

Once when I was in seventh grade, I went bowling with my best friend Donald and his Mom. I rarely went bowling, but Donald's family was more fun than mine. They had cooler stuff than we did – beanbag chairs, a full-sized pool table in their basement, they were the only people I knew who went bowling. Anyway, there we were in the bowling alley. We got our bowling shoes and went to our lane.

Now you need a little background to understand why I might have done what I did next. Seventh grade was my first year in Junior High. This was the first year we changed clothes in the boy's locker-room for PE and took a shower afterwards, etc. Maybe that new ritual of changing into PE clothes was why my brain went into autopilot as I sat down and started taking off my shoes to put on the bowling shoes. Because I didn't stop at taking off my shoes. Off came my socks, then standing up I took off my shirt and T-shirt. Then it was my pants. It was only when I had my pants half off that I snapped out of it.

With horror I suddenly realized, Holy Cow, I'm half-naked in a bowling alley – right next to my friend and his Mom. The possibilities for shame were infinite and flooded my brain. Donald would tell the whole school. But here's the interesting thing. Donald and his Mom hadn't noticed me – yet. They were deep in some argument. In a panic I looked around, and nobody was looking at me – yet. In a rush I desperately tried to get my clothes back on. Time slowed down. Buttons wouldn't work. It was a real, living nightmare.

I don't know if you have the periodic nightmare of being caught in public in your underwear or having to give a speech and forgetting your notes, or (one of my own) showing up late for mass and endlessly struggling to get into the vestments. But these are common experiences, underlining our fear being publicly shamed.

Today I want to preach on the second reading from II Timothy. Paul is writing to Timothy about not being ashamed. Listen again: "Stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my

hands. For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control. So do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord, nor of me a prisoner for his sake; but bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God.”

Are you ashamed of being a Catholic? I think many of us are today. At work, in the classroom, at the lunch table, in a car with friends – the topic of Jesus, the Church, or their teachings comes up, and we’re in a panic, almost as bad as me in that bowling alley. We’re in danger of being stared at, mocked, shamed.

Now, there is the whole sexual abuse scandal that is truly shameful. Priests have abused. Bishops have let them get away with it. We’re morally compromised and shamed by the world. But that shame is for not being who we’re supposed to be – for our failures to live out Christ’s teachings. And that shame can teach and spur change.

But what about the shame we might feel these days at being precisely who Jesus, Paul, the Church, ask us to be? Paul was writing to

Timothy from prison. Being in prison is shameful to the world. But he was in prison for preaching about Jesus. He preached a message that was contrary to the spirit of Caesar's world. And Paul asks Timothy not to be ashamed of him or that Gospel of Jesus, "do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord, nor of me, a prisoner for his sake."

The challenge is the same for us today. Are we going to we shamed by the Gospel or let the power of the Gospel working through the Holy Spirit overpower the world's attempts to shame us by it? "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather of power and love and self-control."

That Gospel teaches that there is a God who is love, who created and sustains all; that Jesus is that God – as well as being human like us; that He died on the cross and rose from the dead, gaining for us an eternal life above all this world's threats and temptations. Jesus' Gospel teaches us that we are to be poor in spirit and chaste in body, that we're to forgive everything and pray for everyone – and that the world

belongs to the meek and humble. And perhaps in this Respect Life Month we can be especially mindful of the Catholic teaching of the infinite value of every life from conception to natural death, the call to sexual chastity, and fidelity to divinely ordered marriage. These teachings grate on the world. It mocks such beliefs as foolishness or evil. But that is what Paul preached, and why he was in prison.

What about us? I think many of us are afraid Jesus will leave us similarly exposed to imprisonment (or at least social shaming) if we witness to others that we follow Him. We think, "Jesus' gospel isn't real or strong enough to protect me." But this hiding of Jesus is actually the cause for our shame. The Apostles in the Gospel ask Jesus, "Increase our faith." The Good News of Jesus will increase joy in us to the extent it's lived out and shared with others. But the opposite is also true. If we hide our faith it creates shame in us. It's the hiding of the rosary or the sign of the cross, the silence during that conversation about that controversial topic, that creates the shame, not the teachings of Jesus.

I would go back to my experience at the bowling alley. The funny thing was that when I realized that I was exposed to the world . . . the world didn't touch me. It was like there was a bubble around me. Everyone was looking elsewhere. Nobody saw my weakness. I eventually got my clothes back on – and nobody ever found out. It felt like I had been protected. It was weird but real.

But I think that's what Paul also experienced in a more serious way in his prison cell. Yes, they put his body in prison, and they wanted to shame him, but he wasn't ashamed. Conviction of the Gospel's truth meant he couldn't be shamed by the people of this world – and that is the greatest freedom. True honor and shame line up according to God's truth, not the world's passing fads and ideologies.

What about us? Are we silent from fear of offending the world? Then try stirring into flame the gift of faith God has given us by bringing it out in the open. Faith proclaimed protects us, a faith hidden, shames.