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Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 28, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

Some of you, I'm sure, have been to Rome and have seen the great basilica of St. Peter on Vatican Hill in the midst of Vatican City. If you haven't been there, you've certainly seen pictures of that tremendous basilica, overpowering in its size and richness and the symbol of power that it gives forth. Perhaps you noticed if you were there that around the dome -- which is the most extraordinary feature of this church, a huge dome -- in very large letters are the words that Jesus says today in the gospel.

They're written in Latin: "Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam." I still know my Latin. It says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." We've come to accept that, that it's Peter, now the successor of Peter, the pope, who has ultimate authority in the church, and especially since the first Vatican Council, which ended in the year 1870, so over 100 years ago, but still dominant in our church, we have ascribed to the pope, total power and authority in the church.

"To you I give the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." The pope, according to this interpretation, has total authority, total power within our church. We've come to be very used to that and have accepted that this is the interpretation of this gospel passage.

But in fact, that interpretation did not become part of the church's tradition until the fourth century, when Constantine (the Roman emperor) had been baptized and the church began to exist with freedom in the Roman Empire. It began to take on some of the traits of that empire -- power, prestige, wealth -- so this interpretation of this passage developed in that fourth century.

Before that, in the earliest tradition, the passage was interpreted as Peter being a type, an image of all the disciples. So Jesus is saying then, "It is on all my believing disciples that I build my church. To all my disciples I give the power to bind or to loose." That's the earliest interpretation and that's reinforced, actually, when you go just a little bit further into Matthew's gospel in the 18th chapter, and Jesus is speaking, not to Peter, but to all the disciples, the whole community. "I say to you, whatever you bind on earth, heaven will keep bound; whatever you unbind on earth, heaven will keep unbound."

So it wasn't Peter, and now the pope, that has the full authority and power within the church, it's the whole community, the church. That's what Jesus said to his disciples and that was the earliest interpretation of this passage.

Later on in the Eastern part of the church, the passage was interpreted as Jesus building the church on faith -- it was the faith of Peter that was emphasized -- so the church was built on the faith of believing Christians. Later on, in fact, in the Middle Ages, people began to interpret the passage that it's on Jesus himself, the Christ, that the church is built. Yet we have taken this one interpretation and have, in fact, enlarged upon it so that we have a church where one person (and this, if you think about it, is really extreme) has all legislative power. The pope can make any law, end any law, at any time, at any moment.

The pope is the only judge in the church -- supreme judicial authority.

And the pope has all executive authority. The pope can appoint a pastor in any parish, anywhere in the world because the pope is the one who has all the power within the church.

This is not a healthy thing, actually, for our church. We have to remember that when Jesus first began to preach and to teach, he was gathering a community of disciples. Jesus never organized a church. All of this only developed over a period of time, so it's changeable. It seems to me, and to many in the church today, that we need to change.

One of the reasons that this has become such a great need, we've come to realize is because of the terrible sex scandal that has happened in the church. We're aware of it here in the United States, but it's everywhere in the church. In some other countries, in fact, it's even worse than here.

Recently, a bishop from Australia published a book called *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*. His name is Bishop Geoffrey Robinson. It might be important to know a little bit about him because he was the co-chair of the committee in the Australian Bishop's Conference that was trying to deal with the sex abuse problem in that church. He served in that capacity for nine years. But then he became totally discouraged and upset because he was convinced that the bishops, the leaders of the church, who had the power under the pope, were not really dealing with the root causes of the crisis.

He wrote this book as a result of his experience and a couple parts of it, I think, are very pertinent to our gospel passages today.

> "Sexual abuse of minors by a significant number of priests and religious, together with the attempts by many church authorities to conceal the abuse, constitute one of the ugliest stories ever to emerge from the Catholic church. It is hard to imagine a more total contradiction of everything Jesus Christ stood for, and it would be difficult to overestimate the pervasive and lasting harm it has done to the church.
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> "This book is not directly about that abuse, but about a better church these revelations absolutely demand, a better church, a church more conformed to the real spirit and teaching of Jesus, a church that needs to be reformed to become a better church."

Bishop Robinson says this a little bit further on, speaking about his work on that committee:

> "Those years left an indelible mark on me, though they led me to a sense of profound disillusionment with many things within my church typified by the manner in which I was convinced that a number of people, at every level, were seeming to manage the problem and make it go away, rather than truly confront and eradicate it.
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> "Through all this, I came to the unshakeable conviction that within the Catholic church, there absolutely must be profound and enduring change. In particular, there must be change on the two subjects of power and sex. That we should look at sex is obvious, but there are two reasons why it is equally essential that we look at all aspects of power. The fact is that all sexual abuse is first and foremost, an abuse of power in a sexual form.
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> "But the second is that within the Catholic church, there is a constant insistence that on all important matters, Catholic people must look to the pope for guidance and direction. We think of the pope who has full authority over the whole church and we wait for the pope to act before we do what is necessary."

Then he says,

> "When a major matter arises, there is a notable and extraordinary absence of guidance or direction from the pope, as was certainly the case in relation to the sexual abuse of minors. It is inevitable that many will react according to older values rather than with a new mind to meet a new problem. Those older values have for a thousand years included secrecy, the covering over of problems and the protection of the good name of the church.

> I am convinced that if the pope had spoken clearly at the beginning of the revelations, inviting victims to come forward so that the whole truth, however terrible, might be known and confronted, and firmly directing that all members of the church should respond with openness, humility, honesty and compassion, consistently putting victims before the good name of the church, the entire response of the church would have been far better.
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> "Within the present structures of the Catholic Church, it is the pope alone who has the power to make the changes that are necessary."

And as he points out as we go along in the book, the pope failed in this instance and bishops around the world had failed, so we really haven't dealt with the problem. It's still going on in our church in spite of the fact that we may have heard bishops in this country say, "We've put it behind us." That's not true. We haven't really got down to the radical causes and tried to make the changes that are necessary.

No pope, no bishop, is being held accountable. That's what happens when all power is in one person, and/or in every diocese, in the one person the pope appoints. That's why Bishop Robinson and many people throughout the world and in the church are calling for radical change in our structures within the church. We have to go back to what Jesus told those disciples: "You are the church. All of you share responsibility. All of you have power to make the changes."

We cannot allow our church to be a church where the pope alone is considered the legislator, the judge and the executor. The whole church needs to act; we need to change. And as we maybe become more convinced that there is a need for structural change in the church, and we join with groups in our country and other parts of the world that are working for such change, we try to bring about reform in our church.

What we need to do, I think, all of us, is to take very seriously what Peter said to Jesus. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." We have to recognize Jesus for who he is, and then we have to follow the way of Jesus, which is not a way of power, prestige, wealth. Right after this incident that is recorded in Matthew's gospel that we heard today, Jesus goes on with his disciples and he begins to speak to them some more and he says, "Look! The Son of Man, I, am going up to Jerusalem where I will be handed over to my enemies, I'll be tortured and executed, crucified."

And when Jesus announces this, the same Peter who had said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," now says, "No! You can't let that happen. You don't have to let that happen! You have crowds following you. You have power. You can fight against them. You could be victorious through that power." Do you know what Jesus says to Peter? "Get behind me, you Satan! You're a stumbling block because," he says to Peter, "you are thinking according to human ways, not according to the way of God."

This would be the most important change we could make in our church, if all of us began to think in the ways of God and not in human ways, where we try to have power, wealth, prestige; we try to be in control. No, we have to try to follow the way of Jesus. "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus," this is what Paul said

to the church at Philippi, "for though he was God, did not think being God was something to be clung to, but emptied himself, took on the form of a slave, became helpless, but trusted totally in God. So that same one is raised up by God."

That's the Jesus we have to listen to and follow.

We have to bring about change in our church, so that we don't have a church that works according to the patterns of the world around us, the patterns of the Roman Empire, the patterns of great corporations or military establishment. We have a totally different way of acting -- the way of Jesus, which gives up power, wealth, prestige and so on.

Our whole church has to change, but of course as always, that change begins with each one of us. And so today, as we listen to the scriptures, we listen carefully and we, I hope, try to commit ourselves to be that whole community of disciples of Jesus, to whom Jesus says, "I will build my church on you and on your faith," and then we try to be faithful to the way of Jesus, which is not the way of power, prestige and wealth.

But each of us begins to live according to the way of Jesus more faithfully, and we work then to make this happen in our whole church -- the bishop of Rome, the bishop of every diocese in the world and every Christian community, in the world, that we begin to follow the way of Jesus. That's the kind of reform that we need in our church, and that's the kind of reform that would finally heal and overcome the terrible scandal that has developed.

I truly hope that each one of us will commit ourselves to that kind of reform within our own lives and help to make it happen within our church.

[**Editor's Note:** This homily was given at St. Hilary Parish, Detroit, Mich. The book Bishop Gumbleton cites is *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church, Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus* written by Austrailan Bishop Geoffrey Robinson. To see more about this topic, click here: Bishop Geoffrey Robinson [1].]

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