



Letter
to a
Suffering
Church

A BISHOP SPEAKS ON THE
SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

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PREPARATION GUIDELINES

1. *Set the date and time for the discussion group*

- Allow 2-3 weeks for parishioners to complete the book after distribution.
- Discussion is designed to last about two hours with only one meeting to discuss the entire book.
- In the announcement of or the invitation to the discussion, include a statement of purpose and stress the proper tone for the discussion (see Introduction to the Discussion below).

2. *Choosing a group discussion leader*

After individually reading *Letter to a Suffering Church*, the pastor and parish staff should discuss who is the “right” leader for this discussion, as not every good adult formation leader is equipped for this sensitive topic.

Some characteristics to consider when choosing a leader:

- Compassionate and an empathetic listener
- Courageous enough to allow participants to honestly reveal their thoughts and emotions, and support them as they share
- Able to redirect discussion if it gets heated, overly emotional, or unduly focused on a “quick fix” solution (see suggestions below)
- Willing to not lecture or give his/her own “solution”
- Experience with leading retreats, if possible
- Experience with pastoral counseling, if possible

3. *Leader prompts/guidelines for difficult issues that may arise:*

If a victim of abuse (or a loved one of a victim) becomes emotional or “triggered” by the discussion:

- Listen with respect and empathy.
- Be prepared; if small water bottles are not available for all participants, make sure a

pitcher of fresh water and some disposable cups are handy. Offering water has a calming effect and permits the person a moment to regain composure. Also provide an accessible box of tissues.

- Use this opportunity to remind the room that suffering is universal to all of us, and that we are able to both join our suffering to Christ's and bear witness to each other, in the same way that Mary, St. John, and Mary Magdalene were unflinching in their witness at the foot of the Cross.
- Suggest that even in these difficult moments, grace is at work in helping to heal and unify the Church, beginning in this small personal encounter with another's experience. Invite everyone into a moment of prayer for the person who is upset, and for the Church as the Body of Christ. Acknowledge, "Lord, the one you love is in pain . . ."
- In leading the prayer, call on the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to guide you; intone an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and a Glory Be for the intentions of all there.
- After prayer, help redirect focus on the question at hand or, if that seems problematic, move on to the next question.

If the subject begins to veer into "quick fix" and "if only" solutions that can both create tension and seriously derail the discussion:

It is important to note how a "quick fix" oversimplifies the issue. This statement is a good summary of the complexity of the issue (feel free to read it verbatim):

"The great sin of abuse is rooted in a disordered desire for power, sought through the objectification of another human being. This is a direct negation of the innate dignity bestowed upon each of us when we are loved into creation by God. It is a sin that not only takes away the agency of another but in so doing shatters the soul. Therefore, it is an intensely grave offense against "the one God loves" (which is any of us)—sin beyond simple lust, greed, pride, wrath, possibly combining all such deadly sins."

If possible, consider—in the prayer that opens the session you are leading—including a request to the Holy Spirit that the group may not be led into distractions or into any illusion that "quick fixes" can resolve the human complexities before us as individual persons and as a Church.

While these issues should be permitted mention, the best way to keep the study group focused and well-directed is to try to dissuade extensive discussion about arguments that are, in the end, futile, unproductive, and distracting, and that could cause the meeting to become derailed.

Response to “If only they’d let priests marry”:

Remind the room that marriage is not a solution to the issue of sexual abuse. Countless children have been sexually abused by family members, married and unmarried. While it is terrible to acknowledge that abuse by priests occurs in a similar percentage as abuse within the general public, this fact confirms that celibacy does not markedly increase the incidence of abuse. (See the John Jay study, commissioned by the USCCB, on the issue of abuse in the Catholic Church: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/the-nature-and-scope-of-sexual-abuse-of-minors-by-catholic-priests-and-deacons-in-the-united-states-1950-2002.pdf>.)

If necessary, remind attendees that every life oftentimes involves periods of celibacy, and those periods do not immediately turn people toward the abuse of children or others.

Response to “If only women were ordained to the priesthood”:

Without permitting the issue to become the focal point of your discussion, first remind attendees that the issue of female ordination—whatever may be privately thought among the participants—has been taken off the table by pronouncements by John Paul II, and even recently by Pope Francis. Second, note that this stance is extremely peripheral to the discussion at hand, because an easy Google search will bring up numerous headlines of sexual abuse by women—not only among female religious orders but also within public schools, where female teachers are increasingly being arrested and charged with the crime of sexual exploitation of students.

Mention that the disordered desire to control or wield power over others is not exclusive to males; it is a disorder of the human mind, heart, and soul, rooted in something deeper than sex or gender.

Gently lead the discussion back to the idea of focusing on what may practically, immediately, and realistically be done, by the laity in partnership with the Church, to bring about healing and accountability within the Mystical Body of Christ.

Response to “If only all homosexual priests were ousted”:

While acknowledging that the majority of abuse cases roiling the Church have certainly involved homosexual activity, and that this is a dimension of the sexual abuse crisis worth looking into, it is also important to remember that the teaching of the Church is that same-sex attraction is not, in and of itself, sinful. The Catechism urges respect for all people and

dissuades us from scapegoating others or presuming to know the state of anyone's soul. Consider suggesting that, for all the terrible stories we hear, we do not hear about the faithful and pastoral priests whose orientation is known to God alone, and who strive to minister to the Body of Christ while enduring thorns in the side about which none of us may guess.

Emphasize that prayers for the sake of all priests and seminarians should be included in our daily prayers to ensure that our priests, and those considering the priesthood, are strong men of faith, reliant each day upon the grace of God, and that they may function beyond their own natures, insecurities, and temptations, which are not limited to same-sex attraction.

Ask whether getting to know our priests better might be a constructive way to keep priests from feeling victimized by loneliness and exclusion. Suggest socializing with them or inviting them to dinner or to a community event. Also, suggest that they ponder and seek to understand the nature of spiritual friendship, to which we are all called, in order to better assist those priests who are as tempted as any of us toward sin yet remain faithful to their priestly identity.

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GROUP DISCUSSION

(~2 hours)

Introduction to the Discussion

1. Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to join the group and provide wisdom and prudence to all.

2. Share these two quotes that will help set the tone:

- Referring to the parables that tell stories of good fish mixed with bad in any fishing net or weeds mixed with wheat in a field, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said in his recent letter on the sex abuse scandal: “Even today the Church is not just made up of bad fish and weeds. The Church of God also exists today, and today it is the very instrument through which God saves us. It is very important to oppose the lies and half-truths of the devil with the whole truth: Yes, there is sin in the Church and evil. But even today there is the Holy Church, which is indestructible.”
- Blessed John Henry Newman said, “Learn to do thy part and leave the rest to Heaven.”

3. Confirm that everyone has read the book. If someone has not yet completed it, that is fine, but encourage them to complete it later.

4. State the purpose of the discussion:

- To reflect on and understand Bishop Barron’s book on this difficult and sensitive topic.
- To openly discuss the scandal and try to find a way forward personally. (We’re not an advisory committee to the Pope or to any bishops and not able to “solve the problem” here.)
- To remember the dignity and worth in Christ of all those gathered. Refrain from judging others, and speak with loving respect to all as brothers and sisters in Christ.



PART 1: *Questions for Discussion (45-60 min)*

1. Bishop Barron believes that the sexual abuse crisis is a “diabolical masterpiece.” Do you agree or disagree? How does the devil work to draw us all away from God? What is required of us for him to succeed?
2. Compare the accounts of sexual dysfunction and past Church scandals detailed in Bishop Barron’s book to the current abuse crisis. What are the similarities and differences? What lessons are evident from our past?
3. Is the difference in the number of offenses before and after the establishment of the Dallas protocols in 2002 meaningful to you? Why or why not?
4. How do you define the Church: Mystical Body or human institution? How does your definition of the Church affect your view of and faithfulness to the Church? How does it affect your actions going forward?
5. When we consider that sexual abuse and objectification happen not only in the priesthood but in scouting, in public schools, and in homes with intact families, “quick fix” solutions to the crisis seem inadequate. What can we say to those who are certain that permitting priests to marry, ordaining women, or barring all homosexuals from the priesthood will solve the crisis?



PART 2: *My Involvement in the Way Forward (Meditation and Reflection)*

Guided Meditation (30 min): Ask your group to get into a comfortable position, relax, and even close their eyes. Then ask them to concentrate on listening and making “word pictures” in their minds from what you say.

Read John 5:2-7:

“Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep Gate, a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes. In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be well?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me.’”

Read:

The first-century Jews among whom Jesus walked believed that an angel would stir the Bethesda pools in Jerusalem and, from that stirring, healing would come to those ready and able to reach the waters.

Now imagine those pools surrounded by the people of God who are the earthly Church today, each of us bearing a portion of the wounds that have beset the whole Mystical Body from the crisis.

- What are you bearing as a result of the crisis? *(Pause)*
- How are you personally wounded? Name your hurt. *(Pause to allow the formation of an answer in their minds.)*
- Walk into the water, taking that wound or hurt with you. Can you feel God's love and mercy in the pool? *(Pause.)* Release your hurt into the water of God's love and trust that he is with you. *(Pause.)*
- How do you feel when you emerge from the water?
- Now look around you; see the people so burdened by their victimhood, or their pain, or their anger, or even by their indifference, that they will never reach the healing waters on their own. Sometimes full-scale evangelization looks like just such a careful and persistent assistance, a step-by-step accompaniment meant to help someone reach the living water of Christ and be made free.
- Who will you help? Who will you bring closer to the pool, bit by bit, until when next the angel stirs the waters, they will—perhaps with your further assistance—finally be able to reach in and participate in the healing?
- See that person in your mind's eye. How can you help?

NOTE TO LEADER: You can choose to lead one or both of these personal reflections during the group, as time permits. Or participants can complete one or both at home. It would be helpful to print this page with the two reflections for participants to take home, even if you do them as a group, to encourage continued prayer and reflection.

Personal Reflection #1 (20 min)

Often, I feel at a loss to understand how I, as a lay person, might participate in the healing of the Church. Bishop Barron suggests that the awful realities before us mean that, for love of Christ, each of us must dedicate ourselves to a forthright and unstinting examination of the collective failures, weaknesses, and blind spots that have helped bring us to this moment of necessary intervention.

Can any of us doubt that at this moment, God's purposes are calling us to access our rich spiritual heritage with our whole hearts, minds, and bodies—to work within the supernatural channels of sacraments and grace available to all of us, with the specific intention of healing the wounds that are so depleting the life force of our shared Body?

Could the answer be as simple as prayer, fasting, penances, devotions—those “obvious” things—undertaken in complete trust that God will use them rightly and justly according to God's perfect understanding (and not my own) of what is truly right and just?

- Aside from those investigatory and procedural reforms now being addressed by bishops (which Bishop Barron mentions in his Letter to a Suffering Church), what sort of specific actions might I take?
- What part might I play in fostering a united effort, shared by laity and the clergy alike, to build a vibrant and energetic solidarity within the Body of Christ?
- Am I willing to encourage my pastor and bishop in leading parishes in Eucharistic processions, benedictions, and other devotions?

Personal Reflection #2 (20 min)

If human cooperation is necessary for the devil to accomplish his purposes, it is also necessary for the power of the Holy Spirit to become unleashed and made manifest. Without priests we cannot be a Eucharistic and sacramental Church; but our power as the baptized laity is real, and it resides within the Body of Christ.

- How often have I prayed for the intentions and the spiritual health of the celebrant when I attend Mass?
- What have I done to promote vocations to the priesthood in my personal life?
- Would I want to see a son of mine pursue such a calling at this time? If not, what might change that feeling?
- Can more lay involvement into the formation of priests promote the health and security of young men entering the seminary? What might that look like?
- How committed am I to praying daily for every member of the clergy that they become reacquainted with and rededicated to the still, small voice that first called them to the priesthood?