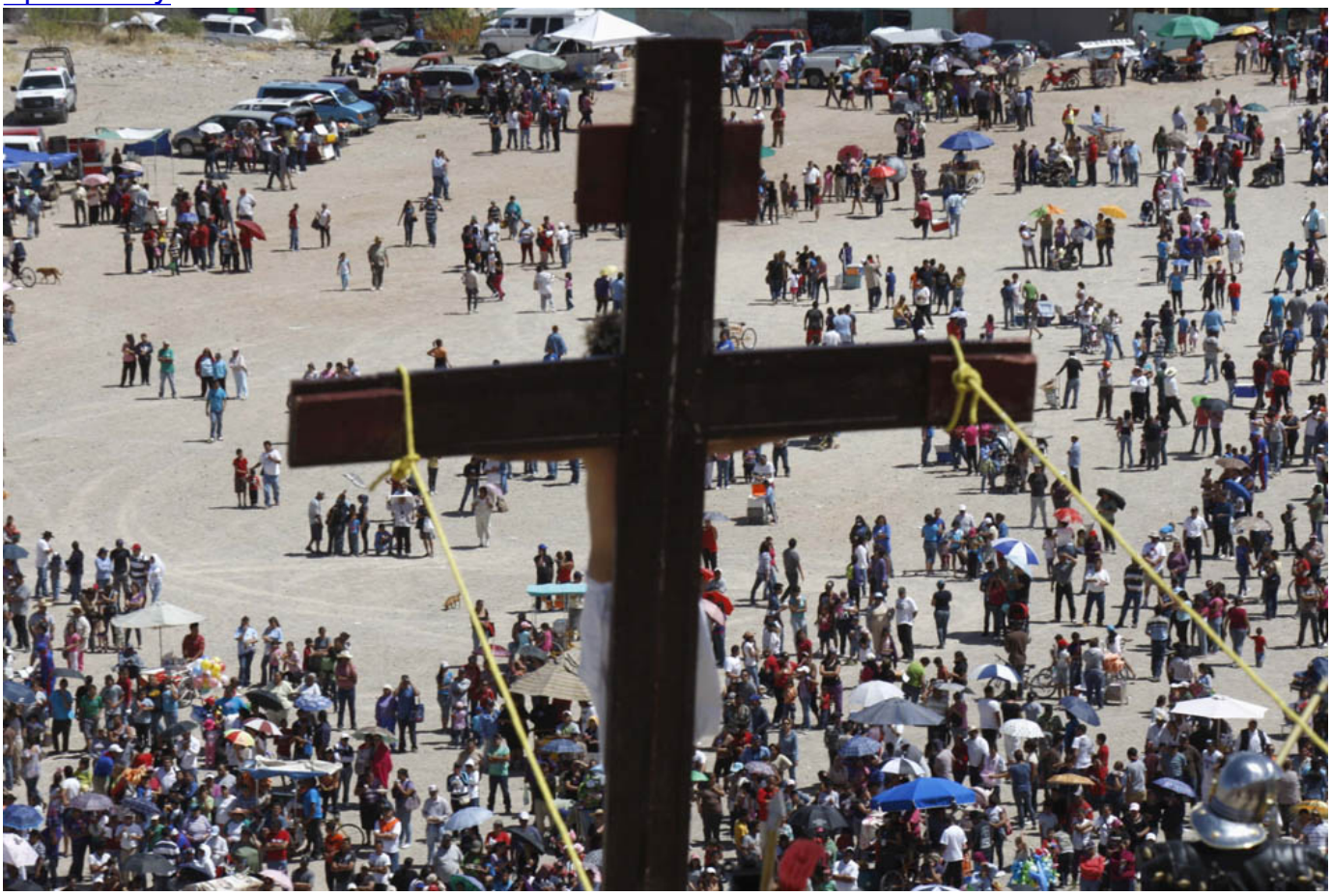
Opinion
Spirituality



People stand at the bottom of a hill during a re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ on Good Friday, April 6, 2012, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. (CNS photo/Jose Luis Gonzalez, Reuters)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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As we all know, this season of Lent is a time that we, in a certain sense like Jesus, put ourselves apart from our everyday concerns, everyday life. As foremost in our life, we try to spend 40 days, 40 nights, six weeks in a kind of retreat within the framework of our everyday life. We try to listen carefully to the Scriptures every week and reflect, try to undergo conversion, renew ourselves with the celebration of our renewed life in Christ at Easter.

Today's lessons perhaps provide us with the most challenging of all the teachings of Jesus that we are called upon to try to take into our minds and hearts and bring about change within ourselves. Jesus challenges us today to reject every other concern, to reject riches, most of all to reject power and violence in order to grow in the one thing that is most important: to grow in love.

That's what Jesus is doing in these temptations. If he didn't reject, if these temptations weren't real — which I think sometimes we believe he had no trouble with the temptations — but they were real because Jesus is like us in every way except sin, so he's fully human. He really experienced temptation just as we would. The devil is trying to get him to use power to make himself different from everyone else. If he could change stones into bread, surely he had an extraordinary kind of power, and he would not be like us in every way except sin.

So Jesus really had to be tempted as anyone of us would be at the end of a fast (40 days, 40 nights) to take an easy way, use power because he was also divine like God. But Jesus rejected that power because he wanted to be truly like us in every way. Jesus refused to worship the devil because, of course, we are as he said, "to worship the Lord our God and God alone." Nothing else must ever come between God and us in our worship.

First Sunday of Lent

March 10, 2018

Deuteronomy 26:4-10

Psalm 91

Romans 10:8-13

Luke 4:1-13

Again, if Jesus were not truly human, like us in every way except sin, surely he could have tamed that power — all the power of the world, all the kingdoms of the earth — he would have all that power in order to do whatever he wished. But again, he chose to be like us in every way except sin. Jesus followed another way, the way of love instead of the way of power. It's so clear. Another time when Jesus was tempted was when he was just beginning his final journey to Jerusalem where he was going to be, as he told his disciples, given over to his enemies, tortured, murdered in the most ignominious way possible, on the cross.

You may remember this incident in the Gospel where Peter says to Jesus, "No, no. You don't have to do that. There's another way." By that time Jesus had a large following and Peter was confident that they could overcome the enemies of Jesus. Do you remember what Jesus did? He got angry with Peter: "Get behind me, you Satan! You do not speak the way of God, but a sinful way." Jesus rejected that temptation. In a sense, I feel that it clearly was a temptation because Jesus' reaction was so fierce, so powerful: "Get behind me, you Satan!"

He was threatened because he felt the temptation to do as Peter suggested, to use human power to defeat his enemies. But instead Jesus continued along the way to Jerusalem where he had promised: "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself." By that he meant, "When I'm on the cross, tortured, dying, helpless, but pouring forth my love upon everyone, even my enemies, I will draw all people through love to follow." That's the only way Jesus acts is by drawing us to follow him in love, not to use power, coercion, to hold it over other people, what we can do to them through our power or force, but always to interact with love.

This demands, I think for all of us, profound change in our way of life. In our everyday life there are times, I'm sure, where each of us, any of us, tries to maybe sometimes subtly, maybe not too subtly, to exert our power over others instead of simply loving them into following what we want and what we know is the best thing to do. Jesus always, right until his final moment on that cross, was pouring forth love: "Father, forgive them," his enemies — he loved them.

In our everyday life we need to begin to do that, to think of how to be more respectful with one another, within our families, in our neighborhoods, in our communities, how we really can love, reach out to those who are suffering. We must even go so far as Jesus did to reject violence and to love even in violent situations. This is maybe in some ways, the most demanding part of the commands of Jesus: "Don't just love those who love you; love your enemies. Be ready to lay down your life for others."

When I think about that, I think about that high school in Parkland, Florida, just over a year ago where that terrible violent killing happened — 14 children killed. There would have been more except for incidents like this: One of the teenage high school students, 16 years old, was trapped in the hallway with the killer. He was heading to a classroom. The young student got to the door first and covered up the glass door with his body. The shooter began to shoot him. He was wounded four or five times. But he was ready to give his life for his friends, his classmates. He loved even to that point.

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Most of us will never be asked to lay down our very life for others, but that's the love we have to try for. We are ready to follow Jesus, to be converted so deeply that we will love others as he loves them, and not just those who love us, even those who hurt us, who in some fashion are enemies. This is the conversion that we must undergo during this season of Lent.

So we begin today in reflecting on these Scriptures how Jesus was tempted, but rejected every temptation to use power and only to reach out in love. When we can achieve this, even come close to following Jesus in this way, we will be able to celebrate Easter with great joy as followers of the risen Jesus, who enables all of us to go through death to new life as we celebrate the feast of Easter.

Editor's note: *This homily was given March 10 at St. Ambrose Church in Grosse Pointe, 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.*