News
Spirituality



Pope Francis prays in front of a candle in memory of victims of sexual abuse as he visits St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral in Dublin Aug. 25, 2018. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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I'm going to do something this morning which I seldom do and that is to share something with you about myself, about something personal. It connects with the Scriptures, especially our second lesson. Many years ago when I was asked to become a bishop, I found out that bishops had to have a coat of arms. I knew nothing about how to put together a coat of arms, but I found somebody who did, and they took care of that.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sept. 2, 2018

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

Psalms 15

James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

But a bishop also had to have a motto that I guess was to kind of summarize his goals in life, what he meant to achieve as a bishop, and the way he was going to carry on his work as a bishop. Again, I had never thought of this, so I didn't have any idea of what I might choose as a motto to kind of describe my life. So I thought every other bishop has one, why don't I just go and look in the Catholic directory, which I get. That's a huge book that lists every diocese in the country and the bishops who rule those dioceses and so on.

So I open up the book and started with Alaska. The very first bishop I came across had chosen this motto: Be doers of the word, not hearers. I thought that's not bad; that could be because I already had been involved in public activities and social justice and so on. So I thought yes, I'll take that motto. But I never realized how challenging it really would be to try to live up to that, to be a doer of the word. I ask you to think about this too. Being a doer of the word means taking all of the Scriptures, everything in these Scriptures very seriously. You make them part of your life — doers of the word, not hearers.

It also means not only the scriptures, but Jesus. Do you remember in the prologue to John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God … and the Word became flesh."? Jesus is the very Word of God. So you look at his life and you try to model yourself. If you're going to listen to the word, you have to listen to Jesus. Again, this becomes very challenging. If you just take today's Gospel, what was Jesus upset about? Because people were pretending to follow God, but they had made up their own human traditions. Jesus says, "You're hypocrites. You claim to follow God, but you're following your own ways." Following God means listening to Jesus and not being hypocrites.

When I think about that and how Jesus challenges those scribes and Pharisees in today's Gospel, I can't help but think of our church right now and the failure of our leaders because we've all heard over the past weeks about the sex abuse crisis. Our leaders, bishops have failed us because they allowed priests to go back to work and repeat crimes over and over again. It's one of the worst calamities that has ever happened in the church.

If you're a doer of God's word, you would not be protecting priests and moving them around from one place to another where this abuse happens again and again. Being a doer of God's word would mean rejecting that kind of hypocrisy and living a life of full integrity. We have failed. It's a huge challenge for the church now under the leadership of Pope Francis to try to bring us back to a real integrity of following the word of Jesus. But also back in those days when I first chose that motto, our own church was undergoing a different understanding of what we are as church.

I'm sure some of you remember Vatican Council II over 50 years ago now, but at that time we began to understand the church, not just as the hierarchy, the bishops and the institution, but as the people of God. All of us are the church. The document from the council called "The Church in the Modern World" opened with the statement: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

What that document was teaching us (that was the first sentence), was not that the church is here to help us get into heaven, no, the church is here to help us to transform the world, enter into the world as church, the body of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus that can transform the world into the reign of God. That's what that

document was teaching us, not just that we're trying to get to heaven, but we're trying to transform the world doing action for justice. Just a short time later, a few years later, the Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome in 1971 issued a document called "Justice in the World."

Among the things that document teaches is very challenging. This teaching that action for justice and participation in the transformation of the world — these are constitutive parts of the teachings of the church. Action for justice and participation in the transformation of the world constitute the very work of the church. That means we have, again, to try to enter into what's going on in the world, transform it, change this world until it becomes the reign of God where everyone is treated with human respect and dignity, everyone has an opportunity for a full life.

Transforming our world to make it a world of justice and peace is a work that is very profound, but it's one that all of us are called to. I recognize over the years whenever I see that passage about being doers of the word, I'm challenged. I'm challenged to not just take this message and read it, and then put it aside some place, but to read it and to try to bring it into the life of our church, the life of our world, and to follow Jesus who is this Word of God. Be a doer like Jesus was where he reached out to the poor, reached out to those who are vulnerable, welcomed them, and welcomed the refugee. He himself was a refugee.

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Jesus shows us so much if we only watch him and listen to him. That motto that I chose many years ago continues to challenge me. I hope all of us are challenged as we listen today to the words of St. James, "Be a doer of the word." Enter into the work of the church to transform our world into the reign of God, the reign of God where everyone has the chance for a full human life where we build a world of peace and justice. This is what we are called to do if we follow Jesus, if we are doers of the word who is Jesus.

[Homily given Sept. 2 at St. Anne Church, Frankfort, 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.]