

Dearest parishioners,

I am eternally grateful to His Grace, the Archbishop, for permitting me to address you as I do in this letter and for the opportunity to apprise you of some of the circumstances surrounding the sudden cessation of my ministry to the parish. I am similarly indebted to the parish secretary, to members of the Parish Pastoral Council and to my visiting brothers priest for their enduring hard work in ensuring that the needs of the parish – spiritual and otherwise – continue to be met until a permanent appointment can be made. It is my great shame to have added, without warning, to their burdens, but I can imagine no finer people to whom the Holy Mother Church could entrust your welfare. I have every faith that God shall continue to provide and that the pastoral needs of the faithful shall be attended to with at least the diligence that I could once muster.

Now, then, a confession: it is a strange thing to be bearing my soul before each of you, having so frequently sought to counsel you through your own penitence. In truth, I recall very little of what has been related to me ‘in Persona Christi’; I remain bound, in any case, by the Sacramental Seal, but the fragility of human memory serves as an additional assurance in this regard – a testament to the wisdom of the Creator. The advice I have received is that I should refrain from sharing that which I am about to impart; I am mindful, of course, of the need to avert scandal, but I leave that to the judgement of others. For my own part, I may be a sinner, but I shall yet spare myself from the charge of hypocrisy. I do not ask your forgiveness, but I do owe each of you an explanation for my abandonment, having fled and left the presbytery vacant. And I am, of course, human: perhaps I simply wish to give my account, to exercise some control over the narrative. I am awake to how

freely rumour propagates amongst even the most upright of communities, such as ours. You are free to speculate as to my motivations for disclosure. I can expect nothing less.

Several weeks ago, I was approached by a young woman in some obvious distress. She explained to me that her mother had recently passed away and I attempted to console her, listening to her plight with affected sympathy. She then claimed to be my daughter. Though taken aback, it did not occur to me then to doubt her assertion. Throughout our brief exchange, I had observed something eerily familiar in the young woman's appearance – in her cadence and pattern of speech; now, at last, I could place it. As a seminarian, some decades past, I had fallen for another. Such was the intensity of our passion that I had volunteered to abandon my vocation and enquired as to whether we might marry. At her insistence, I persevered in my studies. She vanished altogether from my life soon thereafter; I can only speculate that, upon discovering the pregnancy, she left to spare us both from ignominy. Our shared affection was not the sin that I now confess; my sin was turning away this child in mourning – turning away my own daughter. Precisely why I did so I cannot now comprehend. Perhaps I was in shock, confronted not only with the revelation of my own progeny, but with news of the death of one that I had held so dear. Perhaps I was preoccupied with the reputational harms that word of an illegitimate child would represent for both the Church and my place within it. Whatever my reasons, my initial response was anger – a fact that shall no doubt haunt me for the rest of my days. Here was one who spoke the truth, who sought only that I should do the same; instead, I offered denial and recriminations. That was my sin.

In the days that followed, I had cause to reflect on this conduct. I made arrangements to meet with the girl again and confirmed what I knew of her parentage. As we spoke, I felt a profound sense of grief for the years lost between estranged souls and of pride in the remarkable, confident young woman that now stood before me. I resolved in that moment to

become the father that she, still grieving, had the strength to seek out. In losing one parent, she might yet find another – and I a child. I suspect that neither of us knows quite what that relationship entails, but I am grateful that she has afforded me the opportunity to find out.

I should clarify that the decision to leave the parish was my own. I initially told no one of my departure, for which I owe you all an apology. When I did eventually speak to the Archbishop, it was I who requested dispensation from the rights and obligations of the clerical state. As the girl's mother had withheld my name until on her deathbed, by which time the child – our child – had already attained majority, it was not required, in the judgement of the Dicastery, that I should forego my clerical obligations to facilitate the proper exercise of my parental responsibilities. Indeed, His Grace – though sensitive to my request – asked that I continue to minister to the parish until such time as alternative arrangements could be set in motion. Believe me: if I thought it possible, I would gladly do so; it has been an unspeakable privilege to serve this community, which has treated me with more warmth than I have ever reciprocated. That is precisely why I no longer consider myself able to tend to this flock; I am uncertain now that I ever was. The joy of ministry is something that I cannot recall having ever known; only in my daughter's mercy have I discovered such uplifting grace.

Whilst still ruminating on a possible course of action, I had, in my turmoil, sought comfort and wisdom in scripture. I found myself drawn to Genesis and the narrative of the life of Abraham, whom Paul terms 'our father in faith'. Indeed, a father he was – first to Ishmael and then to Isaac, who was a promised child. The elder was cast out into the desert. Later, atop the mountain, Abraham complied with the Lord's command, taking a blade to his only remaining son; such was the strength of his faith that Abraham made an offering of the child, hopeful that, by the Lord's power, Isaac would be returned to him.

All those years ago, at my ordination, I placed upon the altar the very prospect of a child to call my own. In his infinite mercy, the Lord has returned to me my oblation; though I can't claim to understand it, I know better than to argue. Still, there is a sacrifice to be made, a ram offered in thanksgiving – and that is my ministry. The psalmist reminds us that the Father looks kindly upon a contrite heart; only in these last few days have I begun to truly comprehend the ecstatic sorrow of contrition – of witnessing one's will, one's chosen mode of being, shattered with divine force. Though it pains me, I know that I cannot remain your shepherd. I do not yet know what I shall do – only with whom I shall do it. I ought to despair in that unknown, in the infinite possibilities of being. Yet, I am without anxiety; my hands do not tremble as I write. In submission and obedience have I found my freedom and no more does fear command me.

I hope that this account proves satisfactory in outlining the reasons for my departure and for the manner in which I have conducted myself over the last several weeks. It has, as I mentioned, been an honour to have been part of this parish community. I entrust its sound governance to my permanent successor and to its people, in whom I have every confidence. I pray that you may find in each other the joy that my daughter now inspires in me and I enjoin each of you to keep faith: not simply in God, but in the absurd. Divinity does not bow to our preconceptions; that which seems to us inconceivable is a mere trifle to higher wills. I leave you now, with every blessing.

Yours, in fraternity,

Fr. Jacob Pryor,

Priest, formerly of the Catholic Church of Our Lady