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»A pastoral message from the bishop
Expressing the sorrow of the Church

In 1960, in McAllen, Texas, a young woman named Irene Garza was murdered. An ex-priest has now been found guilty of the crime. When I heard about the verdict, I thought of Irene. I hoped that the justice system had worked. I prayed there might be some peace for her family and those who knew and loved her.

As a Catholic, as bishop of this local church, and as a human being I am horrified by this. The suffering caused to so many by this crime is incalculable. In a real way the whole Rio Grande Valley feels again, after 57 years, the desire to accompany the sorrow of Irene Garza’s family and friends. I certainly have this desire, and as bishop I carry the whole Church with me in expressing it. On behalf of the Church, for the sinful actions of members of the Church, I express this sorrow to the family, and to those whose faith has been injured by these events.

I have no reason to doubt the integrity of the verdict, nor the just motives of those arguing the case. I hope and pray that any persons who may have contributed to the crime or acted improperly or unworthily in its aftermath, whether in the Church or not, take responsibility for the great evil done. They should seek repentance before God, before they are called to the Final Judgment.

During the trial some evidence was entered that suggested that there were efforts in 1960 involving persons in the Church, politicians, law enforcement and the courts to hide the now-convicted man’s guilt. The Diocese of Brownsville did not exist back then and I have no special insight into what was done or not done by civil and Church authorities in the aftermath of the crime. And answers to many questions about what people around the investigation were thinking and doing in 1960 were not given in the verdict.

Nevertheless, I am deeply grieved at the thought that political and religious struggles, competing interests vying for advantage, were at play as decisions were being made on how to proceed with the case. Whatever factors contributed to the 57-year delay in reaching a verdict in this case, Irene Garza, her family, and the whole Rio Grande Valley deserved better than that.

Pope Saint John Paul II expressed sorrow on several occasions, on behalf of the Church, for members of the Church in the past who sinned grievously, and who failed to live in fidelity to the Gospel they were called to serve. In expressing such sorrow the pope was not invoking a banal idea of collective guilt, for the Church does not believe we can blame a body of people across history for the actions of some members of the body in the past. Rather, within this
sorrow of the Church is a sense that we are in some way mysteriously connected, both as Christians and as human beings, and that the sins of some injure and profoundly wound us all. The Valley was a different place in 1960, but that does not excuse sin. For us, 57 years later, we should pursue justice more conscientiously and we should ask God’s mercy on those who have gone before us.

Today especially people are suspicious of collusion. Collusion is possible in any era, and not just the kind alleged in 1960 between law enforcement and Church authorities. We hear allegations and counter-allegations of such things every day in the national media. Deep down we all realize that the temptations of power and control are ancient and deeply rooted in the wounded human condition. And although I think here in the Valley and in the Church we are more vigilant against the temptations of power and influence, we must always be realistic about its lure. It was one of the principal temptations that the devil proposed to Jesus in the desert. He rejected it, and so must we.

The remedy today involves creating institutional cultures that put people, justice and truth before institutional concerns. But, even more importantly, it involves a formation of personal conscience in the grace of authentic humility and in principles of justice. In the end, only the good consciences of people within a community, especially its leaders, can protect the community from the temptations of power.

As an institution many steps toward greater accountability and transparency have been mandated by the Church in the United States. The Dallas Charter of 2002 is an example. Many institutional reforms of a similar nature have been instituted worldwide. But we kid ourselves if we think only better procedures are needed. In the Church we need men and women of good and faithful conscience to see that they are put into practice. This is also true of the institutional world apart from the Church, be it the world of schools, government, law enforcement, the courts, entertainment industries, banks and financial institutions, and the news media. They all also need policy procedures that better promote justice, accountability and transparency. But they too need conscientious people operating their institutions.

People who are not even believers in any religion expect more from the Church than from other institutions. And rightly so. The Church founded by Christ, though, is not a one-dimensional or purely institutional reality. The Church has from the beginning had great sinners in it, and great saints as well. The reality of the Church in the world is marked by the mystery of sin and grace. The Lord was betrayed by one of his intimate disciples. In a way, when we hear and read about great evil done in the past or the present, we become more aware also of how great is the love that moved Christ Jesus to die and rise for us, of how much he bears when in love he bears with us.

This moment calls for the local Church to acknowledge humbly that great evil is possible even for individuals in our midst who live in close proximity to the mysteries of God’s holiness and mercy. Yet, we cannot become cynical either, for that is to give in to the thought that holiness is not really possible in this life. Holiness and the personal integrity that comes with it is possible, but it is not something automatic just because we do certain things, or hold certain offices or responsibilities in the Church.

We have to pray and work to live the grace of the Gospel at all times. The authentic witness of holiness in ordinary Catholics has always been the only real credibility of the Church. We fail often, but I think that even many people outside the Church see extraordinary goodness in the
witness of believers. In a sin-ridden world, sin should not surprise us near as much as holiness does. I think of humble Christian souls who today are living lives of selfless charity serving the poor in remote places. I think of many powerless Christians who face persecution and hatred across the world. The Church is credible in her saints and in the hope we sinners have that with God’s grace we can become saints.

The Gospel addresses the deepest wounds and the deepest hopes of the human heart. Without the Gospel, neither sin nor justice nor mercy are really understood. This thought should draw us closer to the mystery of the Cross, for Christ died so that repentance might flourish, sins be forgiven, and justice be renewed on the face of the earth.

The grace of God can never be taken for granted. Let us all attend to the call of our consciences in everyday life, seek repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Power will not save us. It is illusory. Humility, justice and mercy are the saving graces that flow from the Gospel and the Sacraments. Let us ask for them. And let us all regard with renewed respect those who suffer great pain during these days.

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