

Homily: August 8 -9, 2015

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Kingdom and Eucharist – Our Present Challenge

Last week I talked about how Jesus left us the Eucharist so we wouldn't forget his headline message: God is taking charge of history! So the meal we share each week here gives us not just hope but confidence that, no matter what struggles, setbacks, or even disasters we face in the short-term, ultimately God wins and history – our history and cosmic history – turns out as God wants.

But that hope is a foundation; it's not the whole building; and God wants us to cooperate with Him in building the future. We see this in the text today about the Prophet Elijah. When Elijah is discouraged, God sends an angel to feed him. But once Elijah is satisfied, what happens? He wants to go back to sleep.

From God's perspective, this won't do. God wants from Elijah not just a fat and happy prophet, but an effective one: Elijah has a task from God. So the angel tells him to eat again so he'll have the energy to do God's work. That's this week's message about the Eucharist: It's not just for our satisfaction or encouragement: It's given to us for the sake of others we can help through the power it gives us.

So what might we need to be strengthened for? Let me tell you a story from the past which may shed some light on what we need the Eucharist to prepare us for today.

The setting is the Pacific island of Tinian. The date is 1945. The protagonist is Fr. George Zabelka, Catholic chaplain to the 509th Composite Group of the U.S. Army Air Force. Fr. Zabelka's ministry is to counsel and to guide the men who fly the B-29 bombers on their missions over Japan. Let's turn it over to Fr. Zabelka, looking back from twenty-five years later: Quote:

"Many of these planes went to Japan with the express purpose of ... slaughtering hundreds and thousands of children and civilians -- and I said nothing. ...

"Yes, I knew civilians were being destroyed ... Yet I never preached a single sermon against killing civilians to the men who were doing it. ...

"I was "brainwashed"! It never entered my mind to publicly protest the consequences of these massive air raids.

"I was told the raids [were] necessary; told openly by the military and told implicitly by my Church's leadership. To the best of my knowledge no American cardinals or bishops were opposing these mass air raids. Silence in such matters, especially by a public body like the American bishops, is a stamp of approval. ...

Seventy years ago today Fr. Zabelka blessed the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, killing an estimated 40,000 people instantly, and consigning another 34,000 to death within a few months from radiation poisoning. The bomb is estimated to have killed only about 150 military personnel; the rest were civilians.¹ Three days earlier he had blessed the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Without entering into the domain of historians and political scientists about whether the bombing of Japan was wise, or of moral theologians on whether it could be justified, there is one thing I'd like to take from Fr. Zabelka's experience that we

might learn about why we need Christ in the Eucharist today to strengthen us. Fr. Zabelka says,

"It never entered my mind to publicly protest the consequences of these massive air raids..."²

This is a warning that it is entirely possible for any one of us to be like Fr. Zabelka, and to miss totally a crucial issue of our time if there is no conversation in the church about it. And we can put at risk others as well, if we contribute to that lack of conversation.

Next month our Holy Father will visit the U.S. and will speak to the congress and to the United Nations. It's a safe bet that his recent encyclical "Laudato si' – On Care for our Common Home" provides some clues to what's on his mind and on his agenda. Let him speak for himself:

14. I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. ... Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. ...

The Holy Father goes on:

26. Many of those who possess more resources and economic or political power seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms, simply making efforts to reduce some of the negative impacts of climate change. However, many of these symptoms indicate that such effects will continue to worsen if we continue with current models of production and consumption. ...
27.... We all know that it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society, where the habit of wasting and discarding has reached unprecedented levels. The exploitation of the planet has already exceeded acceptable limits and we still have not solved the problem of poverty.³

There's lots, lots more in the encyclical: I urge you to read the whole thing. And I encourage you to listen carefully to what the Holy Father has to say when he's visiting in September.

Our current lifestyle, worldwide climate change, and the effects of both on the poor are perhaps the signature issues of our time as the Holy Father sees things. There are Catholics who will be, and even now are, faced with making decisions around these topics – in their businesses, in what sort of homes and cars they buy, in what they encourage their children to choose for a career, and in countless other decisions that will shape the human future in large and small ways. And some Catholics have been put into positions of great responsibility as elected officials, or in public administration. or in business or finance. Whether our influence is limited or vast, no Catholic should have to face their responsibilities in a culture of silence such as Fr. Zabelka faced at his moments of great moral choice.

In the Eucharist each week Christ tells us, as the angel told Elijah: “Get up and eat; else the journey will be too long for you.” The Eucharist feeds us for a task: to do the work of Christ. Through it Christ offers us the strength now to create a conversation in the church, under the Holy Father’s lead, that will guide and support not only ourselves and one another, but also our sisters and brothers in Christ whose decisions will greatly affect the future of our planet.

Fr. Zabelka was on the sharp point of a great challenge of his day – and he was left alone by his church when he most needed his fellow believers for guidance. By the power of the Eucharist, and with the courage it gives us, we can do our part to create a church-wide conversation about the issues the Holy Father is raising. No Christian in our generation should have to say, as Fr. Zabelka did before his death, “I am not going to the day of judgment looking for justice in this matter. Mercy is my salvation.”

¹ Susan Southard, “Nagasaki: The Forgotten City,” *NY Times*, 8 August 2015. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/08/opinion/nagasaki-the-forgotten-city.html?ref=opinion&r=0>

² All Fr. Zabelka’s comments are from “Fr. George Zabelka: A Military Chaplain Repents.” Published by the Center for Christian Nonviolence, n.d. Available at <http://www.centerforchristiannonviolence.org/data/Media/Fr.%20George%20Zabekla%20Interview%20%5B02%5D.pdf>

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’ (on the Care for our Common Home)*. 24 May 2015. Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html