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Confirmation at St. Mel Parish

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 20, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

[Bishop Gumbleton delivered this homily to the Confirmation class at St. Mel Parish, Dearborn Heights, Mich., Nov. 17]

Your teachers and pastor have given me very powerful testimony that you have prepared for Confirmation and they're confident that you're ready to be confirmed, so I have no doubt that you are well prepared and ready for this sacrament tonight. However, because it is such an important moment in your life (and I want you to be thinking about this), it's a moment when Jesus, through his spirit, enters into your spirit, deep in your heart and touches you in a very deep way, something that can change your whole life, so it's a very important moment for you.

So for that reason, I want assurance from you that you feel you're ready to be confirmed, but what's even more important, that you want to be confirmed. So I ask you now, do you wish to be confirmed?

[Group answers: "I do."]

I don't think anybody could hear that. You're witnesses, you know that? Remember, that's what you said, when you're a confirmed disciple of Jesus, you become a witness, so we have to be able to hear that. Let's do that again. Do you want to be confirmed?

[Group answers: "I do!"]

All right. That's much better.

Now you may be seated. And of course, you're wondering, "Why would he ask that question at this point?" because you have gone through this whole ceremony, I mean, preparation time and you have prepared very carefully, you're all here tonight, so obviously you want to be confirmed. But I ask the question and I always want to make sure that there's a strong answer to that question because first of all, as I mentioned before, and you remember this from your preparation, when you are confirmed, you commit yourself to be a witness, in a public way, to Jesus.

You're going to be a witness, so it's important that you stand up here, as you do tonight, and witness -- before

this community, your family, friends, parish members -- by saying, "Yes! I believe in Jesus and I know Jesus and I'm going to follow Jesus." So you are giving witness when you express that tonight. But then, even more importantly, is to think about this: What are you saying yes to when you say, "I want to be confirmed"? You could think about it and say, "Well, we're saying yes to this ceremony that will take place now and be over in 45 minutes or so, and we all go home, it's all over."

No, that's not it. You're not just saying yes to a ceremony; you are saying yes to Jesus. You're saying, "Yes, I freely choose to be a disciple of Jesus Christ." Now that's a very, very important decision: "I choose to follow Jesus." That means you're going to live according to his teachings. You're going to live according to his values. You're going to try to get to know Jesus and to live your life as Jesus lived his. That's a very, very dramatic decision in your life. It can change everything.

And it's not just for tonight or for this week or a short time, it's for the rest of your life. You're saying, "I will follow Jesus Christ."

So now we need to think about what that means. In one church where I went to celebrate confirmation some time ago, the people in the confirmation class had prepared it -- they had a very huge banner that they put up at the back of the church (it would be back where that red cloth is) and the banner said, "Gifted to make a difference." That's what it means when you say yes to Jesus. You're gifted, but not just for yourself; it's to make a difference in our world.

That's why you receive this sacrament. That's why you say, "I want to follow Jesus. I want to help to transform the world into the reign of God." Tonight, if we listen to the scripture lessons, we will see how that is so true, what happens when we're confirmed. We're saying, "Yes, I know that I am now gifted." In that first lesson tonight, where we heard from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, he was writing to a community of Christians, like yourselves, and what did he say?

You heard this tonight, that to each individual, the manifestation of the spirit is give for some benefit. See, you get some gift and there are different kinds of gifts, Paul lists them. To one is the expression of wisdom, the gift of wisdom. To another (the seven gifts of the holy spirit), understanding, right judgment, courage, knowledge, love and a feeling of reverence and awe in God's presence. Or Paul puts it in other words -- you get the gift of healing, reaching out to console, to touch, to heal people, or the gift of mighty deeds, doing good things, prophecy, speaking for God on behalf of the truth.

See, these are all the gifts that you give, but it's to make a difference. If we really listen to the gospel lesson tonight, I think we understand how great is the difference we can make. If Jesus came into this world, and we've heard this I'm sure, to save us so we could save our souls, well, that's true, but it was much more than that. And the gospel lesson makes this clear to us. When Jesus first proclaimed those words in that synagogue at Nazareth, it was at a very important point in his life.

I think we understand this and really get the full meaning of what he's saying in tonight's gospel if we just go back a little way in Luke's gospel. A short time before he came into that synagogue, which we heard about tonight, Jesus had been baptized. He had become a disciple of John the Baptist and one day after following John

for a while, he asked to be baptized, so he went down into the river Jordan, John baptized him. Then he came up out of the river and Luke tells us he went away by himself to pray and it was a very, very important moment in the life of Jesus because Luke tells us that as he was praying, he experienced the Holy Spirit coming upon him. See, just as you will tonight, the spirit of God comes upon you. That spirit came on Jesus and as he was enveloped in the spirit of God, he heard God speaking deep in his heart, "You are my servant, my chosen one. In you I am well pleased."

Though most of us probably don't recognize these words, Jesus knew what those words were and where they came from. They're from the first part of Chapter 42 of the book of the prophet Isaiah, where the prophet goes on to say (and Jesus was aware of this), "You are my servant, my chosen one, in whom I am well pleased. You do not cry aloud in the streets. You do not break the bruised reed, you do not quench the wavering flame, but you bring true justice to the nations."

What do those words mean? "Cry aloud in the streets" They are a call to arms. The servant of God rejects that -- rejects human power, violence, arms and war -- and is instead very nurturing, loving, doesn't break the bruised reed.

You can think of someone trying to grow a plant and you have to be very careful with it, that it doesn't die. You have to nurture it with love and care. Or "quench the wavering flame" -- if you've watched a fire gradually going out and you try to bring it back, you have to be very careful how you do it, but you can do it. And that's the way the servant of God was to be. So Jesus began to think about that. Then he went off into the desert for six weeks of prayer, and that's when he confronted evil in a very dramatic way, through the temptations in the desert.

You're all aware of those. Then after that six weeks of prayer, [penance], and fasting, Jesus came back and that's when he went into the synagogue at Nazareth. He was ready to begin his public life, so in that synagogue he's asked to read. Now as you heard in the gospel tonight, Luke says the leader of the synagogue gave him the scroll of the book of the prophet Isaiah, but we should notice, Luke says he carefully unrolled the scroll until he found the place.

He knew what he was looking for and then he read those words, which we heard, "The spirit of God is upon me. God has anointed me and sends me to proclaim good news to the poor," see, to change things, "good news for the poor, heal the broken-hearted, to give the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to bring justice and to proclaim God's year of favor." That was the jubilee year when all debts were forgiven, when wealth was redistributed, when everyone was given a new chance to live a full human life -- the reign of God.

That's what Jesus said. He proclaimed those words, then he sat down and as Luke says, "All eyes were fixed on him." What's he going to say? "This day, this scripture passage is fulfilled even as you listen." See, right now, this is what's happening. Jesus said, 'This is my mission, to proclaim good news to the poor, heal the broken-hearted, give the blind new sight, set the downtrodden free. That's what I'm here for. Change the world, make a difference.' What a tremendous difference the way of Jesus can make in our world.

Tonight, this may sound like a lot, and it is, that you're taking upon yourself, but you're being gifted to make a difference in our world, to try to do those things that Jesus said, "This is why I have come." There are so many ways in which, if we really follow Jesus, if we take seriously his example, his words, his witness, try to be like

Jesus, we could change our world, transform it to make it the reign of God, where everyone would have a full human life, where there would be peace and fullness of life for every person.

There are so many ways we can do that, but tonight I want to tell you just two very specific things that I hope you'll think about and try to make part of your life from now on. I guess I could say this, not just for these young men and women (see, I'm putting a big burden on them), but all of us, to remind ourselves we've been confirmed, we have this mission. One of them is to really bring good news to the poor, to try to change things in our world. And there are many, many places where we can reach out to do that right in our own neighborhood, right in our own school or place of work, that we can help others.

But I'm thinking about one place where, very dramatically, people are desperately poor, and that's the country of Haiti. It's been in the news recently. Maybe you even saw some of the pictures on television where a school collapsed. They have no heavy equipment in the country and they couldn't move the heavy concrete, so almost 100 kids were killed. It's a country where just recently there have been three hurricanes. It's the poorest country in our hemisphere.

But here's what really, I think, might touch you. In Haiti, where three-quarters of the population earns less than $2.00 a day, that's less than $800 a year. Who can live on that? One in five children is chronically malnourished, they're never getting enough to eat. The one business booming amid all the gloom is the selling of patties, cookies, made of mud. Can you believe that? People so desperately hungry, they eat cookies made of mud. Now some oil and sugar typically is added to it.

One young man said, "It's salty and you don't know you're eating dirt, but it makes your stomach quiet down," you're putting something into your stomach -- cookies made of mud. Now shouldn't it be the case in our world where God has given enough for everybody to have a full human life, that we could change things so that people wouldn't be dying of starvation, so that kids wouldn't be eating cookies made of mud? Of course we could, but we really have to say, "I want to make things different."

We have to change things. We have to understand that we're gifted to make a difference, so we have to find out about these things; we have to do what we can to help, whether we start right here or whether we reach out to a country like Haiti or some other part of the world. Somehow we have to, if we're going to follow Jesus, carry on his work. We have to work for justice, to change things so that everyone has a chance for a full human life. Jesus was called to be that servant who brings true justice into the world, and so are we.

And now the second thing, and this is something that Pope John Paul II urged upon young people. Many times, whenever he went to another country, he'd always gather tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of young people, people like yourselves, and he would speak to them very lovingly, but with great fervor too. The last time he traveled, a few months before he died, he went to Spain. This was in May of 2003.

When he was in Spain, the first night he was there, the reporter writing about his visit said, "Still filled with a palpable sadness over the war in Iraq," which had just started -- the second war in Iraq -- and he had tried so hard to prevent it, "John Paul told an audience of hundreds of thousands of Spaniards that what he desperately wanted for the world was peace and he kept repeating that word, 'The world needs peace. We must have peace.'"

He kept repeating it like a mantra because he was so filled up with that idea that we can't let this world go on with the wars and the violence that we continually have happen in our world.

So we need peace. But then the next day, carrying on this scene when he was speaking to a crowd of a couple hundred thousand young people, he said to them, "Beloved young people, you well know how concerned I am about peace in the world," and then he condemned what he called a "spiral of violence, terrorism and war." Then he begged those young people, "Be artisans of peace." Like an artist, you have a vision, a dream, and then you make it happen.

A great sculptor like Michelangelo would see a block of marble -- you and I would probably just see the block of marble -- he could see David or Moses in that block of marble and he would chip away and smooth it, until finally, this beautiful statue emerged. But he had the vision first, then he worked to make it happen. So John Paul was saying to these young people, "Be artisans of peace." Dream about how it could be in your home, in your neighborhood, in our city, our nation, the world, then make it happen. Respond to blind violence and hatred with the fascinating power of love. See, that's the way of Jesus.

We're going to change the world, not through war, not through killing, not through violence or hatred. The way we will change the world and make it the reign of God is through the fascinating power of love. That's what Jesus preached. That's how Jesus lived. That's why he died -- to show us that even being put to death by your enemies out of hatred, you respond with love, "Father, forgive them." That's Jesus and his way.

Now tonight, if we're really serious about making this choice to follow Jesus, we have to decide and reflect upon the reality, we are gifted to make a difference, and the difference we can make is that we can transform our world so that it becomes the reign of God. As we continue with this ceremony, I beg everyone here to [be] fervent in prayer so that the holy spirit really will come down upon these young people, but not just upon them, upon all of us.

So that when we leave the church tonight, we will go out of here convinced that each of us is to be a witness to Jesus and that we are gifted to make a difference in our world, and that if we really live the way of Jesus, we can transform our world so that the reign of God will break forth in its fullness. Isn't that something really worth giving your life for? Tonight you have that opportunity to say yes to Jesus and I hope you will do that with great fervor and great conviction and great determination. All of you are being confirmed by every one of us in this church so that we do leave the church ready to make a difference in our world.

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