For almost 40 years of my preaching, I’ve tried hard to stay away from singular pronouns. I try not to talk about *I*, *me* or *my*. Instead, I try to preach about *we*, and *us*; because I’m one of you, as wounded or as healed as the next. But this weekend, I need to shift my approach and share with you some of *my* thoughts, and *where I stand*. It’s simply time.

During these weeks, there are two questions that have continued to surface in my mind as “fake news” has shifted to become “*bad news*” which doesn’t seem to stop unfolding:

**How did we get here?** and

**How will we get out of this horrific mess?**

First there was the news about Cardinal McCarrick. I had heard stories about him as a seminarian in Rome those 40 years ago; about his nephews (when he was an only child!) and even I knew that his “activities” continued. No, I didn’t know so much about his sick pursuing of young men, but I knew how he misused power; how he manipulated others by making promises or threats. How he took vast sums of money to Rome (and those stories are yet to surface!) in order to influence who he would promote to the next position of power and rank.

**Where was the Holy Spirit in *that* I wondered?** That was sick enough, but then, the Grand Jury report from Pennsylvania was released.

Not only has the news been shocking, vulgar, sinfully dark, but so has the “double speak” by many Church leaders calling “*you* to prayer and repentance” “*you* to action”. The pronouns are all wrong; somehow the speakers and writers are pointing their fingers outward (at others!) and not inward…claiming their own part in the misuse of power and the keeping of secrets. …

I’m ashamed to say that I’ve heard remarkably few simple statements of “*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*” “*through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault*” from our shepherds.

Robert Putnam published a book in 2010 called *American Grace*. He describes a phenomenon that you have certainly encountered: Disenfranchised folks who define themselves by saying: “I’m a *believer, not a* belonger”.

As Catholics, we are not *one or the other*, we are *both*. We believe *and* we belong. No matter the darkness of sin that we struggle through .. even when it’s like the thickest mud, I must say… somehow,

*I still believe and belong.*

An accusation was made against a priest I know not long ago. He had been accused by a disturbed man… Ordained for 40 years; and called the Diocese to ask for help. The Diocesan
attorney told him “You need to hire your own attorney Father; your interest and ours are not the same.” The Diocese to which he had given 40 years of his life in ministry? The stipend he received hardly allowed him to pay for insurance, much less save for retirement or an attorney. A whole year passed...as his life was put on hold, and then it was decided that there was no credible accusation. Where was the Shepherd, where the Church? Sadly, during my past year, I learned that lesson too...I heard little if anything from the Diocese or any of its’ leaders.

I think that the Mormons labor under a number of myths and misconceptions, but they understand belonging; perhaps better than we Catholics do. Once a Mormon, always a Mormon. If you walk away, or if you choose to leave the community, you are still a Mormon. You can count on their help no matter what! They understand belonging.

Sadly, the hierarchy doesn’t seem to...but, no matter how I’m treated by the Church I’m a part of, I am both a believer and a belonger. No matter what....When Peter was asked by Jesus: “Do you also want to leave?” Peters’ response was “Master, to whom shall we go?” Like Peter, I’m a believer and a belonger. … to whom else shall I go?

We got here because individuals in positions of leadership and power made decisions to misuse the seductive nature of their position and their influence, their power... (...and not just in the Roman Catholic Church!) Let’s name it: Bishops today are like Popes in their Diocese. There is no way to challenge them, much less correct them. If bishops need more money for programs or staff, they simply “tax” us; or do another appeal, …and to raise that money we parish priests need to beg for and count on your generosity.

I believe that the Church hierarchy (that we have supported!) has failed us miserably. What group or corporation that you know of, would, in this sort of crisis wait till November to address it? A friend said: Call them from their holidays with chilled white wine and sumptuous meals…to deal with it now! The victims of their abuse face brokenness daily, a brokenness of spirit that can never seem to heal. Thousands, tens of thousands? Millions? And the shepherds wait to respond???

I need a break from their delay tactics, their excuses, and their demonstrations of power, their finger pointing and their demands. The misuse of power must stop. The keeping of secrets and of their protecting of each other must stop. I’ve suffered enough abuse, from priests, from Bishops, from prejudice right here in our tiny town. I need time to focus on where I belong, right here, where my beliefs are nurtured and strengthened: right here at this altar, in this space, with you, my parishioners, my brothers, my sisters.

Why... Because I believe and I belong. We are people that come here week after week because we are fragile; we must be together to come stumbling to this altar... to draw strength from one another and from the Lord we receive.
The same patterns, the same gestures... week after week, are the stuff of the comfort of ritual; we practice them because they help define us. The gestures remind us that we belong. The actions of offering a gesture of peace, of presenting simple gifts of bread and wine, of generously giving a part of our hard earned sustenance ... that's how we are defined.

Last year in July, I stood before you and admitted that my drinking had gotten me in trouble. The embarrassment of that experience of a DUI, of having to ask for rides, of time spent in jail was only made bearable by what we do here and who we are here. Your notes, your cards... you may never know how often I read through them, to simply be reminded that I don’t, that we don’t do this alone, we do it together. My faith in the Church, and in the hierarchy is plenty weak right now. I need to know and feel that I am not alone in the darkness of this sinful time in the Church I love; that we will walk through this together.

I was as sad as I’ve been in years this past week when a brother priest told me that he had gotten a few “empty envelopes” in his collection. People angry enough that they decided to voice their protest by not giving. Who is hurt in that process? Not the Bishop… (he gets his cut by taxing us,...) no matter what! The programs that you love and that you want for your families and are what gets hurt then, so I hope we can find another way.

I really wish we could put this story behind us, but as recent reporting (even today with the Pope in Ireland...) points out, the issue is not behind us. And it won’t be for some time yet.

It’s simply not enough for us to say we are sorry. Pope John XXIII said: I want to throw open the windows of the Church so that we can see out and the people can see in. We need to do that and more …open the windows, yes, but we also need to turn on the lights so we can dispel the darkness to see and eliminate the sinfulness.

Most people agree that the church is doing a much better job of protecting children now. Systems and procedures like Virtus are in place to handle suspected cases of child abuse by clergy, religious and lay church employees. Here, we are establishing a safety committee and safety response teams. Most dioceses are committed to making these systems part of the permanent infrastructure of local churches.

But making that much progress has taken decades of advocacy and reporting to create enough public pressure to move the church hierarchy to act. Getting those systems and procedures into place took years of hard work by investigative journalists, lawyers, attorneys general and victims’ advocates. Only when pressure was brought from those constituencies together did change happen.

The church, the people of God, have been let down too often. We are past the time when people will easily forgive leadership.

Nonetheless, I believe and I belong.... I believe and I belong

Will you say it with me?.... I believe and I belong. Again…

Amen.
21\textsuperscript{st} Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 26, 2018