NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

'... and Mary was welcomed'

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 22, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

Bishop Gumbleton delivered this homily July 18 at the National Pax Christi Conference in Chicago. He preached on the gospel text for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Luke 10:38-42, the story of Mary and Martha. "In today's gospel," he said, "we're being shown Mary as the one who chose the better part because she was living out the role of a disciple ... that and Mary was welcomed.?

The complete text of the homily follows.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 18:1-10a

Psalm 15:2-3, 3-4, 5

Colossians 1:24-28

Luke 10:38-42

Full text of the readings [1]

As we try to listen deeply to God's word today, there are a couple of things that stand out immediately as things that we might reflect upon and perhaps listen to in a way that would bring changes in our lives. Of course the first thing that is most obvious is hospitality, welcoming the stranger. You notice how Abraham, with great joy actually, stops the strangers and says, "Stay here, visit with us," and then begins to give all the orders to have everything taken care of, we might say taking on the "male role," and of course inside the tent is Sarah who receives the orders, but that's not my main point; it's hospitality.

This was the culture of the time and remains the culture even now in the Middle East, where hospitality is one of the most important things you can do -- you welcome the stranger. If we wanted to go on with this, we could talk about how we, as individuals, must be hospitable, welcoming people into our homes, our families, into our parish community, into our church, not excluding anyone. We could think about welcoming strangers into our nation, welcoming them instead of building walls to keep them out, but I'm not going to go along that line.

Another thing, though, that is so clear in the lesson is the idea of friendship and how Jesus developed that spirit within himself, to be a friend and to have friends. I'm sure that for Jesus, a passage in one of the Books of Wisdom was something he probably prayed over, "A faithful friend is a secure refuge. Whoever has found a friend has found a treasure. A faithful friend is beyond all price. Hold your friend as priceless. A faithful friend is a lifesaving remedy and those who love God will find one." Friendship is so important, and the need to nurture friends and to develop friendship is so important in order for us to become fully the human person God wants us to be.

And as I think about this, I think of how different things could be in our church if that charism of celibacy that we still try to hold up as a very important charism in our church, if, in formation of young people -- priesthood, religious life -- were taught a very positive understanding of celibacy instead of what happened when I went through the seminary, even now in seminaries and formation houses, celibacy is taught, if it's taught at all, as something negative. "Don't develop friendships, close yourself off from others."

That wasn't Jesus. He had friends, he cherished his friends. He had intimate relationships and affectionate relationships. Think of the woman kissing his feet. Think of John resting on his breast at the Last Supper. Jesus was affectionate and loving, and knew how to develop friendship in his life. All of us need that, but especially in our church it would be so important -- we would not have lonely priests turning to addictions of one kind or another. Or we wouldn't have the problem, probably, of the terrible sex abuse scandal in our church if we had healthy, celibate priests and religious. But again, that's not something that I'm going to develop. I'll let you think

about it.

But what I wanted to concentrate on, and I guess make the main point of our reflection today, is to remind ourselves of something that Jesus said at the Last Supper. This is in chapters 14, 15 and 16 of John's gospel. Jesus has been carrying out a long discourse with his disciples, a very intimate conversation, but at this point he says, "I still have many things to tell you, but you cannot hear them now. But when the spirit of truth comes, the spirit will guide you into the whole truth. The spirit will take what is mine and make it known to you, and in doing this, the spirit will glorify me."

So Jesus was telling his disciples there at the end of his life how he had taught them a lot, but there were so many more things that he could not teach them. It was probably just a matter of time but also how much they could absorb and take in, so he said you need not worry because the spirit will come and teach you those things that I have not been able to teach you. Of course in the early church, one of the first things that happened was when the community of disciples began to have a very, very serious dispute that tore the whole church apart, the small community that was developing, and Jesus had never spoken about this.

What about those whom you invite into the community who are not already Jews? Because Jesus had established a community of disciples that were only Jews. They were following the full Jewish Law. Some people, after Jesus was gone (the leader of them was James, an apostle in Jerusalem), demanded that no one become a Christian unless the person first undergo conversion to Judaism, become a full, practicing Jew, and then become a follower of Jesus. Whereas Paul went out into Asia Minor and began to preach and proclaim the good news to those who weren't Jews, and began to bring many of them into the community, so this dispute began.

There were those who said you must first become Jews before you become followers of Jesus and those who said no, that's not necessary; you're not to be bound up with those 613 laws that the Jewish people followed. You're free from that. Follow Jesus and his way. Well, this is one of those times when they had to listen to the spirit speaking to the church. They had to hear, because Jesus had not given them guidance, and so they did. They listened. They gathered together the community in Jerusalem and Paul and Barnabas told what had happened with them and how they, in their experience, understood and could see how God was pouring forth the spirit on those who were not Jews and they were welcomed into the community. James set forth his views. They listened to each other and they came up with a solution. It was kind of a compromise but everyone agreed, "This is how we'll do it."

So now, all of us are members of the community of disciples of Jesus and we did not have to become Jews first. That's obviously the way it's been since the beginning. Well, there were other things that Jesus had not spoken about clearly and given clear direction. Just a couple of them would be, for example, the death penalty. The church itself had an official executioner until almost the 20th century, but the spirit is speaking to the community so now we have a change in our catechism. John Paul deliberately wrote a new item in the catechism that said, "God has been speaking to us, the spirit is guiding us, and it's obvious that we cannot allow for people to be executed, no matter what their crimes. That goes against what the spirit is telling us."

Another way the spirit has spoken to the church through the ages is the issue of slavery. It wasn't until 1965 during the second Vatican Council that the church, official teaching church, for the first time, declared slavery wrong, immoral, contrary to the way of God. The church itself had had slavery. Paul, in his letters, had never spoken out clearly against slavery when Onesimus, the slave of Philemon, ran away. Paul sent him back and bade Philemon to be kind to him. He didn't tell Philemon to stop having slaves, and that went on. Of course, the church, until modern times, itself has had slaves, but now we understand, the spirit has spoken to us; slavery is wrong.

We must never, of course, own another person, have another person as an object, a piece of property. It's so

clear to us, but that's because the spirit has spoken. But now I'm convinced the spirit is also speaking to us, and the gospel lesson today shows us clearly that there were differences in the church in the understanding of the role of women, profound differences. Part of the church welcomed women as leaders, and I can cite some different examples. Even in the gospel itself, Jesus had women as his disciples. In the incident in today's gospel, we're being shown Mary as the one who chose the better part because she was living out the role of a disciple ...

Mary was welcomed as one who was a learner, a disciple. In his public life, he had women who carried out roles of service for him. One was kind of an administrative role. The women followed him -- Mary Magdalene, Johanna and Susanna -- they provided for him. They took care of his needs, but then as the church began to grow, we'd find citations of women evangelizers and teachers -- women who had that role in the church: evangelizer, teacher. Prisca, Euodia, Syntyche are mentioned by name. There were women prophets -- the four daughters of Philip mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles.

There were the heads of house churches, women who were the head of a church, a community that gathered in a home, which was the way the first community gathered together, and there were women who were the heads of those churches -- [Nympha], Mary, Lydia, Prisca -- all mentioned in the scriptures. But then there was the other side where the word of Jesus had not been so clear, so at 1 Corinthians, the first letter of Paul to the church at Corinth: "Let women be silent in the assemblies as in all the churches of the saints. They are not allowed to speak. Let them be submissive as the Law commands," see, that was the other side. Or also in the first letter of Paul to his disciple Timothy, you find something along the same lines: "Let a woman quietly receive instruction and be submissive. I allow no woman to teach or to have authority over men. Let them be quiet."

There are the two sides and that's gone on now; it hasn't been resolved. We have the teaching clearly that women were given leadership roles in the church. We have today's gospel, Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus as a disciple would, and in that time, only a man would. We have those other examples of the letters of Paul and also in the Acts of the Apostles especially. So we ask ourselves, as this has gone on now all these centuries, could the spirit be speaking to our church in a way to give us guidance on how to resolve this question? Jesus hadn't told the disciples ahead of time, but he promised them at that Last Supper, "I will send a spirit and the spirit will guide you."

Wouldn't it be a blessing for our church if we would imitate the example of the first community of disciples? When they came upon something where there were the two sides, they came together and they listened to one another. Those who were the leaders of the church at Jerusalem listened to Paul and the other disciples who had gone out into the other parts of the world outside the Holy Land. They listened and they understood what God was saying to them, and they allowed freedom for those who wanted to join the church, become part of the community and not be a Jew. Listening to what is happening in our world today.

In our culture and in much of modern culture throughout the world, women are beginning to have leadership roles in societies where they never did before. In our own nation, of course, women could not even vote until the 20th century and were not allowed full citizenship, but now our culture tells us and we are acting upon it. Is not the spirit speaking through that culture as the spirit spoke through those in the early church who wanted to be Christians without being Jews, or how the spirit has spoken to the church to give up any connection with slavery, how the spirit has spoken to the church saying you may not kill even a terrible criminal? I believe the spirit is speaking to the church and the spirit is telling us that the role of Mary in today's gospel must be honored. The role of those first women in the early communities who were leaders of the church must be honored, and we must try to hear the spirit speaking to us, and at least in our church, allow discussion, allow us to listen to one another and to hear what God is saying.

As we do that, we listen, again, to what Paul said in that letter to the church at Colossae, where he's talking about how God has revealed the mystery that was hidden for centuries, and now God wills to make it known to

all of us, the riches and even the glory that God's mysterious plan reserved until now. This mysterious plan that is revealed is that Christ is in you and you are in Christ. This Christ we preach. We warn and teach everyone true wisdom is aiming to make everyone perfect in Christ. For this cause I labor and struggle with the energy of Christ Jesus working powerfully in me. Paul is saying that Jesus lives equally in every one of us. That's the mystery that God has revealed.

And if Jesus is living in every one of us, every one of us has a right to be a full disciple of Jesus, carrying out whatever role of the ministry service God calls us. So we listen to those women in our church who say "I am called." Christ is in them as Christ is in every male member of the church. I hope and pray that all of us will listen deeply to God's word today and that we will hear what the spirit is speaking to the church at this time in history and in our church throughout the world.

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