

Chrism Mass 2002

Yesterday, on Palm Sunday we heard the powerful narrative of the Passion according to St. Matthew. There the evangelist told us just what it meant for Jesus in taking up his cross and, therefore, what it can mean for us to take up the cross to follow him.

For Jesus, it meant being betrayed by one who broke bread with him at table.

Taking up the cross for Jesus meant being denied by Peter who, only a short time before, said, "Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be."

For Jesus, taking up the cross meant that he was willing to let go of his own desires and be about the will of the Father. He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will but as you will." "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

Jesus was betrayed and denied. He was willing to let go of us own desires to be about the will of the Father. We are called to do the same.

As Catholic Christians, we see our values often betrayed and denied. I think two strengths that we need at this time are anger and courage.

Anger is appropriate when others call a child a choice, and an unborn child a fetus.

You can be angry when syringes intended to be instruments of healing are developed into instruments of death, be it by state-sponsored capital punishment or drug overdoses. It is right to be angry when those who hijacked a plane on September 11 tried also to hijack a religion of peace.

Anger is appropriate because then our nation lost its innocence, and innocents lost

their lives on that blue September morning.

You are, and you should be angry at the abuse of alcohol in college settings and in private homes, violating the minds and bodies of those who drink as well as causing violence to the safety of others on the road.

There is our appropriate anger at those who through television, cable, the Internet and mass-marketed videos infect the fabric of society with the poison of pornography. Individuals, relationships and families are destroyed often in a soulless drive for financial profit.

We are angry when persons in the Church, be they priests or teachers or ecclesial lay ministers abuse children and young people. My heart, indeed all our hearts, ache for those who are victims of abuse. Turning our anger into action will require courage.

Courage comes from the Latin word for heart. To have courage means to be strong of heart. Today we are called to be a courageous people of God. We are called to be courageous with our lives.

Priesthood takes a certain kind of courage, especially in the face of the misunderstandings so current in our culture. For example, celibacy is an issue totally unrelated to the sexual abuse of minors: some 90% of such abusers are married people, abusing other family members. Another misunderstanding surrounds the cases of 15 years and more ago: at that time the mental health experts and religious leaders were just beginning to grasp the terrible impact abuse had on the little ones. Hindsight helps us to see the damage done, but it should also guide us to judge more fairly those who made decisions based on faulty knowledge both about that damage and the near impossibility of changing course on the part of the offenders.

These are difficult times to be Catholic.

The Church has faced difficult times in the past, as well.

And throughout 2000 years, whenever the Church has faced great difficulty, God has raised up people who were faithful servants, willing to transform the world by following Jesus in bringing the gospel to the poor. Often their lives helped transform the Church as well - witness St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Bridget of Sweden, St. Ignatius Loyola, and St. Teresa of Avila, to name a few.

In every age, the Church has had faithful Christians who, by the grace of God, lived with fidelity to