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A genuine community of disciples of Jesus

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Going all the way back to my grade school days when I was in a Catholic parochial school, we studied religion. I can remember this particular text very well: "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build My Church."

We were taught that this said something about the Catholic church, that made it very special and unique among Christian churches and implied even, if we didn't say it so bluntly, that the Catholic church is a notch above all the others.

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Why? It was because we have the pope.

"Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build My Church." The pope gave us a strength of unity and guarantee of fidelity to the teachings of Jesus that other churches didn't have. With the pope we had a hierarchy and a very highly structured institutional church, and a real definite division between that hierarchy and the laity.

Matthew 16:13-20

As many people have described it, it was a pyramidal church with a broad base at the bottom of all the laity and the ruling of the teaching with the peak of the pyramid, the pope, the bishops and the whole hierarchical structure.

It's important for us to realize that Matthew really didn't know anything of such a hierarchical church, of that kind of institutional church, with a clear division between hierarchy, clergy and laity. In fact, Matthew and the early Christians thought that Jesus was going to return very soon. So they would not have even thought of the need to develop a strong institutional church that was guaranteed to last for

centuries. The second coming was, in their understanding, to happen very soon.

So what was Matthew teaching? What is being taught through this part of the Gospel?

Clearly, it's something about leadership in the church, and at that point, not an institutional church that we're familiar with today, but this community of disciples of Jesus that had begun by being gathered about Him and then after He was gone, continued to come together as the community of His disciples and began to grow as that community. For them, there was no hierarchy. It was the whole community.

In fact, if you go a little bit further in the Gospel of Matthew, you come to chapter 18 -- just two chapters later -- where Jesus says to the whole community of disciples gathered around him at this point, "I say to you, whatever you bind on earth, heaven will keep bound. Whatever you unbind on earth, heaven will keep unbound." This leadership of the church was conferred on the whole community, not just on one person, Peter. Down through the ages, there have been various interpretations about what this particular text means.

In the early church, up until about the third century or fourth century, Peter was seen as a type of every true Christian on whom the church is built. That is kind of made clear when Jesus says to the whole community, "You have the power to bind or unbind."

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Peter is the type of that community, the one who typifies for all of us the need to have a faith life, where through God's guidance, we come to know Jesus as the One who is truly Son of God. As Jesus says to Peter, "Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but God in heaven."

It's his being able to see with that faith sight that Jesus is the Son of God, that makes Peter a rock, and he typifies all of us.

Another interpretation a little bit later in the church, or maybe at the same time but in the other part of the church that we call the Eastern Church, the rock that Jesus is talking about was interpreted as the faith of Peter. The church is built on faith. The community of disciples is built on faith, and the faith of all believing Christians.

Somehow, through development of the church -- and church historians can explain this for us perhaps -- we evolved into the kind of church that we have now, this institutional, hierarchical structure, very much in place and a very strong separation between clergy and laity. As we look at our church today, we see the problems that we're confronting, the difficulties that the church faces.

Perhaps one of the things that would help us as the church would be to recall and to some extent restore the way the church was, to have a reform within the church that will make us more like that community of disciples at the beginning.

Then that power of binding and loosing, of binding and unbinding that Jesus speaks about, would be exercised in a way that could be much more strengthening of the church, renewing of the church.

We even go back to our first lesson today. We have a hint of what needs to be done. Shevna, the person who was spoken about in that first lesson from the Book of Isaiah who is master of the palace, he was the equivalent of a prime minister. So he was the one who kind of guarded the access to the king.

He had all kinds of perks and powers and so on, but he abused the authority. So that's when Isaiah speaks about how he will be stripped of his power and that power will be transferred to Eliakim.

Then Eliakim, unlike Shevna, who has been an unfeeling task master will be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. He will treat the people as a caring parent treats his or her children, with a real concern for their interests, and not his own. He will use a symbolic key to give access to the royal favor. He will provide an opening to God and to that love that God pours forth upon God's family, God's sons and daughters.

This kind of leadership in the church is in fact, in another Gospel, made very clear that leadership is not to be an imposition of power or coercion over people, but rather, a drawing of people together through love. Jesus said at one point in His life, "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself."

Lifted up on the cross, pouring fourth His love on the world, on all of us, on all people of all times, and He will draw all to Himself.

In John's Gospel, after the resurrection, when the disciples really, for the first time would have understood through faith who Jesus really is: the Son of God, and not just the son of Mary. It was the two together.

In John's Gospel, there is a beautiful what we call a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus where He has interaction with Peter that is very similar to what we read today in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus, at this point, isn't asking Peter and the other disciples, "Who do people say I am? Who do you say I am?"

He's challenging Peter, "Do you love me? Do you love me, Peter?" Peter responds very quickly, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Then Jesus says again, "Peter, do you really love me?" Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Each time Jesus says to Peter, "Look after my sheep. Feed my lambs." Then finally a third time Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter is kind of frustrated at this point and feels even sad that Jesus seems to doubt. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know I love you."

Then again, Jesus says, "Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep," and this is a conferral of leadership on Peter, but it's to be shared with all the disciples, that our leadership in the church is to be nurturing, loving, the way that Jesus himself engaged us. "I, when I'm lifted up, will draw all people to myself."

That power of love, to draw, that is what we need in the church today. It's a charism in the church that is to be exercised by all of us adult members of the church, a charism of leadership based on love in a family.

It's the love and the nurturing of a parent that enables a child to grow and to develop. Those who carry on any role of leadership in the church, teachers, administrators, pastors, all of us who have any role of leadership in the church should exercise that role the way Jesus says to His disciples in that appearance and conversation with Peter after the resurrection. "Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep. Nurture. Draw together out of love."

We can't change the whole church overnight and make it really this community of disciples of Jesus where we really carry out what Paul says, where there is no distinction between slave and free, rich and poor, male and female.

Everyone is part of the community of disciples, equal in freedom and dignity. We can't bring this about overnight, but all of us can be committed to try to make this happen by the way that each of us, in whatever role we have -- and we all have some role of leadership towards others -- that we carry out our

ministry, our role within the church in this spirit of drawing people through love, through nurturing, through caring. We do that through our everyday life and our role within the world in which we live and in our role as a disciple within the church.

If each of us begins to do this, we can bring about the change in our church that will make us once more a genuine community of disciples of Jesus, who proclaimed the Good News that He brought to us, the Good News of God's love poured forth upon our world, that can transform our world so that it more and more becomes the Reign of God.

That is the call that you and I have to be a member of the community of disciples, ministering to the whole church and to our whole world through that power of love that will draw all people to God and into the Reign of God.

[This homily was given at St. Ann Parish in Frankfort, Mich.]

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