News
Spirituality



Priests sit below the statue of St. Peter as Pope Francis celebrates Mass marking the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican June 29. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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I thought I might start our reflection today by finding out something which I think is quite special and noteworthy. In the second lesson, the passage from Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus where he's outlining various virtues for us to try to grow into and live according to. And at one point toward the end he says, "Sing and celebrate the Lord in your hearts giving thanks to God always." Those few words "giving thanks to God," sometimes is translated as "always be thankful." That's what Paul is telling us: always be thankful.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 19, 2018

Proverbs 9:1-6

Psalms 34

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

When you look at the original language, it's even more dramatic, it seems to me, because the what the words are: be eucharists, estotes eucharistountes. Eucharist means thanksgiving, so Paul is saying to let your whole being, every part of you give thanks to God. Why? Because everything we have and are and will be is a gift from God so our whole being should react in total thanksgiving. Every moment, every second of our life should be praise and thanks to God because without God we don't exist, we're nothing, never would be, never will be.

God has loved us into being so we need to be eucharists, always thanking God. That, of course, becomes even more clear — the reason why we should thank God in the Gospel lesson where Jesus talks to us about giving his very self as our food and drink: "I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread, drinks my blood will live forever." Those are very important words today that we need to remember and try to grow in that spirit of thankfulness in our prayers every day — every moment, in a sense, and if we can every day.

But this Sunday, this weekend, it may be somewhat difficult to be thinking about thanking God because of the tragedy that has been exposed about our church during this past week. Archbishop [Allen] Vigneron wrote a long letter to all the priests and another one to the people of the diocese asking us to speak about this. First of all to, I guess, reassure everybody in spite of all the terrible things. If you read any part of that report from the grand jury in Pennsylvania, you know it's just a sordid, ugly story.

The revelations are almost beyond belief. Failure on the part of priests, part of bishops, the leaders of the church, a cardinal having to resign, and more will be coming. We have to begin to bring about a profound kind of reform within our church. So far we can't count on the leadership of the bishops to bring this about. They're going to try again. They're calling for an investigation and a committee to look into the whys and wherefores and so on. But we still are not facing, as I see it at least, based on what I read from other bishops and Archbishop Vigneron, we're not going deep enough.

It's not just a moral failure. Pope Francis has said this. He said that it's part of a clerical culture; it's embedded in the priestly culture. I'm ordained a priest; I'm part of this culture of the priesthood. I can reflect on many ways in which this culture influences my life. That clerical culture has, in a sense, been invaded by evil — the sex abuse of children. In his letter, the archbishop calls for priests to make sure they go to confession regularly, confess their sins, say their daily prayers, and keep up their spiritual practices.

Of course all that's good and important, but it's not enough. We have to have deeper reforms in the church. It might call for a reexamination for something like celibacy. Or at least teaching those in the seminary how to live celibate in a healthy, wholesome, human way. It's something we were never taught in the seminary. It's not easy to be a celibate, someone who doesn't marry, and yet still become a full, human person. We need to look into the ways to make that possible for anyone who is ordained a priest. We need fully developed persons as priests and leaders in our church. Our spiritual life, obviously, is very important, but we need much more.

Back in 1973 at the bishops' conference, we were presented with reports of two studies that had been done on the U.S. priesthood. One was a sociological study that was carried out under the leadership of Fr. Andrew Greeley. The other was a

psychological study that was carried out under the leadership of Fr. Eugene Kennedy. Both of these reports showed major defects in the way priestly people had been formed and came into their priesthood.

The psychological report especially was devastating. It pointed out that at least 8 percent of priests in the United States were what the writers of the report called "maldeveloped." They were severely neurotic or sociopaths. Nothing was being done about it. At the other end of the spectrum, about 8 percent were well-developed people. In between you had a large number who were developing after they became priests. The largest numbers were the underdeveloped — those who were not psychologically and psychosexually mature. There's where the problems were.

But do you know what happened to that report? Fr. Greeley and Fr. Kennedy were at the meeting and each of them summarized the report. As they finished their presentations, Cardinal [John] Krol, the president, asked the body of bishops if anyone had comments or questions. There were a couple; they weren't very profound. But then Cardinal Krol said to Fr. Greeley and Fr. Kennedy, "Thank you fathers," and dismissed them.

Nothing was ever done with that report. If we had changed our seminary formation programs back then, if we had provided developmental programs for priests back then when we were presented with the opportunity, we could have prevented a lot of this, I'm sure. But even now, that's the kind of thing that I hope the bishops (and the prodding of the people like you) will bring about. We do know how to form fully developed people, but it doesn't just happen by magic or by the kind of formation we've had in the seminary.

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There has to be very well developed programs so that when a person is ordained a priest — no one is going to be perfect, fully developed, but at least that person has come to a development stage that means he is basically healthy, psychosexually and psychologically. If we don't do those kinds of reforms, the situation will not get better.

I hope that people like yourselves who are very concerned, I'm sure, and who find it very distressful to think of what has happened and who are embarrassed (Like most

priests feel embarrassed in public. People might say, "Is he one of them?" It's a very difficult thing), so all of us, and lay people — you're the church — it's up to all of us to make sure that our leadership in the church doesn't just do a formalistic kind of change that really doesn't get to the root problems.

Saying our prayers, going to confession — all the spiritual things that we do, they're absolutely important, but they're not the full answer. There has to be the developmental programs that will make priests and all of us who want to be reasonably fully developed persons, but we especially need it among priests who are called to be leaders in their community and who are called to be models for the whole community and especially for the young.

As we reflect on today's scriptures, yes there is much to give thanks for. If each of us looks at our own personal life, I'm sure we can thank God just that we're here, that we're alive and we have life. God has drawn us into being and God loves us at every instant, so we give thanks.

But we also are aware that we have problems in our church and all of us have a responsibility to pray and to work for the change that will bring about a healthy priesthood, that we will not have to fear the kind of reports that came out this week ever again. We need to make the change to guarantee that. It's up to all of us to try to make it happen in whatever way we can.

[Homily given Aug. 19 at St. Philomena, Detroit, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]