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The Eucharist and health care

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 21, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

In his homily from Sunday Aug. 16, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton relates the teaching on the Eucharist from John's Gospel to the debate on health care reform. He says, "If we're going to say, 'Yes, I will accept [this teaching on the Eucharist],' I hope we will accept it with a full understanding of what Jesus is teaching about the Eucharist, not just that he's present, but that he's present to give himself. ? [to] pour out his blood, give his flesh for the life of the world."

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Readings
Proverbs 9: 1-6
Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6: 51-58
Full text of the readings [1]

As I've mentioned, we've been following this gospel of John now for a number of Sundays. In fact, this is the fourth Sunday where we're reading from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. Now, it seems that we come to kind of a crucial point because those people who were listening 2,000 years ago began to be troubled about what they were hearing: How can he give us his flesh to eat? How can he do that?" If we stop and listening to what he is saying and let it sink in, it is extraordinary. We might get to that point where we say, "How can he do it?" We'll hear what comes right after this next Sunday. There were some who said, "This sort of teaching is very hard. Who can accept it?"

It's important, I think, now as we come to this point where we are being challenged, do we believe or not believe in what Jesus has been saying?

Perhaps it's helpful to go back over the last couple of Sundays, and remind ourselves how we get to this point. First of all, we were reading the Gospel of Mark every Sunday, and after next Sunday, we'll pick up on the Gospel of Mark again. Four Sundays ago, we came to the point in Mark's Gospel where Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fish in the desert place, but instead of hearing Mark's account of that, we took John's account. It's very important to remember that John's account of that incident in the desert was really, in John's Gospel, his account of the Last Supper.

He uses all the words that in other gospels Jesus used at the Last Supper. John doesn't have those words at the Last Supper in his gospel. He has them here in the sixth chapter of his gospel. "Jesus took bread, looked up to heaven, blessed it, broke it and gave it to the crowd, to his disciples." That's how the other gospels describe the Last Supper. Jesus, at the Last Supper, says, "Do this in memory of me. Keep on doing what I've done."

You may remember that after Jesus did that and he distributed the bread, John remarks that there were over 5,000 people who were fed from five loaves and two fish. They wanted to make him king, so he went off by himself and they followed him around the lake. Then he began this long teaching. In the teaching, he tries to help them and help us to understand what the Holy Eucharist is, that it really is the body and blood of Jesus. Not only that, we're to imitate: "Do what I have done. Do this is memory of me."

It's one thing to believe in the presence of Jesus in the bread and wine. In part of this sixth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus is emphasizing, "I am the Living Bread. This bread I'm giving you is who I am," it's me, this bread, and this cup of wine. I am really present there.

We have accepted throughout our lives that Jesus is truly present in the bread and the wine, but also, on the Sunday after that when Jesus was trying to lay out what the Eucharist means, we're reminded of how, "This bread is my flesh given for you," or, "This cup is the cup of my blood poured out for you." We're being reminded that the Eucharist is the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate at this altar.

So the Eucharist is Jesus pouring out his life for us. It's not just Jesus present so we can adore him because he's the son of God; no, it's Jesus pouring out his life for us, Jesus pouring out his blood for us, giving us that magnificent, amazing, almost unbelievable message about how love is all that he is about.

His death on the cross was not a way that Jesus repaid an angry God for our sins. No, it's Jesus loving us without limit, pouring forth his life for us to show us that love is what changes everything, the way of love. That is what the Eucharist is.

And so, as we have challenged today, who can accept this?

It's one thing to accept that he's present, that we adore Jesus as he is in the tabernacle, but how about accepting that the Eucharist also means that he's pouring out himself for us? What does that mean for us if we really believe it? "Who can accept this?" they said. We have to ask ourselves, "Can I accept this that when I receive the Eucharist, I'm really committing myself to be poured out as Jesus was for others?"

There are lots of practical ways in which we are challenged to pour out ourselves for others.

Just this week, and in the last couple of weeks in fact, I'm sure we've all been aware of those crowds of 200 people at this place and some other place, at the forums that have been held by members of Congress and even the President about health care. So many of those in the crowds said, "We don't want to change anything. It's OK the way it is. We don't want socialized medicine. We don't want everyone to have it. I have mine." That's almost what the message is. "Let everybody else worry about themselves."

This week, there was an article that was in the paper about health care. This happened in Englewood, Calif. It starts off:

> "They came for new teeth, mostly, but also for blood pressure checks, mammograms, immunizations, and pain medicine. South Los Angeles is the place where health care is scarce. So when it was offered nearby, word got around. For the second day in a row, thousands"

-- not hundreds, but thousands --

> "of people lined up, starting after midnight, snaking into the early hours, for free dental, medical and vision services, courtesy of a non-profit group that more typically provides mobile health care for the rural poor. It's called Remote Area Medical.
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> "The Tennessee-based organization that ran this event decided to try its hand at large, urban medical services. Its principles thought that Los Angeles would be a good place to start, but they were far from being prepared for the outpouring of need.
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> "Set up for eight days of care, the group was already overwhelmed on the first day after allowing 1,500

> people through the door, nearly 500 of whom had still not been served by day's end, and had to return in the wee hours Wednesday morning.
>
> "The enormous response to the free care was a stark corollary to the hundreds of Americans who have filled town hall-style meetings throughout the country, angrily expressing their fear of the Obama administration's proposed changes to the nation's health care system."

The President is saying we need to provide health care for everybody. That might mean we have to change something that I already have, not that any of us would ever be asked to give up our health care if we have it. Don't we have to wonder how people who have what they need can be so angry that we're trying to spread this out to others? It seems like there's some kind of terrible fear that suddenly I'm going to lose everything I have, or if the government does it, it won't work, even though we already have government health care that does work.

There's something strange here happening out of fear, and I think maybe some selfishness, that we just don't let ourselves be aware of 49 million people in this country without health insurance. Even many millions of those who have it can't get adequate care. So there is an effort now to spread this so that everyone has adequate care like every other developed country in the world provides.

What is it in our nation that brings people out with such anger, and a seemingly uncaring spirit, especially if they think of themselves as Christians, and especially as we who are Catholic Christians and many other Christians have a sacrament like the Eucharist? The whole sacrament means Jesus pouring himself out for others, giving up himself for others.

It seems to me that as we reflect on this teaching that Jesus has been providing for us the last few weeks, that teaching about the Blessed Sacrament and the Holy Eucharist, we have to ask ourselves how can Jesus give us his flesh to eat, his blood to drink and this is a hard saying, "who can accept it?"

If we're going to say, "Yes, I will accept it," I hope we will say it with a full understanding of what Jesus is teaching about the Eucharist, not just that he's present, but that he's present to give himself. When we receive the Eucharist, we too must commit ourselves to what Jesus did: pour out his blood, give his flesh for the life of the world. We have to commit ourselves to do the same thing.

Maybe if we are going to do that, it's good to hear once more what St. Paul says because he makes it very specific and very clear: "Pay attention to how to behave and how to live, what your attitudes are. Do not live as the unwise do, but live as responsible persons. Do not let yourself be ignorant, but understand what the will of God is. Be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Paul goes on to say, "Sing songs and pray, giving thanks to God in the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord, always and for everything."

That giving thanks to God, in Greek, is "be eucharists." The word Eucharist means thanksgiving. So Paul says, "Be eucharists." That's the challenge to us today, to be Eucharists, but in the very way that Jesus taught it, giving ourselves for others as he did.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich, on Aug. 16. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an e-mail alert when the latest homily is posted. Send this homily **to a friend** [3].]

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