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Fifth Sunday of Easter

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 25, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

I am very flattered and honored that Fr. Fabian Slominski asked me to celebrate with him this Holy Eucharist this morning as he rejoices, as we heard him proclaim at the beginning, with such sincerity, in the 60 years that God has allowed him to serve as a priest in the Archdiocese of Detroit. I think we ought to acclaim Fr. Slominski at this moment and thank him for those 60 years of service. [Applause.]

I can tell you that as a priest, friend and brother of his, I've always looked up to him as a friend and as a model of what priestly service should be. Of course, it's appropriate that this morning as we celebrate his 60 years in the priesthood, that we reflect upon what priestly ministry is, and if we listen carefully to the scriptures today, we will be well instructed.

I hope we will leave this church more committed to that understanding of what an ordained priest is, but even more, what your priesthood is. I wonder if you listened carefully to those words of St. Peter in the second lesson this morning. They weren't addressed to Fr. Fabian or me or the other priests that are here with us; they were addressed to a group of newly baptized people -- people who had just come in to the community of disciples.

Here is what Peter says to them, first he speaks about Jesus, "He is the living stone rejected by the people but chosen by God and precious to God." Certainly that is true of Jesus, but then Peter says to those newly baptized, and these are words spoken to us: "On drawing close to Jesus, you also became living stones, to be built into a spiritual temple, a holy community of priests."

That's what it says -- "you became living stones built into a spiritual temple, a holy community of priests, offering spiritual sacrifices which please God through Jesus Christ." It's not just Fr. Fabian, me, or any other priests that Jesus calls to be priests, it's the whole community. Peter goes on to say, toward the end of his sermon to these newly baptized, "You are a chosen race, a community of priests, a consecrated nation, a people God has made God's own to proclaim God's wonders."

The whole community is called to serve as living stones being built into a temple where God is worshiped and proclaiming the good news about Jesus everywhere. "You have been called from your own darkness to the wonderful life of Jesus." That message is reinforced when we listen to Jesus speaking to those first disciples at the Last Supper. We have to understand, this wasn't 12 people sitting around a table with Jesus, it was the Passover meal, and this is the time of Passover.

If you know any Jewish people and they're celebrating Passover, it's the whole family, the whole community that gathers together. That's what it was when Jesus was celebrating Passover with his first disciples. Again,

hear what Jesus says to them and is now saying to us about the works that he had done: "Truly I say to you who believes in me will do the same works that I do and in fact will do even greater works."

That's always a mystery, I think, to people, what Jesus means by that. How can we do something greater than what Jesus did? Is that possible? Yes, of course, it is because the spirit of Jesus, the spirit of God, lives in this community of the church. All of the disciples -- the spirit lives within us and as we go out into the world, we go to places where Jesus could never go.

We meet people Jesus would never have met but Jesus meets them through us. We go to places Jesus can't go now because Jesus is in heaven with God, but we are his disciples. We are the living stones that carry on the works of Jesus and as he tells us, we do even greater works if we are faithful followers of his and try to carry out his works.

Where then, does that leave Fr. Fabian, me, the other priests? What's our role if the whole community is doing the work of Jesus, and must do the work of Jesus? I think if you go into another part of the gospel, in Matthew's gospel especially, there's an incident that I think, because it's so clear how it can happen and seems so real to life, that we remember it easily.

It was toward the end of the public life of Jesus and he had been with his disciples, teaching them and doing all the good things he had done in his life. It was obvious, because he had even said it, 'I'm going to go up to Jerusalem and I'll be handed over to my enemies, be tortured, put to death -- I'll be gone.' Well, they had heard this and someone who noted it especially was the mother of the sons of Zebedee, who are the disciples James and John.

She came to Jesus and she was looking into the future a little bit and said, "Look, when you come in to your Kingdom, make sure my sons are one at your right and one at your left." She wanted the highest places for her sons, and what mother wouldn't want that? But she was misunderstanding, as probably all the other disciples were, because after she had done that, Jesus called them all together. The rest of them were upset. How could she try to get those high places for her sons?

Jesus brings them all together and tells them a very important message, gives them a very dramatic lesson. He says, "Look, among the pagans, those in positions of authority lord it over others, but among you it cannot be that way. Those who are to be the leaders may not lord it over others, use power to demand this and that, to order people around." That's the way it's done in the world around us.

That's the way it's done in the Roman Empire Jesus was talking about -- those in authority lorded it over others, but "not among you." It can't be that way because "the one who is to lead must be the servant of all." That's the role for priests in this community of the living stones that make up the whole temple of God. We're supposed to be leaders, yes, coming forth from the people, designated by ordination to be leaders, but that means to serve; not to dominate, not to rule, not to make all the decisions.

Notice in that first Christian community, the incident that we hear about in the first lesson this morning, there was a problem in that early community. Earlier the apostle St. Luke had talked about how the community of

disciples was really extraordinary. Twice, in chapter two and chapter four, he speaks about how, in this community of disciples, nobody's in need because everybody brings what they have, they give it to the disciples and it's shared -- no one is in need.

But now suddenly -- they're human, they're sinners, so we've got dissension going on and people are upset. There are two factions. They're all converts from Judaism, but there are those Christians who live right there in Jerusalem, in the Holy Land, but the others who have been part of what was called the Diaspora, the Jewish people who had gone out into other parts of the world and they'd come back, either for the feast of Pentecost or to come back and stay.

They were not Hebrew-speaking; they were Greek-speaking people so there was this split. Those who were the Greek speakers thought (and well, evidently they were) they were being bypassed when it came to the distribution of the food and goods. They were pushed aside and others were getting more. But now look how the disciples resolved this problem. Peter doesn't come in and say, "Look, I want you to do this, that, or the other thing."

Luke says they called the whole community together and said, "Here's the problem. You have to talk about this and you have to do something about it." So they do. They decide, "We're going to set aside certain people," and they pick all people from the Greek-speaking community to figure out how to share the goods and how to do the distribution, so the people resolved the problem themselves.

The disciples don't say, "Here's how you do it." The people, with the Holy Spirit working through them, resolved that problem. That's how the church functioned in the beginning. It was a church that was a whole community. Everybody was aware, "I am alive with the spirit of Jesus. I am a disciple of Jesus. I do the work of Jesus." The leaders were what we would call today "enablers." They empowered the people by their leadership. They drew forth the skills of the people so that the church could act, not just the hierarchy or the priests; no, it was the church.

Do you know what? During this past week, we've had an example of that kind of leadership by Pope Benedict. I think it's amazing and I'm very grateful that it's happening. First of all, there are two issues that he spoke about while he's been here. One, it's been very noted in the media and we've probably paid attention to it because four times, he has brought up that terrible scandal within the church of the abuse of children by priests -- something we all almost don't want to talk about, but Pope Benedict has done it four times.

He hasn't said to the U.S. bishops, "Look, here's what you do. Do this, that or the other thing." No; he modeled what to do, and it's something the U.S. bishops haven't done yet, at least not the vast majority. He went to the papal nunciature in Washington the other evening and he invited victims to come and he listened to each one tell his or her story of horror, of what had been done. They wept and he wept, but he listened. That's an act of servant leadership because he was modeling what the U.S. bishops need to do.

So far, most of them have treated the survivors like enemies because it's been forced into the courts, and so it is with our legal system which is adversarial, you don't talk to the person who is suing you. They've rebuffed all of the victims instead of being pastors, leaders and servants. So we have a lot of bitterness, anger and continuing pain among these thousands of people who went through that terrible experience.

Maybe now the U.S. bishops following the leadership of Pope Benedict will invite victims to come individually so each one can tell his or her story. No bishop has really done that yet, and that would be the beginning of healing within our church. There is a model of servant leadership -- Pope Benedict, our Holy Father, is such a model and we in our church need to encourage our bishops to act the same way, to be that kind of servant by listening to those who have been hurt, those who have been most vulnerable. Listen and serve them by listening.

The other area where Pope Benedict gave us this model of leadership was in regard to the question of immigrants in our country. It's a question that you hear about, I'm sure. It's in our media all the time. Those running for President have talked about it and most of the time it's a situation where they say, "Push them out." Again, Pope Benedict hasn't said to the church in the United States, "Do this, that or the other thing." He hasn't said that to the bishops or to us, but he has reminded us in a very pastoral way, "These are your brothers and sisters." Think about that and then decide how to act.

You don't build a wall to keep your brothers and sisters out of your neighborhood, not if you really understand that they're brothers and sisters. So Pope Benedict has been telling the bishops and reminding all of us of that message -- they're our brothers and sisters. Many of them are baptized followers of Jesus just like we are, but they're also brothers and sisters in the human family. We don't turn brothers and sisters away. That's what Pope Benedict is reminding us of. Again, in a gentle way of servant leadership, he's giving us direction, trying to empower us to be the disciples of Jesus that we're called to be.

So today, as we celebrate Fr. Fabian's 60 years as a priest and we remind ourselves of what a blessing his life as a priest has been for those communities where he has given servant leadership, we remind ourselves also of what it means then for us to be those living stones, that chosen people, that holy priesthood, those who are called to do the works of Jesus, and even greater works than what Jesus did.

If we listen, if we have listened to God's word today, all of us will leave this church empowered to be the priests that we're called to be, and those of us who are ordained will try to leave here more determined than ever to be the servants, servants calling you forth to be what Jesus wants you to be. What a difference that will make in our world as all of us go forth, do the works of Jesus and even greater works than he did.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at at St. Cletus Parish in Warren, Mich.]

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