

**16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
18 July 2021**

“Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock”

Unfiltered—that’s the title of a new track on *Ruthless*, the latest album from country singer, Gary Allan. In *Unfiltered*, Allan longs for the truth without any sugar-coating. The refrain declares, “If you’re gonna give it, give it to me straight.” Well, that’s what I’ll do in my homily today—just the facts, with no sugar-coating. You may not like hearing what I have to say, but as the lay faithful, you deserve the truth, so I’m going to give it, and I’ll give it to you straight.

In today’s reading from the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord declares, “Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture...You have not cared for them, but I will take care to punish your evil deeds.” For Catholics, our shepherds are the bishops, and in recent years, we have certainly seen bishops who have misled and scattered their flocks. The sex abuse scandal is the most conspicuous and damaging example of that. Both the perpetrators of evil and those who tried to hide their crimes from the Church and the world gravely wounded their victims and grievously scandalized the people of God.

One consequence of such scandal is that it taints the reputations, not just of those who sinned or covered up, but of all other bishops as well. Many of our bishops are good, conscientious and holy men pouring out their lives for their flocks, but the actions of a few have led to a virtual open season on *all* bishops—from all sides and from both outside the church and within. Their credibility has been eroded, their sacred office has been tarnished, and their God-given authority has been questioned. In many recent critiques of our bishops by fellow

Catholics, there has been neither a spirit of fraternal correction nor a willingness to forgive, despite the Lord commands that we foster both.

Take one example. Like most bishops in our country, Bishop Powers of Superior has had to deal with the novel responsibility of leading his flock through a global pandemic. Bishop Powers has sought to navigate through all of the often-conflicting evidence to best protect his people's spiritual *and* physical welfare. He has been bombarded with opinions from all sides, and he has wrestled mightily to prudently craft the best possible guidance he can as the situation has evolved.

And how has our bishop been rewarded for his conscientious efforts? Well, at least in our two parishes, I've heard him mocked and disparaged from folks on both sides of the issue—those who thought he should have been more restrictive, and those who thought he went overboard. Until very recently, I continued to hear grumbling and belly-aching, some as people were literally walking in the doors for Mass. I've seen others nearly dancing in the aisles at church when new guidance from the Bishop conformed more closely to their own opinions, openly mocking those who may not agree with them.

What I haven't heard is anybody verbalizing their sympathy for the Bishop's tough position or expressing their willingness to forgive what they think might be his errors in judgment. I've seen and heard a lot of self-righteousness, and a lot of ignorance about all that the bishop must weigh before coming to his decisions. I'm sure many of our parishioners have quietly chosen to cooperate with the bishop's guidelines, but I've seen little overt evidence of a generous and charitable willingness to bite the bullet and sacrifice personal opinions and preferences for the greater good of the entire diocese.

So, allow me to make a suggestion. Before reflexively criticizing our bishops, let's take a breath and a step back. We can't walk a mile in their shoes, but we certainly can obey the Lord's command to remove the plank from our own eyes before seeking to remove the speck from theirs. Before we rip our bishops for failing to adequately fulfill their obligations to teach, govern, and sanctify, let's first ask ourselves how we are doing at fulfilling our obligations as members of the Church. To evaluate that, I'd like us to go beyond the responsibilities common to all Christians, and consider how well we are fulfilling those obligations which come to us specifically as Catholics. We call those fundamental Catholic obligations the five precepts of the Church.

Before listing them, however, I'd first like to ask, how many of you have even heard of those five precepts? OK, given that Father David mentioned them in his homily just last week, I guess my next question is, how many of you were awake during Father's homily? Alright, for those of you who have heard of them, how many of you can list them? OK, so we clearly need a little catechesis, a little instruction. The general definition of a precept is "a guiding principle or rule intended to influence conduct." For Catholics, the *Catechism* tells us that "The obligatory character of these [five precepts]...is meant to guarantee to the faithful the indispensable minimum in the spirit of prayer and moral effort, in the growth in love of God and neighbor."

So, what are the five precepts of the Church? First, you shall attend Mass on Sundays and on Holy Days of Obligation. Second, you shall confess your sins at least once a year. Third, you shall receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least during the Eastern season. Fourth, you shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the

Church. And, fifth, you shall help to provide for the needs of the Church. Now, any one of those five could merit a homily of its own, but today, for our purposes, let's just consider how well we fulfill the first precept—the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and on Holy Days of Obligation.

But first, a reminder about the value of Mass. Vatican II taught us that the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith. We are thus encouraged to recognize that our personal encounter with Jesus Christ through Holy Communion at Mass is the well-spring of our faith and the greatest intimacy we can share with our Lord and Savior this side of Paradise. Because of the irreplaceable value of the Eucharist, we should long to share in the celebration and lovingly desire that intimacy with the One who came and died to save us. To ensure that our passion for the Lord does not fade, to reinforce our spiritual health, to foster unity among God's people, and to fulfill the commandment to keep the Lord's day holy, our Church obliges us to attend the Eucharistic celebration—that is, Mass—on all Sundays and Holy Days.

So, do you attend Mass every Sunday and keep that day holy for God? Or do other “sacred” rituals take precedence—like rooting for the Packers or participating in school sports or early-morning fishing or just sleeping in? None of those activities is wrong in and of itself, but they are wrong if they become excuses for missing Mass.

What are the consequences of missing Mass on Sundays without a legitimate excuse? The *Catechism* explains, “The faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness [or] care of infants), or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in the obligation commit a

grave sin.” And, to be clear, a “grave” sin is a *mortal* sin, a sin which drives out sanctifying grace, the very life of God, from our soul—a sin which, if unrepented before death, leads to damnation.

Recent polls suggest that on any given Sunday, only between 30 and 40 percent of American Catholics attend Mass—about half as many as the percentage attending on Sundays in the mid-1950s. Even more alarming, only about 22% of Catholics attend Sunday Mass *every* week, which means that nearly 4 out of 5 Catholics are committing mortal sins every single week.

I could find no statistics regarding attendance at Mass on Holy Days of Obligation, but based on my experience serving as a deacon at such Masses, it is clear that most Catholics are confusing “obligation” and “optional.” Mass attendance on Holy Days of Obligation is almost always less than at the most sparsely-attended Sunday Mass. In America, there are only six Holy Days of Obligation, but that obligation is no different than the Sunday obligation: an unjustified failure to attend such Masses is a mortal sin.

Furthermore, judging by the short lines for Confession each week and the long lines at Communion, most Catholics who occasionally miss Mass are compounding that grave sin by next receiving Communion while still in a state of mortal sin. If you miss Mass, and then later receive Communion without first confessing that you missed Mass, then you’ve committed a second mortal sin. As St. Paul said, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the body and blood of the Lord...and drinks a judgment on himself.”

So, just considering this one of the Church’s five precepts, most Catholics in America are falling woefully short of the minimum

commitment for worshipping the Almighty God, praising and thanking him, and keeping his day holy. When we bemoan the state of the Church in America, and are tempted to blame the bishops for their failures, perhaps we should just hold up a mirror to ourselves first.

Now, if you have failed to fulfill this particular precept, you might have one of two responses to what I've been preaching. The first could be indignation and outrage, believing that the Church has no right to establish those precepts and that the Church can't tell you what you can and can't do. Well, you would be wrong in that conclusion. Jesus explicitly gave that very authority to the Apostles—the first bishops—who then passed it on to their successors. He gave them the authority to bind and to loose, and he affirmed that their decisions here would be honored in heaven. When I preach next month, I'll explore that authority in more detail. But, for now, trust me—the Church is well within its authority to establish both the Sunday obligation and the obligation to attend Mass on Holy Days.

The second response you might have when hearing these stark truths—the one I pray you have—is to repent for failing to take the Mass obligations as seriously as you should have. Jesus longs for us to repent when we have strayed, and the Church is ever ready to share the Lord's mercy and forgiveness through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. So, if you have missed Mass without a legitimate excuse, repent and come to Confession. If you have missed Mass and then received the Eucharist without first receiving sacramental absolution, then come and confess that as well. If you have missed Mass without good cause, and have not yet had a chance to confess it to a priest, then I encourage you to refrain from receiving the Eucharist today. Wait until you've made a

sacramental confession, and then return to the Supper of the Lamb next week with a restored soul and a clean conscience.

Now, for all of you who do come to Mass faithfully and obey the other precepts, thank God, and God bless you! But as Han Solo said after Luke Skywalker destroyed his first Imperial fighter, “Great shot, kid! Don’t get cocky!” St. Paul, a somewhat more authoritative source than Han Solo, said much the same: “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you do not fall!” Remember that the five precepts are specifically, “the indispensable *minimum*” that we are obliged to fulfill as Catholics. Do any of us really want to stand before the Lord on Judgment Day and defend a luke-warm faith by declaring, “Gee, Lord, I *did* do the absolute minimum!”?

So, in closing, let’s remember that, just like us, our shepherds, the bishops, are flawed and imperfect people—most of whom are conscientiously doing their best to serve their people and seeking ways to draw their flocks ever closer to Jesus Christ. Let’s pray for our bishops regularly—whether we think they are good or bad at their jobs—because all of them need our prayers. The Lord himself declared that they will be held to a higher standard, so let’s not make their job any tougher than it already is. We won’t always agree with them; we may question how they govern their diocese and we might question their theological opinions. Such concerns are legitimate, and as lay Catholics you have a right and a responsibility to share those concerns with your bishop, *charitably and respectfully*. But, let’s not judge them too quickly or too harshly. Before we take our bishops to task for failing to fulfill *their* obligations, let’s first hold up that mirror to see just how well we are fulfilling our own.