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Will you also go away?

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 28, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

A recent report done by a research group called the Pew Foundation indicates an extraordinary number of people have left our Catholic church -- people who were baptized, raised Catholic, have gone. In fact, this report says that one out of 10 people in the United States have what we would call "fallen away" or are former Catholics. One out of ten -- that's 30 million people. Many people are troubled and mainly we see it especially among young people, which is always very discouraging.

Yet if we listen to today's scriptures, we will realize that this kind of thing has happened before. In fact, going back into the time of the chosen people, those who have been called by God, those who are following the way of God might choose to leave.

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time
Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b
Psalm 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21
Ephesians 5:21-32
John 6:60-69
Full text of the readings [1]

That's like Joshua, in our first lesson today, called all the people together. It was a point at which those who had made the long journey across the desert that took over 40 years, as you know. Many had died along the way but there were those who had come all that way and they rejoined those who had left earlier from Egypt, or some of those who had never left the Promised Land and gone to Egypt -- all of them, all the tribes who were brought together -- and it was time for a commitment to be made.

They had made such a commitment some time before at Sinai when Moses brought the tablets of stone down and he challenged the people to choose God to be their God. God proclaimed, "I am your God and you are my people," the sacred covenant, but now some were drifting away and some had never really joined that covenant.

So that's why Joshua stands up and says, "Look, you have to make a choice. You can follow the other gods, the gods of these lands where you live, or you can follow Yahweh, the true God. Make your choice." Joshua gives the example, "I and my family choose Yahweh, choose the God who was revealed to us on Sinai, the God who led us into Egypt and brought us back from Egypt, freed us. That's the God I and my family choose. Now everyone, make a choice."

And it was a free choice. No one was forced to go one way or the other.

And then in our gospel lesson today, people are challenged to make a choice, "Will you also go away?" Will you become one of those 30 million?

It's important, I think, to examine the choice that they're being asked to make in this incident in the gospel. We know that Jesus has just been preaching to them about the Holy Eucharist. He told them, "I am the living bread," and that he is truly present in that bread. They were expected to believe this, what had happened at the Last Supper, "This is my body?this is my blood," it really is, will you believe it?

But even more fundamental, earlier on when Jesus was speaking to them he said, "I am the bread of life and whoever comes to me shall never be hungry. Whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty. I have come from heaven. I am the bread which comes from heaven." This is what the people had a hard time accepting because at

that point, John tells us, "They began to say, 'This man is the son of Joseph, isn't he? We know his father and mother. How can he say he has come from heaven?'"

What they were really challenged to believe is that Jesus of Nazareth, the man who looked like any other peasant in that area, the one who was truly human, he is also saying, "I am the son of God." Will you believe that and accept that?

That's the challenge for us -- will we accept that Jesus is the son of God, and that what he says then is something that we need to follow?

As we think about those who are leaving the church and perhaps sometimes people will say to me, "Why do you stay?" Maybe people say that to you sometimes: "Why do you stay?" When you look at the church, sometimes you become disappointed. I'm talking about what we think of as the institution of the church. Maybe especially the leadership now of our church, the leadership that refuses to really probe the problems that are going on in our church:

Why are people leaving?

Why do we have so few who are willing to enter into religious life, or especially into the priesthood?

Why do the bishops not look for other people who can serve in our parishes so we don't have to close them, as we're doing all over this country?

Or why now is the Vatican, under the auspices of the pope, doing an investigation of religious orders of women? Why should they be investigated? For what? They've been the most faithful ministers in our church, especially here in the church in the United States for hundreds of years now.

Maybe there should have been an investigation of the bishops. Why did they continue to hide those who were predators against little children? No investigation of that has ever been made; no bishop has ever been held accountable for sending a priest from one parish to another.

So we could be discouraged with the church, but you know, it isn't the church that you're being asked to say yes to.

Oh yes, we want to belong to a community and it's important that we share our faith with one another -- that's how we strengthen our faith, grow in our faith, when we come together like this as believing people and declare together, "Yes, I do believe. I will follow the way of Jesus." So we do want to belong to a community, but there has always been the problem that human institutions, which the institutional church is, can become deficient or even corrupt.

So when you are asked, "Who will you follow?" it's not a question about really the institutional church or not. The deeper question is, "Will you follow Jesus?" Will you really become a disciple of Jesus? That's the challenge that's being presented to us today.

Certainly, we can respond to that challenge within the Catholic church, and my hope is that we would not have so many people leaving the church, but if they find Jesus in another way, that's what they must do. If the institutional church is unwilling to reform itself, then perhaps more people will leave, but those of us who stay have to keep on working for that change to make our church the institution more faithful to the way of Jesus.

But again, this morning, each of us is being challenged to say, as Jesus asked his first disciples, "Will you also go away?" and he means "from me," from Jesus. I guess most of us would quickly say, "Oh yes, I'll follow

Jesus," but then we have to be ready to live according to his values.

There are many, many ways in which we could look at the values of Jesus and find how challenging they are, but I suggest that maybe in our second lesson today, we find what is the most profound challenge of Jesus. There's a longer version of that passage than what we had read to us today, but it's all part of the same passage. Paul starts out by saying, "Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ."

Further on, he says, "Wives to their husbands as to God," and it even talks about "the husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. As the church submits to Christ, so let a wife submit to her husband. As for you husbands, love your wives as Jesus loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Those are words that we might find difficult, especially because in the passage as it's recorded here, it sounds as though wives are to be submissive and subject, but the passage starts with the lead sentence, "Everyone be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ." So husbands be subject to your wife, wives be subject to your husbands and if that can be lived out in a full way, then as Paul says at the end of the passage, that in a marriage, this is a very great mystery and that referred to Jesus and the church.

So husbands and wives that are subject to one another, willing to love one another as Jesus loved us with the total gift of himself to each of us, then you have a sign of how Jesus loves his church. The challenge is that we learn how to love. Marriage is the most prominent example of the relationship of love because it becomes the very symbol of how Jesus loves his church -- constant, unconditional, forever.

But every relationship, whatever relationship we have, it has to be a relationship where we are willing to be of service to one another. In the Eucharist, which Jesus has been speaking about in the gospel for the last few weeks, he says, "This is my body given for you. This is the cup of my blood shed for you." Jesus pours out his whole life for every one of us, so he asks us to follow him, pour out our lives in service to one another -- within marriage, within the family, but within our communities, within our world -- really become people who follow his way, ready to love without limit, without condition, those in our family but beyond that.

If we could follow this way of Jesus, we would build a world in which true peace and justice would prevail, but it is a very difficult challenge. So this morning, as we celebrate this Eucharist, as you receive Jesus in communion, think about that question: Will you follow him? That means not just in a formalistic way. Will you follow him by living according to his way and his values? The answer to that question is very important for each of us individually and for our whole world.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich, on Aug. 24. 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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