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Follow a servant leader to truly become a community of disciples

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 7, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton gave the following homily June 3 for Fr. Michael Donovan, the pastor of St. Donald Parish in Roseville, Mich., who is celebrating his 50th year in the priesthood.

It is, for me, a great honor, privilege and a joy to be here today to celebrate with Father Mike the 50 years that he has given of his life to serve God's people and to serve God as a priest. We all rejoice with Father Mike and give thanks to God for him. He has asked me to, through the reflection today, which I'm very happy to do. ... I spent this week trying to prepare this homily, and I felt very much like I did way back in the 1950s, when I was at St. John's [Provincial Seminary in Michigan] before Father Mike was.
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You'll remember the procedure we had in the third year of theology was when you preached your first sermon. You prepared over a couple of years of theology and in the homiletics courses. At the end of the second year, you were given a topic to prepare, and you had to have a sermon written and turned in the day you returned to school. Of all things, I was given the topic of the Holy Trinity. If you think of all the teachings of our church, the teachings that Jesus has given us, what is the most profound and the most difficult to make real to people?

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40

Psalms 33:4-5, 6, 9, 18-19, 20, 22

Romans 8:14-17

Matthew 28:16-20

Full text of the readings [1]

I spent most of that summer in turmoil, trying to think, "How am I going to preach the sermon on the Holy Trinity?" I don't have a copy of it anymore, but I'm sure it was very abstract. It was very academic. It was very theological, and probably would have meant nothing to people if I would have preached it in church. I hope I give you better today. I'll try, at least. What our task is when we preach, as I'm sure you've learned over the years from Father Mike, is always to take the scripture lessons that are proclaimed and try to listen to those, and put them in the context of what is happening in your life right now, and what is happening in the world around us.

Today, it's especially what's happening, as we celebrate this anniversary for Father Mike, his 50 years as a priest. We tried to listen to the scriptures in that context. First, I have a couple of words about trying to speak about the Trinity. We heard in the Gospel lesson Jesus giving the disciples that commission to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, three persons in one God. This is obviously the most profound mystery of our faith. Trying to conceptualize what it means that there are three persons, one God, each distinct and yet, one God.

How can this be? Of course, we can't conceptualize this. We can't conceptualize God. When we have concepts and even images in our mind and imagination, it's of a physical object, part of the creation all around us. God is outside that. God is totally other. God is profound mystery. So we really can't conceptualize three persons, one God. We try to use different images like the three-leaf clover and things like that, but none of those tell us about God.

What makes it so difficult, of course, is when you hear, as we did in our first lesson today, from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses telling the people, "Therefore, try to be convinced that God is the only God of heaven and earth, and there is no other." We insist, way back in the Hebrew scriptures, one God -- only one God -- and yet, we speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How do we put this together? I think maybe the only way we can even come close is to remind ourselves of something that the disciple John, the one closest to Jesus, writes in the first letter he shared with the Christian community.

"My dear friends, let's love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. This is love, not that we love God, but that God first loved us. Those who do not love have not known God, for God is love." This is the amazing truth about God. It's something that we can maybe begin to grasp somewhat because we know love. It's human love in our relationships with one another, and we know what a beautiful thing love is and can be. God is love. We should remember love is triune, three.

There is the one who loves, the one who is loved and then the bond that unites them, creating a power, energy and spirit. This is God, the lover, the beloved and the spirit that joins them. Somehow, from that, we begin to get a sense of God as triune because we know love. Love is triune and God is love. Now how do we connect this with the priesthood? Father Mike has been a priest now for 50 years, and we celebrate that. We rejoice in that, and he gives thanks to God for those 50 years that, in spite of some stresses and difficulties at times, I'm sure, have been a fulfilled life for him.

There are a couple things that I think about -- and I'm sure that Father Mike would remember these, too, from our formation in the seminary. One of the things that we were taught and we kind of formed our spiritual life around it was that when you're ordained a priest, you're another Christ. That sounds marvelous, doesn't it? It kind of puts the priest up here on a pedestal. Another Christ! We strove in our spiritual formation to say, How are we going to live up to that?

If you remember last Sunday, it was Pentecost Sunday. Luke, in the first lesson, described what happened on the first Pentecost. He described how the whole community of disciples gathered in the upper room, experienced God poured forth on them in a very powerful way, with the Spirit coming upon them. Luke describes this within the context of Pentecost, the Jewish feast that had been celebrated among the Jews for 1,200 years. It was the feast that commemorated and brought back to their minds the covenant that God had made with them 1,200 years before.

This was the covenant that had made them God's people: "I am your God and you are my people." Now, Luke is saying when the Spirit is poured forth upon the church, you become God's people. You share the life of Jesus. Everyone is another Christ. So that puts us in our place in a certain sense. Everyone is another Christ. We can't exalt the priesthood and priests above all of you who are baptized into the life of Jesus and have become another Christ. Our whole community, everyone in this whole church and our universal church, is called to be another Christ.

So as we reflect on our scriptures today and on the priesthood, we know that at least one thing we can't, as priests, do -- Father Mike, myself and other priests -- is we can't put ourselves above anyone because we are other Christs. No, all of us are.

There was another thing that we learned in the seminary about being a priest. That was how important it was when we celebrated Mass. We made it seem so important that when we celebrated Mass at that altar, we stood there and said those words of consecration: "This is my body. This is my blood." Somehow, again, it separated us.

We were the only ones that could do that, and yet, that isn't exactly true, either, because it's the whole

community that brings forth the Eucharist and makes Jesus present. St. Paul, in writing to the church at Corinth, reminded them that everyone who eats the bread and drinks the cup makes present the death of the Lord until he comes. When we eat this bread and drink from this cup, all of us make present the death, the resurrection and the life of Jesus Christ in our world. All of us make that present.

We commit ourselves, and this is a challenge that maybe we don't think about often enough, that we already share in the sufferings of Jesus. We will share in his sufferings, share in his dying and do it as he did -- loving, even those who might be causing his suffering. That is what Jesus brought forth on Calvary: a manifestation of God's love that is unbelievable love, almost. God so loved the world that God gave Jesus, God's son, and the son so loved us that Jesus gave his very life for us.

That included everyone, even those who were Jesus' enemies, and all of us make that present every time we gather together around this altar. When we eat the bread and drink from the cup, we recommit ourselves to make the presence of Jesus and his love for all of us present in the world. Now there is one other thing that happened at the Last Supper that is part of our priesthood, and part of what all of us share in, also. It's something that I think we neglected to some extent. Most of us don't remember this until recently, when we revised our liturgy some years ago and restored the washing of the feet on Holy Thursday night.

Most of us wouldn't know that much about what Jesus did there just before the Last Supper. It's only in John's Gospel, and it's significant in John's Gospel. John doesn't give an account of Jesus saying the words, "This is my body. This is my blood." That's not heard in John's Gospel, but this incident is, where Jesus, before he sits down at the table with the disciples, takes off his outer garment, puts a towel around his waist. He goes before each disciple and washes his or her feet.

The whole community was present, so he washed the feet of his disciples. He took the role of a slave, and remember, Peter objected. "Don't wash my feet." Peter had some sense that Jesus was one who should not be washing feet, but Peter was wrong. Jesus said, "If I don't wash your feet, you have no part with me." Jesus insisted he was to be the servant, the slave. Then, at the end of that incident, Jesus tells the disciples so clearly in the Gospel, "If I then, your Lord and master, have washed your feet, you also must wash one another's feet. I have just given you an example that, as I have done, you also must do."

We don't remember that so clearly as we do the words of consecration, but that's just as important. Jesus is saying to all of us that we must be servants. We must serve one another. Reach out to whoever is in need, as Jesus always did. That's the whole community again. Where does the priest come into all of this? As St. Paul writes to the church at Corinth again, he talks about all the different ministries there are in the church. All of us share in these different ministries, and the more we share in them and live them out, the more we can build up this people of God, the community of disciples of Jesus.

One of those ministries is especially important. It's the ministry of leadership, being a leader, calling together the community, making that community perform according to the word of God and according to the way of Jesus. What is leadership through Jesus more than anything else? There is an incident that happens some time before the Last Supper, toward the end of the life of Jesus, where the disciples are arguing with one another. Who is going to be the greatest when Jesus comes back and establishes his kingdom?

They thought he was going to establish an earthly kingdom, like people had when King David was their king, the great Jewish kingdom. "Who is going to be in the top places?" James and John asked for that, and Jesus said, "No, that's not for me to give." The other disciples, when they heard about this, they were upset and angry with James and John. "Why do you think you should get the highest place?"

Jesus brings them all together and says, "You know, among the Gentiles, the pagan, those in authority over them rule over them with a power. Among you, it cannot be that way. The one who wants to be a leader must be the

servant of all." The leader must be the servant. If there is anything about the priesthood that we must strive for, in my eyes, if you're going to try to be a leader within the church, that means that we, most of all, have to be the servants of all.

By our serving, we help to pull together a community of disciples of Jesus, who then also carry on the work of Jesus. That's what Father Mike has been doing for 50 years now. He's been a servant leader. The most difficult way to be a leader is to be a leader without any power. We would hardly think of that, would we, that you could somehow lead without power, that you would be hanging on a cross, totally powerless. Yet, as Jesus said about himself, "I, when I am lifted up on the cross, will draw all people to myself."

That's true power. That's true love. The priest has to be a leader in service, a service of love. When that happens as it happens here in this community, because you've had Father Mike as your servant leader now, you become a community of disciples of Jesus. Then you will be ready to do what Jesus tells us at the end of the Gospel lesson today. He commissions us to go forth and to baptize all nations.

"Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you." Jesus isn't just talking about a ritual of baptism, pouring water over someone. He's talking about a commissioning. The disciples go out into the world and they carry on the work of Jesus, everything that he taught us in the Sermon on the Mount, everything that he teaches us as he hangs on the cross, and loves even those putting him to death. "I will draw all people to myself through the power of love."

There are priests among us, and Father Mike has been one for 50 years and has done so well. They lead all of us to become this community of disciples who are ready to go out into our world and transform it, not through power and might, but through love, by serving one another and serving all of those who are in any way in need.

When we follow the kind of leadership that a servant leader can give, and we become a real community of disciples of Jesus, then we will definitely make happen what Jesus envisioned. Our world will be transformed, and it will become a world in which there will be fullness of life for everyone. There will be peace and joy. This is what the Christian community is called to do, and this is what a priest like Father Mike helps us to do: He enables us to become the community of disciples Jesus calls us to be.

So we thank Father Mike for his leadership here at this parish and for the leadership he has given in the archdiocese for 50 years. We thank him, and we thank God for him. I hope all of us, in our thanks, will also accept what that leadership calls us to do: to become those who go out into our world, carrying the message of Jesus, and help to transform this world into the Reign of God.

[Homily given at St. Donald Parish, Roseville, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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