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Confirmation reminds us that we've got a friend

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 15, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

My dear candidates,

Both of your pastors have said very strongly that they are convinced that you are ready for the Sacrament of Confirmation, and I have read your letters in which you asked for the sacrament and I was very impressed with what I read there. It gave me real assurance that you have prepared and you know what's happening today. So I can accept that recommendation and from what you said in you letters.
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However, as you know because you have prepared so carefully, this a very important moment in your life.

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Ezekiel 37:12-14
Psalm 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8
Romans 8:8-11
John 11:1-45 or 11:3-7, 17, 20-27, 33b-45
Full text of the readings [1]

It's a moment when God touches your spirit deep in your heart with the spirit of Jesus in a very special, profound way. And so because it is so important, it's not only good your pastors recommend you but also it's important that you in fact want to receive the sacrament of Confirmation.

And so I ask you at this point: do you want to be confirmed? (low voices saying I do)

Uh-oh. I couldn't hear that.

There's a lot of you here; let's do that again. Do you want to be confirmed? (stronger voices proclaiming I DO!)

All right!

Remember one of the things you learned about Confirmation is when you become a confirmed member of the church, you have a special responsibility. We talk about becoming an adult Christian -- in fact, some of you put that in your letters. As an adult member of the community, you begin to take on responsibility.

And what's one of the most important responsibilities of the sacrament of Confirmation? It's to be a public witness to your faith.

So when you say, "Yes, I want to be confirmed," then everybody here can hear you and you are giving witness right now that you believe -- that you really are a disciple of Jesus.

That's why I wanted you to say that in a way that could show that you are giving witness to your faith. I might mention that all of us are responsible to give public witness to our faith. Just by coming together like this every Sunday celebrating the Eucharist together we give witness to one another that we believe in Jesus -- we follow Jesus.

And so that's a very important part of this sacrament that you say, "Yes, I want to be confirmed."

But now, when you say "yes" to confirmation, what are you saying "yes" to?

You could think of it as a ceremony. It will take place in the next forty-five minutes or an hour and then it's over and we all leave, go home and that's it. No, it's not. It's more than that.

It's not just a ceremony that you're saying yes to. When you say "I want to be confirmed," you're saying yes to Jesus. You're saying, "Yes, I want to follow Jesus Christ; I want to be a disciple of Jesus." I want to learn from Jesus, be his disciple. I want to live according to the values of Jesus, follow his way. And sometimes that's hard.

He asks very much of us if we are going to really be authentic and honest in following Jesus and all that he teaches us in the scriptures. We could go on and talk about some of those things that are part of being a disciple of Jesus and how difficult it can be at times to live up to the radical message that Jesus teaches.

But, today because of the Gospel, I want us to reflect on something else that this sacrament means. For you today, but for all of us who have been confirmed.

You must have noticed in the Gospel it's a very extraordinary incident in the life of Jesus. How his friend Lazarus is sick, Martha and Mary, his sisters, friends of Jesus send him word, but he doesn't come right away and Lazarus dies. Then when Jesus gets there Martha meets him and says, 'Lord, if you had been here our brother Lazarus would not have died.' She thought of him as a wonder worker. He healed many sick people. He could have healed Lazarus, but he didn't.

Then Jesus, though, says back to Martha, "Well, he'll rise again." Martha says, "Well, of course, I know on the last day."

But what does Jesus say at that point? He says, "I am the resurrection. You don't have to wait until the last day, until the end of time. I am the resurrection. Who ever believes in me, even if they die, shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

You are alive with the fullness of God's life right now. We don't have to wait until we get to heaven to share everlasting life. It's right now -- that's the gift that God gives to us in this sacrament of confirmation.

When you receive the spirit of Jesus you become alive with Jesus. And so you are already sharing everlasting life. And if we follow Jesus carefully we begin to experience the blessings of that fullness of life, the blessings of joy and peace and goodness that come when you follow Jesus and live according to his values.

And so what Jesus says today to Martha, "I am the resurrection," we want to think about that, because when we believe we begin already to share the life of Jesus. We begin to enter into everlasting life.

But now as we reflect on that, I also want you to think about this. Martha says back to Jesus, "Well, of course, I know he'll rise at the last day," and Jesus then says "I am the resurrection -- do you believe this?"

And so he's asking us: do we believe it?

While it might seem almost beyond the possibility of being true that the son of God would enter into my spirit, in this gospel lesson we see Jesus not only as the son of God, who says, "I am the resurrection." We see Jesus very much as someone like us in every way.

Look at what happens when he goes to the tomb. These are his friends, Martha and Mary. He loves them. Lazarus was his friend. Jesus gets to the tomb and, as someone like us, the experience of death is overwhelming. Jesus wept, that's what John says. He broke down and cried like anyone of us would. If one of our dearest

friends, someone in our family, our brother, sister, mother, father. When they die we experience terrible grief. And Jesus was like that. He wept.

And so when we think of Jesus as son of God, we should also think of Jesus as son of Mary, one like us in every way. Fully human. Then we understand how Jesus could be friends of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. And that's what he wants to be to us: to be our friend. And once we really share the fullness of the life of Jesus as we do through baptism, Confirmation and holy Eucharist -- the sacraments of initiation into his life -- Jesus is there as Son of God but also as our friend.

And what that means is what friendship means in our life at anytime. We all need friends. We try to develop friends, we try to be people who love and who are loved. That's what it means to be a friend.

In fact, later on in the life of Jesus, shortly after this incident when he moves into the last week of his life, this happened just before that. Remember on Holy Thursday night Jesus gathers with his disciples, and one of the beautiful things that happens there during that last celebration of the Passover, that Jesus celebrated with his closest friends, he says to them at one point, "No greater love can anyone have for another then to lay down your life for your friends.' No greater love then to lay down your life for your friends."

And then Jesus says to the disciples and he says to all of you, all of us today, "You are my friends; you are my friends. I'll do anything for you, lay down my life." And he does it, of course, doesn't he? Lays down his life for us, because we are his friends.

And so today as you celebrate this sacrament of confirmation, I hope you'll think about that, that Jesus is your friend. And he'll be your friend forever, he'll lay down his life for you, do anything for you, because he's your friend and you're his friend. And now as we celebrate the sacrament, live out the sacrament, what's important is to deepen that friendship.

Friendships don't just drop out of the sky, you have to work on it. You have make a friendship happen, and so each of us can become a better friend of Jesus. Whenever we come to church on Sundays, listen to the scriptures. Listen to what Jesus says to what he does and begin to understand what a great friend he is. That's the blessing you have today, that Jesus, who is son of God and so is the resurrection and the life, is also your friend.

Rejoice today as we celebrate this sacrament, and thank God that you are receiving this sacrament and that you are this friend of Jesus. And as we leave the church today, I hope we'll all go back into the world to be witnesses to Jesus but also remember everyday of our life that "Jesus is my friend."

He's willing to lay down his life for me and greater love than that no one has than the love that Jesus has for each one of us.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at Christ the Good Shepherd Parish, Lincoln Park, Mich., during a Mass in which students received the sacrament of Confirmation.]

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