

In church's blistering summer, signs of a rebuilding church

By Father Eric J. Banecker • Posted September 7, 2018



On my way into church to celebrate Mass the other day, I noticed a small blade of grass newly peeking out from the ground. It's been hot this August, but not hot enough, *Deo gratias*, to prevent new life.

In some ways, that's an apt image for this summer of our discontent. The heat at times has been blistering and endless: Chile, McCarrick, Honduras, more McCarrick, Pennsylvania grand jury, seminaries, McCarrick again, Vigano.

Thus, as our children return to school and religious education programs, the question becomes: is there any shade? Is there any shelter from these terrible revelations? Can parents really trust clerics to protect their children?

I believe we are experiencing a powerful storm, one which can be frightening and damaging, but one which is necessary to attain the peace and tranquility we desire in the Church. And in the midst of this storm, I'd like to address a specific question that has been raised in the midst of all this: the accusation that Catholic seminaries in the United States are not healthy places.

A recent news article referenced an allegation made by a former seminarian at St. Charles Borromeo in Wynnewood about inappropriate behavior which he experienced there. Having not been a seminarian when the alleged incident took place, I cannot comment on that, except to say that I am sorry that he experienced such things which have no place in a seminary.

Sexual misconduct – whether harassment or outright abuse – is abhorrent and should be addressed and prosecuted if it rises to the level of a crime.

My concern, instead, is more with his characterization of the environment at St. Charles Seminary as “toxic.” Now on this topic I can speak a bit more clearly, having spent the last six years as a student there before being ordained by Archbishop Chaput in May.

During my time at St. Charles, I had the opportunity to meet some of the finest men I know. They've served in Iraq and worked in the intelligence community. They've taught, worked in business, and traveled the world. Men studying there now have received degrees in everything from engineering to medicine from fine schools. Some could easily be professional musicians or chefs. And yet all of them accepted the call of Jesus Christ to study for his priesthood. Having lived with these men over the years, I can testify to their strength of character and desire for holiness.

Of course, there are no perfect seminaries, just like there are no perfect seminarians. Yet I would say that the “culture” of St. Charles, due to the fine men who study there, is healthy and vibrant. So many people who interact with the community regularly would testify to the same fact.

Far from “toxic,” I would characterize my experience at the seminary as *edifying* and *life-giving*. I say this not to diminish in any way the scandalous behavior of some, but simply to point out that the *dominant culture* of St. Charles is one that Catholics can be proud of. From my experience of other seminaries and young priests, I think the same can be said of the vast majority of seminaries and religious communities today.

We cannot lose sight of many signs of coming renewal, both among clergy and laity, even in the midst of these storm clouds: The Thomistic Institute, FOCUS, the Leonine Forum; countless solid ac-

ademic programs, both in established Catholic schools, newer ones, and even in secular campuses like Penn; young urban-dwellers and dynamic families finding new ways to share Catholic life amid a hostile culture.

These new movements, as well as the renewal of traditional structures, represent the building blocks of the rebuilt Church, rising even now from the ashes of an era that is ending. Just like Benedict after the fall of Rome, just like Francis and Dominic, just like Catherine, and just like Ignatius: in every era of crisis in the Church and the world, the Holy Spirit opens up the windows so that cataclysm may give way to radical re-commitment to the Gospel.

None of this will be easy, of course. Living the Gospel with all of its implications never is – that’s why the figures I just mentioned, along with so many others like Mother Theresa – are so significant. That’s what *heroic virtue* is. But such a life is not dour, boring, and lifeless. In fact, it is the fullness of what it means to be human!

Pope Benedict XVI reminded the Church of that at his installation Mass as pope: “Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that he might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? ... No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great.”

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