'm sure there are many more who are grateful than there are those who seek to tear you down. Continue to be brave. Remember your worth. Hold on to what's important. I wish you the very best and pray for your continued strength.

- Lauren.