

Editorial: The Church in 2019

Two events took place in the earliest days of January that centered on the future of the Church in America, and they couldn't have been more different.

In Chicago, the U.S. bishops met for a weeklong spiritual retreat at Mundelein Seminary, where they immersed themselves in prayer and reflection following a year in which allegations of clergy sexual abuse reached one of the highest-ranking prelates among them. The retreat, requested by Pope Francis himself, illustrated a Church on its knees trying to come to grips with just how far it has fallen, and struggling to regain credibility and find a clear path forward.

In Indianapolis, just 231 miles away, another Church was on its knees – on a concrete floor in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. This was a young Church, a generation of young people who, given the clergy abuse crisis, it would be easy to think does not exist – and which the world tries to tell us does not exist. But there they were, the participants in the SEEK2019 conference, numbering nearly 18,000 and ready to set the world on fire with Christ's love.

In Chicago, according to Archbishop Samuel Aquila of Denver, who celebrated Sunday Mass during SEEK, the bishops were told by Father Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., preacher to the papal household, that they had lost their sense of eternity – “that we really do not believe in Christ as the light, in Christ as the one who has come to give us eternal life.”

At SEEK, Curtis Martin, founder and CEO of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, the event organizer, reminded the young people during passionate opening remarks that “eternal life is all that matters.”

“Nothing else matters but getting to heaven and getting as

many people there as possible,” he said.

But though the two events were different in nature, they found an intersection through prayer. Inside the adoration chapel at SEEK, a printed prayer reminded those present to pray that the bishops, while on retreat, be inspired to “seek the wisdom of the Good Shepherd,” be empowered “to speak the truth to the faithful,” and be anointed to “be courageous in living holy and generous lives.”

“Let their example be for the faithful blameless, upright, moral and just,” it said.

This is the U.S. Church in 2019: a leadership somberly focused on repentance and reversion, and with a long way to go to regain the trust of its people, and a youth somewhat astoundingly filled with joy and ready to be the light of Christ to all they meet. There is hope in both, as well as a lesson for us all.

In a letter to the bishops before their retreat, Pope Francis said that the undue suffering caused by the abuse crisis “forces us to look to what is essential and to rid ourselves of all that stands in the way of a clear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” This was the message to both prelates and young people in early January. And this, indeed, is the calling of each one of us – whether a Church leader, a young person, or a lifelong Catholic perhaps struggling to remember what a life of discipleship is all about.

As the Church in the United States moves forward in 2019, with the February summit on the abuse crisis in Rome in the near future, let us join our leaders and our young people in focusing on what is essential in this life, and eliminating all distractions that stand in the way of our path to the next.

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