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Confirmation strengthens family, community of believers

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Editor's note: This homily was given at a confirmation Mass.

Before we go on with the sacrament, it's important for us to reflect for a few moments on the Scriptures of this evening. I think it's important to notice that whenever we read and pray over the Scriptures, as we do during this liturgy, we always try to put it in the context of what's happening within our lives. We have to try to listen to God's word so that we really hear that word in response to what's happening to us, so that we can listen to God's word, or we need to hear it for some reason, or it will give it consolation and joy -- whatever is happening.

So this evening, of course, we're celebrating the sacrament of confirmation. It's really amazing to me how, when you think about what we're celebrating -- the sacrament of confirmation -- then you listen to the word of God carefully. And I must say it's really proclaimed very well in this parish family, so I'm really pleased with that, that you proclaim it carefully and try to listen to it deeply.

It's amazing how these readings tonight really speak to us about what is happening to you, being confirmed, in a sense gratifying, confirming what happened to you at baptism. It's important to be, as you learned, I'm sure, an adult member of the parish family, one who carries the responsibility of a confirmed Christian.

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Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Exodus 17:8-13
Isaiah 40:1-2, 34-40
Matthew 3:14-17

Full text of the readings

When you listen to the lessons tonight, listen to what Paul said to his disciple, Timothy. Timothy was a very young disciple; in fact, Paul had to warn him one time: "Don't let them put you down because you're young." Timothy was young; you're young; but Paul is writing for you: "As you continue with what you have learned and what has been entrusted to you -- the gift of faith, the gift of your baptism -- you listen now and continue with what you have learned." You have learned this, Paul says, from the Scriptures, and Scripture, of course, is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for training in the Christian life.

So this is a reminder to us as we are stepping forward now to be confirmed adult members of this community to remember it's the Scriptures that have formed us, and you continue to listen to those Scriptures. Paul also says to Timothy, "In the presence of God and Christ Jesus, and by the hope I have of his coming and his kingdom, I urge you to proclaim the word of God."

You're being asked now to be witnesses to this word of God; to proclaim it, not so much by getting up and preaching (perhaps sometimes you'll do that -- actually give witness to what's happening in your life), but it's more you proclaim God's word, the message of Jesus, by how you live. That's really what makes all the difference: how you live.

I ask you to consider, for example, how Pope Francis has kind of overwhelmed the world, not so much by what he'd been saying -- he's done a lot of that -- but it's more by how he has given witness to the way of Jesus by saying he's going to live a simple life. Simplicity of life: He will not be building up wealth; he doesn't need to live in a palace; he rides around in a very ordinary car; he lives among the people and he interacts with them on a regular basis. When he goes back to where he rooms, he rides up and down the elevator with everyday people who are there living in the same building he lives in.

He's showing us how to be a witness to Jesus; in this case, witnessing to simplicity of life. Not that we need wealth -- riches after riches after riches. No; just a simple, ordinary life, and Francis is showing us. So this is the first thing that is important for you as you listen to this word of God tonight: that you be witnesses; you proclaim the message of Jesus by how you live.

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But then if we turn to the Gospel lesson, there, too, [is] something very important, I think, from this Gospel lesson, and it's a lesson about faith. This woman who has been treated unjustly has confidence -- faith, trust -- that if she continues to struggle for what is right, eventually she will receive it because she trusts in God, that God will come forth to bring her what is true justice in her life.

But after that example of that woman who has this confidence and trust, Jesus says at the very end of the Gospel today, "When the son of man comes" -- in other words, when Jesus comes to be in our midst again -- "will he find faith on Earth? Faith among God's people?" Now by that, Jesus doesn't mean what we usually think of as faith -- you know, when we stand up at the end of the liturgy and the Word, we proclaim our belief in the mysteries of our faith; that's one way.

Our faith is to proclaim our belief in the way that we've articulated who God is and how God relates to us and so on. Different doctrines of our faith; but that's not what Jesus means here. By faith in this Gospel and throughout the Gospels, Jesus means our relationship with God. Our relationship with God -- that's what faith is really about.

St. Paul, in writing to the church at Rome, said, "The just person lives by faith," and that doesn't mean by

assent to doctrines. It means by relating to God, and especially to God through Jesus. So it's our relationship with God that is all-important, and one of the ways we build up that relationship is coming to know God -- know God deeply by listening to the Scriptures, but also in our prayer. Like that woman in the Gospel, we have to be persistent in our prayer. Prayer doesn't mean we're trying to change God; no, it means we're trying to enter into relationship with God so God can change us.

So we have to be faithful in prayer, and as confirmed disciples of Jesus, that becomes more and more important for every one of you, not just those being confirmed tonight or all of us who are already confirmed. We have to keep deepening our relationship with God in faith. That means we trust him; we understand that God is always there ready to be with us -- to support us, to show us God's love. Our relationship with God has to keep on growing.

So that means we have to keep knowing Jesus better because Jesus is how God is revealed to us: as a God who loves us without condition, without limit -- the way Jesus loves every one of us. So as confirmed disciples now, it's going to be more and more important for you to be conscious of your relationship with God in Jesus and to deepen that relationship every day through your prayer, through your reading of the Scriptures.

Finally tonight, the first lesson, I think, is also very important because it shows us Moses there alone, praying earnestly to God, and he was doing it in a form of prayer that was common at the time: to pray with arms upheld. Moses was praying, and he wanted to keep praying with his arms held up, but he got tired. So Aaron and Hur, his two disciples, come and help him -- support him, hold his arms up -- so he can be constant in prayer.

I think that's a beautiful example of what happens within a parish community -- a community of believing people -- like this parish of St. Anne's. We're here to support one another. My faith life will strengthen yours; your faith life strengthens mine. We come together to celebrate our Eucharist, our other sacraments.

We come together as God's people in support of one another, and that's very important now as you are confirmed disciples tonight [and] become fully immersed in the life of Jesus through the sacrament of baptism, confirmation and holy Eucharist. It's important that you continue to receive help from one another and from your parish family.

That's why all of us are here with you tonight: to celebrate with you and to assure you that, as you continue to try to be faithful disciples of Jesus -- confirmed followers of Jesus trying to give witness to the world about the love of God -- as you're trying to do this, your parish family, your own personal family, all of us are here to support you and to give thanks for you because of your willingness to stand up now and proclaim your belief in Jesus and that you want to be a witness to Jesus for the rest of your life.

We gather then tonight in great joy as we celebrate this sacrament, and I hope that we will continue to listen to God's word and the Scriptures so that we will continue to be formed according to the way of Jesus and be enabled to be his disciples -- witnesses to him -- for the rest of our lives.

[Homily given at St. Anne Parish in Ortonville, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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