



## *Rivers in the desert . . .*

The news the last couple of weeks has been filled with reports from Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Vatican about the clergy sex-abuse scandal that is rocking the Roman Catholic Church. And, of course, we've seen similar reports in the United States in recent years. Blame is cast about; responsibility denied or diverted. Suspicion is high. Confidence in leadership is low. It is very sad. And, it is all too human, while being found in an

institution that claims a divine foundation. Unfortunately, the Catholic Church is not alone in the public airing of its dirty linens. Protestant Christianity has its problems, as does Islam, as does Judaism, Hinduism . . . and so it goes. I think it was Ghandi who said something like, "I don't have a problem with Christianity, it's Christians that are the problem." The same sentiment can easily be passed around the religious world.

But what I want to focus on this afternoon are not necessarily the institutional problems, but rather the human tragedies. One of the reports out of Ireland, after Pope Benedict issued his apology for the scandal there, was that there was no mention of disciplining those responsible. How, if at all, that will be handled is certainly up to the Vatican. But the image of a "desert" seems apt to describe the feelings of those affected by this problem. What had been, for many, a very fruitful, verdant (especially when thinking of the Emerald Isle) faith has lost much of its nourishment. "Was there any truth at all?" is a question that floats around, as well as "what are you going to do about it?". What I hear underneath the question about "discipline" is a longing for some kind of "river" in the "desert" that is now their Church.

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah provided a message of hope for his people as they had languished in exile in Babylon: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (Is 43:18-19). Certainly the Jews have not forgotten "the former things"; nor will religious folks who've been touched by scandals within their traditions forget. What we all want is for the past not to dictate or control the future. We want errors acknowledged, but then a way forward. We want our "deserts" watered; the hope of vitality restored.

This passage from Isaiah formed the basis of meditation for me earlier this week, especially the phrase "rivers in the desert". I began to wonder what is my "desert", and what would water it? My thoughts then turned to those around me: what are my wife's and my children's "deserts"? Do I know? Or do I only suspect? And if I don't know, can I really help provide the right "water" to help (insofar as it is in my power to do so)? It seems to me that often the kinds of apologies that get issued misunderstand the human hurt, and only address the offense. That's what I see in the Irish situation: the "desert" has been misunderstood. And the proposed response, thus, inadequate.

May we take some time in our meditations from time to time to reflect on our deserts, our dry, parched, thirsty places -- as well as of those around us. And then to go a bit deeper and ask what would REALLY quench the thirst, not merely rearrange the sand or put up a sun shade.

Blessings,

Gary

PS: To my Christian brothers and sisters, may the upcoming Holy Week be, for you, a rich time of prayer and reflection. And, to my Jewish brothers and sisters, may the coming Passover be a joyous time of celebration of deliverance and freedom!