

May 23, 2007 - Doing what Jesus would do

By Leslie Hittner, Winona Daily News (MN)

Winona - I was pleased to see Darrell Ehrlick's editorial asking for The Diocese of Winona to reconcile its past performance with respect to the priestly sexual abuse scandal and to be accountable for the injustices it has done in "spiritually aborting" abuse victims in order to protect its clergy.

I was at St. John the Evangelist Church in Rochester, Minn., in January and heard Bishop Bernard Harrington preach a homily concerning the poor and disenfranchised people in society and the important role the church plays in helping these people. It is a social justice role in which the church can rightfully be proud.

In his homily, he spoke of a recent instance of the church's social justice advocacy; his response to the federal immigration agent raids in southwestern Minnesota. The bishop told us of his special trip to Worthington, Minn., to listen to and talk with the Hispanic population in that area. He publicized that trip as well as his efforts to raise money to assist these unfortunate people.

However, during his homily, I found myself wondering how it is that the church can openly and publicly reach out to people who have been wronged by the federal government and yet remain closed and secret about the wrong of sexual abuse of the church's own youngest members by the priests and hierarchy? Why is it that he has been unwilling to speak with these unfortunates in the same open and inviting manner? Why is it that he has been unwilling to confront this wrong, being committed inside the church, in the same way he confronted the Immigration Service? Why is it that he resists committing financial resources to righting this wrong?

At the conclusion of his homily, Harrington asked us in effect to join the church and to question social justice issues that we see around us and then to ask ourselves "What would Jesus do?"

I thought about that for a moment and nearly did what I thought Jesus would do. I nearly stood up. I nearly said "This is wrong!"

I nearly screamed, "How can you and the church dare to sweep social wrongs committed by priests and covered up by the hierarchy under the carpet below the crucifix?"

I decided to take the bishop up on his plea. I decided to do what Jesus would do and I began by writing letters to Harrington. After writing four letters over a period of three months, I finally received an acknowledgement. Harrington would be willing to meet with me and listen to my personal story.

We did meet in early April. I assured Harrington that I did not have a personal story. I assured him that I had not been abused by a priest. I assured him that to the best of my knowledge neither of my children had been abused by a priest. I told him that I came as a Catholic to express my concern that the church has lost its way. I told him that I feared that with respect to the sexual abuse scandal the leaders of the church were listening to their lawyers and that they were not "Doing what Jesus would do." Harrington — with a mask of benevolence on his face — merely listened.

Harrington's mask came off only once, when he expressed frustration with a comment I made concerning an ongoing lawsuit involving abuse, cover-up, murder and suicide. He then put his mask back on.

Priestly sexual abuse is bad enough. However, the cover-up of the abuse is worse.

I'm not sure if Harrington really heard me. I appreciated that he was willing to meet with me, but until the Diocese of Winona gives us all the news rather than attempting to control the news, reconciliation won't happen.

It's time the cover-up ended. It's time the church did what Jesus would do.