

Stones Cry Out

Faithful of Southern Illinois

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." He said in reply, "I tell you, if they keep silent the stones will cry out!"

Lk. 19: 39-40

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From Scripture we learn that the basic message of Jesus was for his followers to believe in the good news "that the kingdom of God is here. It is the time of fulfillment." Jesus' transforming gift to us was the call to full humanity; to become all we can be. It was the gift of wholeness. If God's kingdom is the presence of God working effectively among us, right here and now, then God works in and through everyone, not just men. Being open and living in God's love enables us to discover the presence of Jesus in the hearts and lives of others. We help one another achieve fulfillment.

The Vatican's latest announcement that lists the ordination of women to the priesthood with priest pedophilia as grave offenses (*delicta graviora*) is a violation of the human rights of women and, most importantly, a violation of the example and message of Jesus. By believing it can control how and in whom God chooses to become present, the Church prevents women from accepting Jesus' gift of wholeness. The pairing of women's ordination and priest pedophilia is outrageous and an insult to the dignity of all women in the Church. How can the ordination of women be equal to a sex crime? How can an action that robs the innocence and life from children be compared with an action that gives God's grace and spirit?

In 1976, Pope Paul VI's own Pontifical Biblical Commission examined whether or not there are any obstacles in the Bible to the ordination of women. The Commission concluded that there are none. Pope Paul VI chose to ignore the results of this investigation and the Vatican continues to keep people ignorant of the facts of this study.

To the Vatican's list of grave sins must be added the sins of sexism and injustices committed by the Church towards women. Church leaders can continue to issue illegitimate statements, try to warp our minds, use fear tactics and keep women in their "place", but the Spirit cannot be controlled by any human leader or institution. Truth will never be consumed by power. Jesus' gift of fulfillment was given to all.

Called To Renew Our Church

Believing that we are being called by the Spirit to renew our church, members of FOSIL and VOTF, St. Louis, each hosted a prayer vigil service at their respective Cathedrals on Pentecost Sunday, May 23. Priests, religious leaders and laity were invited to attend.

As Catholics, we struggle with feelings of betrayal and mistrust because of the despicable behavior of churchmen complicit in the sexual abuse of minors. Lacking accountability and fostering a cover-up of the abuse, Catholic leadership has failed the Catholic community.

FOSIL members gathered together in a familiar Service of the Word, with song, Scripture readings and prayers of petition. Les Himstedt offered a commentary on the readings.

Our prayer was three-fold. First, to stand in solidarity with all survivors and families of clergy sexual abuse; second, to thank all the priest and religious women and men who serve with integrity as faithful ministers of the gospel; and third, to pray for the courage to continue our efforts to listen to the Spirit within each of us, calling us to speak out with openness and honesty so needed in our Church today. *(Read Les Himstedt's reflection on pages 3 & 4)*



Members and friends of FOSIL on the steps of St. Peter's Cathedral in Belleville, Illinois, for the Pentecost prayer service.

Good Friday Prayer Service



The Good Friday tradition of conducting a prayer service at the Tamms Correctional Facility in Southern Illinois, calling attention to the inhumane and criminal use of capital punishment in our country, was held again this year. Barred from entering the prison grounds, members of FOSIL joined a group of men and women from the Carbondale area on the side of the prison road to pray for the victims of the crimes of the inmates, for family members and friends of the victims, for the prisoners and for an end to capital punishment.

Calling to mind that another group, organized by Kim Diaz in Decatur, IL was praying simultaneously with them, the names of the Illinois prisoners on death row were read. Silence fell upon the group as they reflected on the tragedy of killing convicted men and women in the name of justice.

Guards, driving by to begin or end their prison shift of work, acknowledged the group's presence as they passed by.



PENTECOST REFLECTION

by Les Himstedt

Fear. . . fire. . . noise. . . wind. . . babble, slowly turning to an understandable language. Sounds like a 3-D movie right out of Hollywood, doesn't it. But it's really the story of the early followers of Jesus, a story familiar to all of us, the Pentecost story. It graphically describes the beginning of the early Christian community, first acknowledging the fear that encompassed the disciples after Jesus' Resurrection. Then it shows the Spirit, quickly filling them with the fire that gripped their new-found faith, giving them the courage to go out and preach the Jesus they had begun to know and grown to love.

First came FEAR. We know from our own experience that FEAR always plays a large role in the beginnings of anything new; fear that causes hesitation to do what we know must be done to address the challenges we face. As we reflect on that first Pentecost, we're reminded that the beginning of that small Christian community is not so different from our own experience today. They were challenged to accept in faith that Jesus was indeed risen from the dead, and that the gifts of His Spirit would help them keep the good news of Jesus alive. Our challenge today, as we celebrate the memory of that Pentecost time, is to accept that same Spirit now living within us, so that we, too, like those early disciples, can renew that same gospel spirit within today's faith community.

How often do we hear the question: What are our church leaders afraid of? Why can't they speak openly and honestly in the spirit of gospel truth? But don't we often harbor that same fear in our own hearts, and fail, like our failed leaders, to act as people of faith, fail to preach and teach and make the gospel ring true in our lives? That's our challenge today.

But forget the FEAR. Let's focus on the FIRE, the tongues of fire that hovered above the disciples in the Pentecost story and literally put a fire in their

belly, so they could begin to preach and live the good news.

We saw that same fire in the belly of our church some 50+ years ago as the spirit of the Vatican Council reshaped and renewed our church. Unfortunately, that fire has slowly burned out, becoming no more than a weak ember during the reigns of John Paul II and Benedict. That flame needs to be stoked again, and what better time than on a day when we recall and celebrate the wonder of that first Pentecost.

Remember the noise. . . the wind. . . the babble of voices in that Pentecost story. Isn't it time now for us to accept that Spirit, who will help us be a noisy voice with the mighty breath of the Spirit at our back, giving clarity to the call for renewal.

It's time for the whole church – you, me, the priests and the bishop who presides in this Cathedral, the officials in the Vatican, the entire People of God — to speak out, to speak up. If we don't, they won't!

That Pentecost Spirit must come alive again to renew our Christian community, but this will only happen if we recognize ourselves as 21st century disciples, as legitimate successors of those 1st century disciples. We must believe that we, too, are truly called by the Spirit to dispel all our fears; we must believe that the Spirit still gifts us with the ability to speak up to church leadership and demand again and again that they speak with openness, honesty and integrity just as Jesus taught His early disciples to do.

We cannot simply cower in the face of today's scandalous headlines about clergy abuse, or tremble in the face of autocratic church governance, or tolerate liturgical practice that provides little or no spiritual nourishment. We must speak out, especially in dialogue with our pastors and religious educators, all those who are leaders in our local churches!

The Pentecost message today tells us, very simply, to listen to the Spirit, the Spirit that resides in each of us, and to believe that this spirit will give us the strength to rid our church of fear, that it will gift us again with the courage to give voice to the good news of Jesus.

We've just heard Paul, in his letter to the people of Corinth, remind them that there are many gifts, many different forms of service. The Spirit is not just a 1st century phenomenon. Paul's words are a reminder that today is also the day of our Pentecost, and that the Spirit manifests those gifts in each and every follower of Jesus, even today in the 21st century.

It is in that Spirit that we come together today, as one body in Christ, in common prayer. May the Spirit offer hope for a renewal of our church, for a new Pentecost on this 23rd day of May, 2010. Thank you for joining us today. Please, when you return home, take the Spirit with you.

Les Himstedt is a member of FOSIL's steering committee.

FOSIL PRESENTS

A Vision for Women in the 21st Century Church

with

Sr. Theresa Kane, RSM

One of the most critical issues facing the Church in the 21st Century is the role of women. How the Church deals with the injustice of sexism and discrimination will have a tremendous impact on the future of the Church. Its actions will affect all members, both women and men.

This presentation will focus on a historical perspective of women in light of the patriarchal construct of church and society in which we find ourselves. Addressing some of the past constraints for women and focusing on the developments that have been achieved will be the basis for women to envision a new way of being - in church and in society. It will raise life's quality for all women, and consequently men - universally.



Sunday, October 24, 2010

Hilton Regency Conference Center in O'Fallon, Illinois

Telephone: 618-277-7594 or 618-526-7063

SINGING THE PRAISES OF BISHOP BRAXTON

The National Catholic Reporter (June 11, 2010) carried an article by John Allen on the U.S. “bishops’ informal policy on settling (clergy sexual abuse) claims rather than litigating them, on the theory that fighting all the way to a verdict could result in even more mammoth payouts. . .” While Mr. Allen writes of the emerging moral position that many bishops in the United States are taking, we must not forget the course taken by a courageous bishop in the small, impoverished diocese of Belleville in Southern Illinois.

The Bishop, Edward K. Braxton, boldly sought another course to resolve the clergy sexual abuse problem plaguing our nation, but he has not received the credit he deserves. He has sought an “all or nothing” approach by allowing the first case of clergy sexual abuse to go to trial in the Diocese of Belleville. The “all or nothing” approach he embraced is one of throwing the dice: Either the diocese wins or the victim of clergy sexual abuse loses or vice versa. There would be no win/win in his diocese!

Bishop Braxton’s throw of the dice resulted in a huge loss for the diocese: a \$5,000,000 verdict, \$2,600,000 of it **punitive damages** for the diocese’s cover-up of Father Kownacki’s criminal sexual assaults — numerous youngsters, in at least six parishes, over more than two decades. Bishop Braxton remained steadfastly undeterred, throwing the dice again by appealing the \$5,000,000 judgment. If Bishop Braxton won this time, it would be on the “technicality” that the Statutes of Limitations won out over the cover-up of Father Kownacki’s crimes. Now if Bishop Braxton lost, the diocese would be required to pay an additional \$900,000 in accrued interest, almost certainly forcing the diocese into bankruptcy. Diocesan assets would then be sold to satisfy creditors, including other clergy sexual abuse victims whose cases are moving through the civil courts.

We must salute Bishop Braxton for this bravado in taking this course of action! He has

the courage to go against other bishops who bundled all their dioceses’ clergy sexual abuse cases and sought global settlements. So why sing the praises of Bishop Braxton? Because he is willing to buck the tide of these conscientious bishops and roll the dice with diocesan assets, taking these assets to the Casino and betting everything on the roll of the dice. Sure he lost on the first roll, but what if he defies the improbable odds and wins the second roll, the appeal. If he wins, he will be the hero who had the courage to gamble everything. The diocese will keep its money!

Those who question the wisdom of Bishop Braxton recognize that the victim too gambled, but lost. He gambled that the shepherd of Belleville would recognize the enormity of the diocese’s sins and compensate him for his suffering. The victim gambled that, while he could never be made whole, his life would be more comfortable if he were compensated for the terrible wrongs of his parish priest.

We praise Bishop Braxton for the approach he has taken and salute him for his bravado. We must not forget how truly courageous he really was. Like a good gambler he did not flinch when told in February 2008 that the trial would begin August 18. Faced with overwhelming evidence against the diocese, he did not flinch. He could have shown weakness by cancelling his month long vacation to Paris during August; could have sought settlement for an amount the diocese could afford; could have even bundled the four other major claims of sexual abuse against the diocese and sought a global settlement for an amount less than the \$5,000,000 verdict on one case; could have spared the diocese the ugly and devastating testimony of Father Kownacki’s sexual abuse and the diocese’s cover up of his crimes and the victim would have received fair compensation. But he

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did not buckle! No weak-kneed man is this Bishop Edward K. Braxton!

Following the \$5,000,000 verdict, the second of four additional clergy sexual abuse cases was nearing trial. The attorney representing the victim in the first case had sought settlement for his four remaining clients. Bishop Braxton stood his ground and refused to consider bundling the cases for a global settlement. But plaintiff's attorney had found Bishop Braxton's Achilles' heel, a Motion for an Order of Contempt filed against the diocese for failing to hand over certain documents ordered released by the judge. Plaintiff's attorney requested a court order requiring Bishop Braxton to give a deposition under oath. The deposition would focus on documents that had been ordered released but were not. Questions would be asked about Bishop Braxton's role in this further cover up. If he were found to have violated the judge's order, he could have been held in contempt of court.

Before the court order was obtained, Bishop Braxton sent his vicar general to seek a settlement for this victim, identical in all respects to the case resulting in the \$5,000,000 verdict, and settled for \$1,200,000. Some were critical of Bishop Braxton for not settling the first case. After all, he could have saved the diocese a minimum of \$3,800,000.00. But those who are critical do not

understand Bishop Braxton. He was forced to settle the second case because he could have been required to give incriminating answers to questions about the diocese and his role in failing to play fair in the second case awaiting trial. Furthermore, if Bishop Braxton were required to answer questions, he might appear to be subject to the law. \$1,200,000 should not be considered compensation for the victim. It should be considered for what it was: a small price for the diocese to pay for Bishop Braxton to maintain his image and his independence.

We must not forget that, whether or not Bishop Braxton loses the appeal and bankrupts the diocese in the second throw of the dice, he will roll the dice at least three more times as the remaining three clergy sexual abuse cases work their way through the court system. Two involve the cover-up of Father Kownacki's crimes against other youths, the other involves another diocesan priest. What courage it must take to gamble against such formidable odds!

To those who ask where Bishop Braxton will go after he depletes the patrimony of the Belleville diocese and completely demoralizes the presbyterate and laity who have worked here for so long, they must be told that we cannot selfishly hope to hold on to him forever. There are other dioceses for him to serve.

FOSIL meets the second Tuesday of each month at 7:00 PM. Meeting places vary - please call 618-277-7594 for location. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

FAITHFUL OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS
P.O Box 31, Belleville, Illinois 62222
Telephone: 618-277-7594
Website: www.FOSILONLINE.com

IN MEMORIAM

We lovingly remember Marilyn Hebenstreit who entered her new life in God on January 22, 2010.



As a member of FOSIL's Steering Committee, Marilyn was committed to the mission of FOSIL, always seeking ways to establish a Church of openness, integrity, accountability and justice.

Women of The Word. . . continued

