

The Long Dark Winter's Night

The Long Dark Winter's Night

Reflections of a Priest in a Time of Pain and Privilege

Patrick Bergquist



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by Ann Blattner.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture texts in this work are from the *New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms* © 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC, and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

© 2010 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bergquist, Patrick.

The long dark winter's night : reflections of a priest in a time of pain and privilege / Patrick Bergquist.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 978-0-8146-3301-4

1. Child sexual abuse by clergy—Meditations. 2. Catholic Church—Clergy—Sexual behavior—Meditations. 3. Priesthood—Catholic Church—Meditations. 4. Bergquist, Patrick. I. Title.

BX1912.9.B44 2010

282.09'045—dc22

2009035528

*To the Good People of St. Raphael Parish in Fairbanks, Alaska
who so patiently indulged me as a Poet
who so challenged me to be a Prophet
but most of all
who taught me how to be a Pastor*

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction <i>Confessing to Winter's Night</i>	1
Chapter 1 <i>The Warning Winds of Winter</i>	9
Chapter 2 <i>An Endless Winter of Discontent</i>	34
Chapter 3 <i>Winter's Healing Wounds</i>	50
Chapter 4 <i>Spending Our Winter's Night Grieving</i>	67
Chapter 5 <i>Winter's Grieving and Weeping Grace</i>	83
Chapter 6 <i>Scars Heavy upon Our Priesthood</i>	96
Chapter 7 <i>Winter's Redeeming Elegy</i>	104
Conclusion <i>Longing for Spring</i>	123
Notes	128

Acknowledgments

As a priest I readily confess to a life of giving thanks at the table. As a believer I must confess that my heart continually gives thanks for the gentle and unassuming faith first taught me by my mother Mary and my father John—a faith I also shared with my brother John and my sisters Leslie, Kate, Beth, Sue, and Emily. As a pastor I also must confess that even my dreams give thanks for the wonderful years of ministry that I shared with Gloria Slagle. And as I writer I give words of thanks to Sherry Pappert, who so patiently listened to me when I first began to write; to Nancy Jackson, who with gentle compassion helped to edit what I first dared to write; to Marjorie Cole, who, as we sat around her table, helped me see myself as a writer with something to say; and to Liturgical Press, for believing that my words might actually have something to say for our church. To all of these, and to so many more—thank you.

Patrick Bergquist



Excerpts from SONNETS TO ORPHEUS by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by M. D. Herter Norton. Copyright 1942 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., renewed © 1970 by M. D. Herter Norton. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Co., Inc.

“A Cure of Souls” by Denise Levertov, from POEMS 1960–1967, copyright © 1966 by Denise Levertov. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

“This Bread I Break” by Dylan Thomas, from THE POEMS OF DYLAN THOMAS, copyright © 1943 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

Excerpt from Mary Jo Bang, “The Role of Elegy,” from ELEGY. Copyright © 2007 by Mary Jo Bang. Reprinted with the permission of Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, Minnesota. www.graywolfpress.org.

“The Mission School” by Tim Giago, from *Children Left Behind*. Reprinted with permission from Clear Light Publishing, Santa Fe, New Mexico. www.clearlightbooks.com.

“Elegy for Jane,” copyright © 1950 by Theodore Roethke, “In a Dark Time,” copyright © 1960 by Beatrice Roethke, Administratrix of the Estate of Theodore Roethke, from COLLECTED POEMS OF THEODORE ROETHKE by Theodore Roethke. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.

“Dust of Snow” from THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1923, 1969 by Henry Holt and Company. Copyright 1951 by Robert Frost. Reprinted by arrangement with Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

Introduction

Confessing to Winter's Night

As I gaze out my frost-laden window, with its panes—my pains—graced in such delicate design, I find myself meditating and musing on the so-called new springtime in the Roman Catholic Church and its priesthood. And thus I find myself pondering what promises to be another seemingly endless winter. For when you find yourself lost in the depths of a deep dark winter, springtime can seem so very far away. It may be inevitable then, like the coming of winter itself, that enough time has passed, enough things have happened, for me to pause and peer out my window and at last attempt to put things into perspective—my church, my priesthood, and perhaps a bit of my life as well. And though I have searched endlessly, I can find no voice other than my own that dares to speak of, not a “new springtime,” but a “long dark winter’s night.” How I wish and long that it was spring. But how can I, how can anyone, ignore the deepening winter outside?

I am but a simple parish priest, no saint and surely no scholar. I cannot and would not ever dare lay claim

to any real authority or academic standing. My vantage point, the window from which I am blessed to see, is my parish and its wounded but wonderful people. What I do lay claim to is the lived reality of nearly twenty winters ordained, fifteen of them serving in the Missionary Diocese of Northern Alaska, a place where the number of winters spent is precisely how we mark the passing of time. Being in this place I can testify that winter is real, and it's enduring, and more often than not it's a struggle just to survive.

When I first came to Alaska in the fall of 1995, I did not know what to expect. At first I was tempted, as so many people are, to imagine myself wrapped up in a nice, warm hand-stitched quilt, safe and secure, with a stack of really good thick novels piled high beside me, waiting out the winter. As the current clergy sex abuse crisis and scandal in the Roman Catholic Church continues to linger and linger on, much like the long winter's night, I wonder how many of us have been tempted to do the very same—to wrap ourselves in the warm blanket of tradition and memory, all safe and secure, reading and re-reading through the stories of how wonderful things used to be, just biding our time, marking our place, hoping for spring. Yet the arctic winters are too long and too pervasive to wait out and pretend; and the cold dark nights outside our windows are too compelling to simply ignore. I wonder, though, if this is just what our church and our priesthood are doing in this moment of crisis and

possible transformation: are we simply fooling ourselves that spring is around the corner and that once again things will return to what they used to be?

Here in the north I have come to discover and to truly appreciate that the long winter's night is the perfect place for both the poet and the prophet. Prophets are those who look deep into the very heart of the matter and dare to speak of the seriousness of the situation, speaking not from places of fear but out of faith. Poets, on the other hand, are those who fashion and form their words from deep within the human heart and experience—still deeper within the soul—giving voice to our hopes, our dreams, our fears, and our faith. If Dante had Virgil to guide him through purgatory, so we must rely upon the poets and the prophets to help and guide us through our long dark winter's night.

While I write this book for no other reason than to give voice to my own heart and soul, I do pray that others might at least give my voice a hearing, perhaps daring to see things as they are, or at least as I believe them to be. This is not, however, a book on the legitimacy or merits of the discipline of celibacy. Nor is it a treatise on church structures—for good or for bad—or an indictment of church leadership. What it is, at least what I hope and pray it to be, is a glimpse into the heart and soul of a parish priest struggling to make sense of a desperate situation.

For nothing is more dangerous and despairing here in the north than to simply ignore the seriousness of the situation, wishing it just wouldn't be so. Many may choose not to believe in this seriousness, this winter; but I challenge you to look out your window and ask yourself what it is that you see. As for me, I believe the so-called new springtime in our church—in my church—is still a long way off. Furthermore, I fear that our winter's night is barely half spent. I believe this crisis, this moment of transformation for our church, is real, and it is enduring. And like the winter's night, it too will cause us to struggle just to survive.

The long winter's night resounds with the songs of the poets. Robert Service dares to ask:

Have you known the Great White Silence,
not a snow-gemmed twig aquiver?
(Eternal truths that shame our soothing lies.)¹

If ever you have stood alone in a forest on a cold winter night, so alone that not even the wind—not even the whispering through the trees—accompanies you, you would have no doubt heard the “Great White Silence.” In this book I want to share with you some of the things that I have heard in that silence. Even as I do, I wonder why others have not heard, maybe even cannot hear. Possibly it takes someone living in the midst of the “Great White Silence” to truly describe what winter is.

A few winters past I wrote an article titled “A Long Winter’s Night.” In many ways this book grew out of that article, only more so. At that time, I wondered if we might find some sort of solace or sense of purpose in the clergy sex abuse crisis in light of the great mystic John of the Cross—and most especially in his *Dark Night of the Soul*. What I wrote then I still believe today: “When the road ahead disappears into darkness and all the familiar signs and symbols to which we have clung for security and familiarity are denied us, then and only then will we be ready to receive God’s self-communication to our souls and perhaps to the soul of the priesthood.”² Maybe St. John’s *Dark Night* and Robert Service’s “Great White Silence” are one and the same. And maybe, if we but dare, from deep within the very heart and soul of this silence—this darkness—we can still hear the voice of God. Truly this is my hope and my prayer.

During these long winter’s nights I often find myself sitting by my window, reading through things that I wrote earlier in various journals, poems, and sermons, words penned in the deep dark silence.

I have prayed that this darkness would have somehow dissipated and this Dark Night would have simply exhausted itself. But if anything it’s only deepened and settled into the church’s corporate soul. And still the shadows of broken innocence lay scattered and strewn along life’s

wayside; like so many discarded dreams. Perhaps,
just yet maybe—it is darkest before the dawn.

It is here, and really, can only be here, where our journey through the long dark winter's night must begin—in the darkest hour before the dawn, in the winter before the spring. With our innocence squandered, our dreams all but shattered, and our priesthood suffering (though I am finding many who disagree), do we yet dare to venture forth into the darkness and the silence? Yet even as we prepare to do so, we ought never to forget that here in this darkness and silence there is great beauty, profound truth, and things that cause the soul to simply stand in awe of it all. Contrary to popular belief, the “Great White Silence” is not some empty wasteland, nor is the “Dark Night” necessarily without sight. The poet Theodore Roethke reminds us:

In a dark time, the eye begins to see.
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade.³

Have you ever seen the northern lights dance in the wintry night sky? If not, just listen then to the poet beckon:

Let us probe the silent places, let us seek what luck
betide us;
Let us journey to a lonely land I know.
There's a whisper on the night-wind, there's a star
agleam to guide us.”⁴

I ask that you join me here in the long dark winter's night. Listen to what I have seen and heard. Together we might come to find something of real purpose and meaning. Not just for ourselves but also, and most especially so, for those who venture here after us.

Chapter One

The Warning Winds of Winter

The Telltale Signs of Winter

Winter rarely, if ever, begins all at once, fully revealing itself to anyone foolish enough to inhabit it. False starts are many, often luring us and tempting us to question the actual beginning and ending of such seasons. Nevertheless, there are certain telltale signs that winter looms somewhere nearby, perhaps just over the horizon. A cold wind sweeps down from somewhere unseen. It appears without warning and from seemingly out of nowhere. It wraps itself around us and seeps deep into our bones. It awakens some long-forgotten instinct buried deep within us, buried in the very marrow of our memory, beckoning us to prepare and make ready. To make ready, if for no other reason than we might survive the approaching winter, preparing for the long cold darkness that will soon and inescapably surround us. If only we would heed its calling.

Soon after the wind, we awaken to the first hard-killing frost. Yes, there are always a few flirting frosts that come and go, and that are easily enough dismissed from our memories when the sun begins to warm our faces. However, the first really hard frost is of a different sort. While it might be beautiful to look at, there is also something strangely foreboding about it, for it brings with it a certain dying. The once bright and scenic leaves of autumn now fade from all their glory, turning to a dull and listless brown, even as they release their desperate and futile hold and drift away upon the wind. Flowers that once adorned our lives, enlivening our imaginations and reminding us of that garden of an original innocence now seemingly lost to us, wither and die. The first hard frost, like the cold north wind, leaves an undeniable and indelible mark upon the landscape of our souls. As it has, I fear, upon the soul of our priesthood. Try as we might there is no denying it, there is no ignoring the approaching winter, even with all our talk of spring.

I first encountered the cold north wind and the killing frost as a young, newly ordained East Coast priest, long before I would inevitably venture north and come to know the true depths of an arctic winter. It was the early 1990s, and I was just thirty years of age and still so full of dreams. I believe I was in love with the idea, with the notion, of being a priest; but never could I have known its true sacrifices. I could not have begun to

imagine that it was my soul needing saving, my church needing redeeming.

I remember, what now seems nearly a lifetime ago, sitting amid a roomful of black suits and Roman collars. Looking back, I suppose these clergy meetings would have been encouraging and supporting experiences for a newly ordained priest such as myself (with the scent of fresh chrism still clinging to the palms of my hands). And I suppose these meetings could have been truly edifying had we gathered to share our lives as ministers of the Gospel and shepherds of God's people. But such was not the cause, nor the case, for gatherings such as these. It was not the cardinal or even his bishops who stood front and center before us, but rather six diocesan lawyers. These lawyers pointed out, point by meticulous point, what would happen to us should any of us find ourselves accused of certain "clerical improprieties" or "priestly misconduct with a minor"—and indeed, this was exactly how we spoke of such things way back when. And so it was that the clergy sex abuse scandal blew its way into our lives and came to settle upon our souls. Well, mine at least.

As I attempt to recall these events, even while still trying so desperately to separate them from my own innocence lost, I vividly remember the lawyers preaching as they pointed out across this sea of black suits and Roman collars: "When any of you find yourselves accused, know that an investigation will immediately

ensue.” This investigation, they assured us, need not necessarily be exhaustive or even conclusive. If, however, there seemed to be the slightest of hints, the slightest of suggestion that something inappropriate might have happened, then this would be sufficient grounds for an immediate suspension from active ministry. No questions asked. We all sat there stunned. Can anyone prove their innocence? Is it even possible? How did all of this come to be? And why? Little could we have known, although there are those who insist that we should have known. But as to the sheer depths and depravity of the situation, we just did not know. Many years later we would indeed come to know and understand, but at that time we didn’t even dare to imagine, at least I didn’t.

Following “credible accusation,” the lawyers continued, civil and state authorities would be given our names. Then we would be sent off for psychological evaluation. It was at this time that words like *pedophilia* and *ephebophilia* first crept into our priestly lexicon. But honestly, we never knew where our accused brother priests were sent. They simply vanished. Gone too were their faculties and the license to practice their “craft and their trade.” They were, as we would soon come to say, “removed from ministry,” wherever and whatever that might actually mean. I guess for many of us sitting in the room that day, had we actually then been able to talk about it, it must have seemed as if we were living through some modern-day inquisition.

Strangely enough, what I most remember about those days were the *faxes*. Remember that these were the days before e-mail, cell phones, and text messaging. Faxes were the most expeditious way for the chancery offices to get out the official word of an accused brother priest. And so, I guess, in order not to be scooped by the local papers or embarrassed by the evening news, faxes soon began arriving from the chancery's office. And they kept coming, day after day, night after night. Many nights I would find myself waking to the distinct ring of the fax machine downstairs, both it and myself groaning and fearing—no, not again.

After the faxes came the bishops, with their hearts weighing heavy, to be sure. The bishops came to our parishes, not to preach the Good News, but to deliver the bad. They climbed into the once-ornate and glorious pulpits of our churches, not to proclaim “glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1), but rather to inform Christ's holy people that their shepherd, their pastor, their priest had been accused of unspeakable crimes against innocence and against children. Further, the bishops told the people that they, the faithful if not fearful flock, were obligated (certainly a word near and dear to all Catholics) under both civil and ecclesiastical law to come forward if they had any information concerning this priest, or for that matter, any other priest. It was truly a

day when a cold wind swept down from somewhere unseen, and quite literally blew us priests off our pedestals, all the while the faithful sat in their pews stunned, almost beyond belief.

As for my brother priests, now forever branded with the new scarlet letters *PP*, Pedophile Priest (two words that in time would come to be considered nearly synonymous with one another)—they were consigned and forsaken to aimlessly wander about in a new sort of ecclesiastical limbo, rarely if ever to be heard of again. Occasionally, we caught a fleeting glimpse of them on the evening news as they were paraded off in handcuffs. But mostly, and sad to say, they just slipped away from our sight, from our collective memories, never to be heard from or spoken of again. Or so we at least prayed.

What amazes me most about these early days of the clergy sex abuse crisis was the sheer lack of any faith talk, God talk. And really, God would play little or no part in these proceedings, except perhaps in the final judgment in the end. As I look back on these events now, I believe that the church, my church, simply chose the courtroom over its confessions, its contrition, and its convictions. All this seemed my church's veiled and desperate attempt to save the institution and to protect its priesthood. But, I ask, to what end? This desperate attempt appeared to be the "sole," but not necessarily the "soul," issue at hand. And still I ask myself why the church chose to react out of fear but, sadly, never chose

to act out of faith. And, to be perfectly honest about it, I believe the church has yet to do so even now. What is it that we as church pray each Lent?

*For I acknowledge my offense,
and my sin is before me always:
“Against you only have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight.” . . .
My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit;
a heart humbled and contrite O God, you will not
spurn.*

(see Psalm 51:5–6, 19)

In a world filled with “what ifs”—What if the church, my church, had actually practiced what she preached? What if the church had herself confessed its sins and pleaded for forgiveness? What if . . . ? One only has to wonder how things might be different today.

I have witnessed with my own eyes, indeed with my own broken heart, men I once knew, or thought I knew, men I had admired and revered, now bound and shackled. Men of the cloth clothed now in the bright orange jumpsuits of prison-yard garb. Jesus forewarned Peter: “Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” (John 21:18). Jesus said this to Peter, however, not because of Peter’s sin but

because this was the true cost of discipleship. These men, on the other hand, these men I once held as living examples of faithful ministry and holy priesthood, now stood disfigured in disgrace and shackled in their shame. What must a vision such as this do to the mind and heart of a newly ordained priest? What sort of spiritual scars must my generation carry upon our souls?

I do confess that there is indeed a scar left upon my soul when I contemplate my priesthood, my church—not because of how things ought to be but because of how things really are. How best can I describe this scar to you? Perhaps a story might help. As I have said, winters in Alaska are very long. It seems they begin around September and rarely end much before May. As a result, people do a myriad of things just to occupy their time as they wait for spring. I am convinced that one of the things we do as a community, and that we seem to enjoy most, is to argue. Because winter is so long we need something, anything really, to argue about. It doesn't matter what the issue or controversy may be, and, in fact, come spring we usually just forget whatever it was we were arguing about. Over the winter, though, the editorial page of our local paper makes for some interesting reading, most especially the letters to the editor. In these letters there is a friendly, though sometimes not so friendly, bantering back and forth.

So when a number of articles concerning the priest sex abuse scandal began to appear in our local paper,

you could expect there were going to be some letters in response. And so there were, back and forth. Some praised the priesthood, some condemned the priesthood. But the one letter I remember most was one that likened the priesthood to being an “Icon of Christ.” Who could argue with something like this? Well, this might be true in a perfect world, but not so in mine. Being a priest, I felt somewhat compelled to write something in response. But I confess that I lacked the courage to actually send it. Then again, perhaps what I wrote then best belongs here, in a place such as this, within the settings of a deeper conversation:

Recently in the letters to the editor there have been references to the Roman Catholic priesthood as being an “Icon of Christ.” In many ways this is a wonderful and noble analogy of what will always remain but a mystery. In my understanding, limited though it may be, when praying with an icon a person looks through the painted and gilded image as if it were a window to something beyond, perhaps to a small glimpse of heaven itself. The image is of incidental importance when compared with the revealed wisdom, grace, and beauty of the divine that lies therein.

I, for myself, carry a deep and bleeding wound within my heart and soul as I contemplate this icon of the priesthood. Not of how things should be, but of how things are. The icon

through which I look is not made of gilded gold but resembles more a shattered and broken window, seeking only to distort and disfigure the figure of Christ. Priests accused and even convicted of unspeakable crimes against innocence. But speak of them we must. Those who have violated both body and soul—men, brothers I once knew, respected, and admired—now shackled and disgraced. Did I know them at all? This is the icon with which much of our society now views the priesthood.

Looking back on the years I have been a priest, I begin to wonder whether the crucifix is not a more authentic image on which to meditate and pray, whether the tortured and contorted face of Christ is a more realistic portrayal of how things are, with one notable exception—his innocence, our guilt. Not an icon of a resurrected Christ, but one of a crucified Christ. Blame not the victims, or the media, or the lawyers, or the courts. In truth, this is a *self-inflicted crucifixion* and a tragedy of our own making. For who would dare paint such a picture? And who would dare look through such a window?

Who would paint such a picture? I guess I would. Who would dare to look through such a window? I guess I must. But still I must ask why my church or my brother priests will not dare to look through this shat-

tered pane. This very realization was perhaps the beginning of my own long winter's night, the one that I now see outside my window.

Though I did not send that letter to the editor, I could not remain silent. Each Friday our paper has a "Faith Page" that covers anything from the election of a pope to a potluck supper at one of our local churches. One regular feature of this page is the Insight Column, a place where local pastors are invited to write words of inspiration and hope for our community. Given this opportunity, and having impatiently waited for someone of more authority and importance than myself to write something, anything really, I wrote this back in 2003:

It's been twelve years now since sacred hands were laid upon my head and my own hands were anointed with the blessed oil, and I was ordained a Roman Catholic Priest. I began my journey with innocence, perhaps a bit naive, believing in the goodness of God's promise. I believed then, and still do today, in the incredible potential of the human heart for things of beauty and grace. But what I have seen, indeed what we are all just now beginning to see, is also the capacity of the human heart for things of ugliness and sin.

As a Catholic Priest I am embarrassed, angered, even horrified as I hear of new and ever-increasing revelations of children abused and victimized by

my brother priests. A child's innocence stolen, their faith betrayed. And the institution of the church, my church, only perpetuating and participating in this sin by its silence or complicity for years and years. This same institution that I once promised my solemn obedience to, and that for the salvation of my soul. It is enough to make a poor parish priest cry out in anguish.

Twelve years ago now I stepped out in faith; with nothing but the promises of God's love I sought to find hope where I could, and where I could not, to bring that hope which God so freely bestows. The Roman collar that I wore around my neck was never anything to boast in, but rather was my gift to God, a sign and symbol of a life freely given—mind, body, and soul. Today that same collar, frayed a bit from wear, is a source of shame and disgrace. The violence of others reflecting back upon me. As I look into the beautiful innocent eyes of a child, the one place in all creation where truly anything is possible, and all good things can be imagined, I cannot but help to see the face of my God. How could anyone, let alone a priest, violate something so sacred, so holy?⁵

Throughout the 1990s I hoped and prayed that a revealing wind would blow through the church and stir up our souls. I hoped that all this would awaken in us some long-forgotten notion of what it means to be

church, what it means to be priest. But, sad to say, it did not. A cold north wind assaulted us, but we dismissed it, believing that the worst had passed us by. That somehow we had weathered the storm and life would once again return to how it used to be. We convinced ourselves that people would just forgive and forget, and we could again be deserving of their respect and the respect due our holy office. The long dark winter's night, however, is not so easily dismissed, and the true depth of winter's chill had yet to reach or pierce our hearts or our souls. Yes, a cold north wind blew into our lives, but we chose to turn our faces and ignore the coming winter. As William Shakespeare forewarned and foretold:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind.
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude.⁶

In the Fullness of Winter

Winter finally arrived in earnest. Settling first in Boston, then Dallas, and finally, inevitably and ironically, with ever-new revelations of abuse, it arrived here in Alaska. Looking back upon winter's arrival I soon found myself writing:

The snow outside is gently falling as I sit and
begin to write what is in my heart and soul. So

often, here in this seemingly remote corner that we call Alaska, we can pretend that the world outside does not really exist, that it is all just something we watch on CNN, far removed and full of make believe. The current crisis in the Catholic Church has been slow in coming to us, but then again it takes awhile for things like the mail to reach us. . . . But if the truth be known, no cold, no ice, no wall of isolation could separate us from the rest of the church—neither its sins nor its sufferings.⁷

We had sighed so heavily, had so sincerely believed we'd survived the worst of it. We'd weathered the storm. But we were sadly mistaken, and soon enough we awoke to find our priestly sins splashed all over the front pages of the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, and yes, even the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*. No, they hadn't just forgotten. Nor did it seem they had forgiven. How could anyone really forget? And as for their forgiveness, this was going to cost us more than we ever dared imagine or even pray.

Winter usually arrives with a certain rudeness. It is not usually anxiously awaited or anticipated like the other seasons of the year. It is almost always nearly dreaded. In the north we even add two more seasons: "freeze-up" and "break-up." Freeze-up occurs when the streams and rivers, ponds and lakes, and even the seas themselves wrap themselves in the white baptismal

garments of ice and snow, though for some it might seem more a funeral pall (the white cloth that drapes over a casket). The waters' depths, their currents, their lives, remain hidden from late September until May, and sometimes even well into June, when all of a sudden they throw off their heavy cloaks of ice and snow, and are resurrected, sometimes most violently so in break-up. But break-up in the north isn't the new springtime. It is summer, and summer is the stuff of yet another story.

For now it is winter, and as I have said, I fear our winter is barely half spent. It is here in the midst and depths of winter that the prophets do dwell. These prophets, like winter itself, speak with a certain crass rudeness. They speak, and at first we are intrigued, perhaps even fascinated. Their mystical presence captivates us. But when the truth of their words, like a two-edged sword, begins to pierce deep into our hearts, we find them—much like a long winter—utterly too much to bear.

How well I remember my first winter in Alaska. To the new and uninitiated there's a certain fascination that captivates the imagination, just staring at the thermometer with its red line falling. Watching it fall past the point of freezing, not hesitating at zero but slipping ever deeper to ten, twenty, thirty, forty, even fifty degrees below. For the new and the naive this first winter is full of wonder and awe. It's even cause to boast to

family and friends living somewhere warmer. But come the second or third winter, the novelty, much like the linings of our parkas and the soles of our boots, wears a bit thin—as does our patience. I suppose in this way winter is like the prophets, and prophets, like the winter. Fascinating at first, even somewhat captivating, but when the icy truth of their words shatters our illusions, we find them too much to bear.

Prophets seem to belong to a different era, a different time, and a distant place. But here in the midst of the long winter's night, they are at home. There is a certain clarity in the stillness of the winter air, which makes it the perfect place for the poet and the prophet. When winter finally and firmly embraces you and you become aware of the very breath inside of you, now made visible in the mist before your eyes, there is no denying its reality. When your every footfall in the snow makes you aware of your aloneness and the beating of your heart becomes something almost tangible, there is no denying winter's presence. And it is here, in this place, that the prophets have chosen to pitch their tent. As I said, prophets look into the heart of the matter and speak of the seriousness of the situation. They speak not out of fear but out of faith. And if perchance I remember the lessons of seminary correctly, prophets are not so much fortune tellers as they are tellers of the truth. They are not so much soothsayers as they are sayers and seers of the truth. They do not so much look

into tomorrow as they peer and pierce into today. And this could be why we fear them so.

I realize I am probably very much alone in believing this. I believe that we as church owe a deep debt of gratitude to the press and the media, strange as that might seem. For when we could not, when we would not face our inner demons, they dared to show them to us. When we lacked the integrity due our calling, they demonstrated the relentless commitment of theirs. When we lost our prophetic voice, imparted to us on the day of our baptism—called forth from us on the day of our ordination—they found theirs, all the while we fearfully clung to our silence. And while the media might not have gotten everything exactly right, they nonetheless did their level best. (We need always to remember that ours is a church not easily given to full disclosure.) When we needed to be prophets, even within the very mess we had created, we couldn't be, we wouldn't be. Perhaps we were like the prophet Jonah and simply chose to turn and flee from our appointed Nineveh. In the end, like Jonah, we simply could not run away from ourselves.

The *Boston Globe* is often heralded, and I suppose rightly so, for being the voice that broke the story. I wonder, however, if the full story has yet been told. When the *Globe* was awarded the 2003 Pulitzer Prize in Public Service journalism, it was commended for its “courageous, comprehensive coverage of sexual abuse

by priests, an effort that pierced secrecy, stirred local, national and international reaction and produced changes in the Roman Catholic Church.” How I wish it were true. Instead, I am left wondering whether these “changes in the Roman Catholic Church” will ever truly be realized. Was this true *metanoia*, or change of heart, on behalf of my church, or was it merely a placation to forces beyond its control? All the while we just waited out the storm, waited for things to blow over, waited for everything to return to how they used to be. The church, my church, has always been terrified of change.

In the winter of 2004 Bishop Wilton Gregory, then president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, presented the John Jay College study *The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States*, which had been commissioned by the newly formed National Review Board. Bishop Gregory began his presentation with this most remarkable line: “The terrible history recorded here today is history.” Oh, how I wish that were true. The words of philosopher George Santayana come to mind: “Those who cannot remember the past [history] are condemned to repeat it.” And so the horrid revelations of the 1990s were once again resurrected in the new days of the new millennium.

As the fax machine gave way to the internet so too did my perspective grow. From the window of my lap-

top my eyes were opened wide by web sites such as Abuse Tracker: “A digest of links to media coverage of clergy abuse. Click on the headline to read the full story.”⁸ Each day this site reveals the many tragic stories that make up this crisis, not just in Alaska but all over the Catholic world. To many people in the pews, indeed to many parish priests just struggling to get through the crisis, it might seem as if Bishop Gregory’s words— “[this] history. . . is history”—are prophetic. But to those who look through the window of “Abuse Tracker” and read the stories contained therein, it is quite obvious this is not the case. Each day these windows open to reveal more of the sordid and horrid truth. View this, and many other similar sites, and you soon realize that our church is still bleeding, our winter is far from over, and the new springtime is indeed a long way off. Each day the prophets prophesy, the reporters report, and each day my church dies just a little more.

The long winter’s night is a deep and abiding place, but the press and the media are not the only voices to be heard here. Journalists, I am convinced, became the prophets of this scandal almost by default; but there were other voices crying out in this wilderness as well. As early as 1985 Thomas Doyle, OP, Michael Peterson, MD, and Mr. F. Ray Mouton, JD, had cried out to the “seriousness of the situation.” They presented a paper to our bishops, *The Problem of Sexual Molestation by Roman Catholic Clergy: Meeting the Problem in a*

Comprehensive and Responsible Manner—this, nearly twenty years prior to the John Jay College study. But did anyone hear them or take them to heart? Did anyone heed the prophets' cry or harken to the seriousness of the situation? The Mouton-Doyle-Peterson Report, as it would come to be known, begins with this most haunting line: "Some extremely serious issues have arisen that presently place the church in the posture of facing extremely serious financial consequences as well as significant injury to its image."⁹

Knowing all this, having been warned of all of it back in 1985, how is it that we still wonder how we got to where we are today? To tell the truth, we are even a bit surprised by it all. And to be brutally honest, many have just simply grown weary of it all. Didn't Jesus say to the would-be disciples, "let the dead bury their dead" (Luke 9:60)? Why, we priests cry, why can't we bury this too? Why? Because the death of our illusions comes by way of acceptance, not by way of denial. I believe in the depths of my heart and soul that we have yet to accept or to embrace our long winter's night. Instead, we choose to distract ourselves from winter's humbling demands with all our talk of spring, a new springtime at that. All the while the world looks at us in sheer and utter disbelief.

Where once I thought I could wait out winter, sitting by my window, wrapped in a quilt, a pile of good novels beside me, it just hasn't worked out that way.

There is, to be sure, a pile of books beside my chair, falling over due to its ever-increasing numbers. A random view of their titles reads like some sort of pathological nightmare: *Our Fathers: The Secret Life of the Catholic Church in an Age of Scandal* by David France; *A Gospel of Shame: Children, Sexual Abuse, and the Catholic Church* by Frank Bruni and Elinor Burkett; *Sex, Priests, and Secret Codes: The Catholic Church's 2000-Year Paper Trail of Sexual Abuse* by Thomas Doyle, A.W. Richard Sipe, and Patrick Wall; *Lead Us Not into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children* by Jason Berry; *Sex, Priests, and Power: Anatomy of a Crisis* by A.W. Richard Sipe; *Children Left Behind: The Dark Legacy of Indian Mission Boarding Schools* by Tim Giago; *Sacrilege: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* by Leon Podles; *An Irish Tragedy: How Sex Abuse by Irish Priests Helped Cripple the Catholic Church* by Joe Rigert—and many, many others. These are the prophetic voices of those who have peered into the darkness of winter's night. And they too have given us the voices of those who seem to have no voice, whose innocence we stole, and whose souls we raped. The voices of the victims' souls who still cry out in the wilderness, pleading to be heard. And I promise we will hear them, for truly there's something healing in the telling of their stories.

SNAP's (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) mission statement reads: "By sharing our stories, we recognize that we are not alone, and we are

not guilty for what happened to us. Gradually coming to a full knowledge of this empowers us to confront the truth, and to find healthy mechanisms for healing.”¹⁰ The shadows of broken innocence will not, cannot, simply be left scattered and strewn along life’s wayside, like so many discarded dreams.

Listen, then, to the long winter’s night calling. Listen carefully to the “Great White Silence.” There is a most conspicuous voice missing, strangely silent among the sad and often angry, lamenting chorus. It is not that of the church’s magisterium, or the lawyers, or the courts, or the journalists, or the social commentators and critics. It is not even the voice of the victims themselves. It is the voice of us parish priests. Scripture tells us that the prophet Jeremiah was thrown into a dry cistern in order to silence him from saying something others did not want to hear. Perhaps we parish priests just slipped and fell into this cistern and now stand in a hole in the ground, our feet stuck in the mud, choosing to be silent in our protest. Or maybe we have grown numb in the cold night and are unable or unwilling to speak. I have come to believe that we don’t speak, we can’t speak, simply because we are afraid. And it is our fear that has paralyzed us, causing our feet to be stuck and our tongues to be silent. In a winter such as this, what is needed is *faith*—not fear.

In this, the long winter of our self-inflicted crucifixion, too often we priests blindly lash out in fear at

those we falsely believe to be the cause of all our pain: greedy lawyers, an overzealous media, and even those we have so grievously harmed. We believe in some sad and sordid way that all this is being done to us. We actually believe, we have somehow managed to convince ourselves, that priests are the true victims of this scandal. The pitiful and mournful cry I hear most often amid the sea of black suits and Roman collars echoes like some common dirge: *"Why are they doing this to me?"* ("They" meaning the lawyers, reporters, and victims themselves.) *"I've done nothing wrong!"* *"I am even afraid to wear my collar out in public."* And always: *"Why do they have to keep saying, 'Pedophile Priests'?"*

There are, of course, those in our ranks who attempt to resist the winter's night by self-righteously proclaiming the new springtime, by becoming more Catholic than the pope himself. These are the ones who boldly boast of their freshly starched Roman collars, who choose to see these collars as some sort of defiant badge of distinction, insisting that it is just a few bad apples who are responsible for all of this. These are the ones who tenaciously defend their priestly identities by overt acts of public piety, all the while being too busy praying to hear those who are weeping. I remember reading somewhere, but for the life of me cannot remember where, that *a truly spiritual person tries less to be holy than to be deeply human*. I cannot help but believe that the redemption of the Roman Catholic priesthood

will be found not in our being “set apart” but in our solidarity with those who weep.

In our long winter’s night certain existential questions have arisen concerning our priestly identity. In his groundbreaking and thought-provoking book, *The Changing Face of Priesthood*, Donald Cozzens writes:

At the core of the priest’s crisis of soul, then, is the search for this unfolding identity as an ordained servant of Jesus Christ. Behind and beyond issues of integrity and intimacy that shape the quality of his soul lies the lingering question of his true self as one ordained into the priesthood of the one High Priest.¹¹

Our crisis of soul, both as individuals and as the corporate soul of the priesthood, has little to do with how things appear. It is about how things are and ought to be. As I see it,

the quest for a new priesthood, or perhaps the discernment of a more actualized priesthood in this dark night, lies not in the disparaging debates between *alter Christus* or *in persona Christi* but in the lived reality of the suffering and death of Christ—that one true and authentic priest from whom and with whom all meaning, purpose, and existence of priesthood must necessarily originate. The cries of those victimized at the hands of those who would pretend to be Christ are in fact the cries of Christ and therefore the

cries of the modern priesthood . . . even more so they are the wounds of those brutalized—either by sins of the flesh, sins of presumption, or sins of just plain indifference—the wounds of Christ and, therefore, also the wounds of the priesthood.¹²

If ever the truth be told, the true victims of this scandal are not we priests. The victims are those we have harmed through our thoughts, words, and deeds. Those we have injured by the sins of our commission or our omission, in what we have done or what we have failed to do. In truth, their pain and suffering shame ours. This may be precisely what the poet Robert Service intended when he wrote: “Eternal truths that shame our soothing lies.”

Listen, then, to the whispers upon winter’s wind, crying out like a prophet in the wilderness or a poet in some barren wasteland.