

What Must Happen

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Dear friends:

Like you, I am sick about what is happening in our church. Also like you, I've prayed about how best to move ahead. Our church will survive. The "gates of hell" will not prevail against it, as Jesus Christ himself promised us.

But Christ, through the workings of the Holy Spirit, urges us to act: to rebuild the church and help his holy and faithful people. Without certain steps, people will flow out of the church, never to return, like water from the side of the Crucified One on Good Friday.

Some of you may not agree with each of these steps, but I believe that each one is essential for us to rebuild the church. This list is neither complete or exhaustive (and presume the reporting practices for abusive priests already contained in the Dallas Charter).

But in order of immediacy, and with a focus on the US church, they are:

First, while journalists have discredited large sections of the Vigano "testimony," and while many charges have been revealed as baseless, there is one charge that journalists will not be able to uncover: Pope Francis's knowledge and actions regarding the McCarrick case.

The faithful, as well as clergy and religious, are exceedingly confused about this question; a short and simple answer from the Pope or from the Vatican will help us move us ahead.

Second, dioceses and religious orders should open their abuse files to the public, rather than waiting until they are forced to do so. Otherwise, the church will face years, perhaps decades, of civic authorities slowly uncovering our secret crimes, sins and failings. Confession is not just about what you're forced to reveal.

Third, lay leaders should investigate the McCarrick case. More importantly, lay leaders should be placed in charge of all review boards in dioceses and

religious orders, if they are not already in charge. The system has proven that it cannot police itself.

Fourth, bishops found guilty of abuse, or of covering it up, must be removed from their posts as soon as possible. Perhaps just as important, when bishops resign, the Vatican must be clear about the reasons for their resignations.

Fifth, the widespread demonization within the church must end. It is a stumbling block to healing and disedifying to both Catholics and non-Catholics. Social media has played a malign role. The stereotyping of whole groups (gays, celibates, bishops, liberals, conservatives) must end. Personal vilification must stop.

Sixth, public acts of penance from the hierarchy must take place. Letters and statements are, as we have seen, insufficient. The laity should decide what form these acts should take. Symbolic actions, as well as practical actions, matter here.

Seventh, both married men and women must be included in all levels of decision-making in the church—including heading Vatican congregations, reforming the Curia, helping to select bishops, etc.

Married men and women must also be included in all levels of leadership—including leadership in the church's liturgical life, something of immense symbolic importance. Married priests and women deacons are a start.

Eighth, a thoroughgoing review of seminary formation, especially regarding education in human sexuality, must happen—again. There are still seminaries and religious orders where candidates are incapable of, or prevented from, discussing the most fundamental areas of their lives.

Ninth, clericalism must die. The system privileging the status of bishops and priests over that of lay people (and parents); that insists on an exaggerated deference for clergy and bishops, and that has functioned as a closed world, must be dismantled.

Finally, despair about this situation must end. Despair is not of God. The Holy Spirit is with us and will help us through even the most difficult times. We must never forget Jesus's words to his disciples: Fear not!"