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The Sacrament of Nonviolence Makes Martyrs for the Truth

Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JUNE 1, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Four Gospels tell the wonder-filled story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes that has been situated geographically at Tabgha, the place of the seven springs on the Northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Today's Gospel looks back to the rich theology and spirituality of Israel, and also forward to contemplate the idea of life in God's kingdom as a banquet at which the Messiah, himself, will preside.

Mark's readers saw this incident as an anticipation of the Last Supper (14:22) and the messianic banquet, both of which were celebrated in the community's Eucharists. Matthew's addition of the number of people present and fed is very important, because the total figure could well have come to 20,000 or 30,000 people. Since the total Jewish population of Palestine at the time of Jesus is estimated at half a million, Jesus is presented as feeding a tenth of the population. This gives the feeding stories a social character, which makes them different from healing stories or the accounts in the other Gospels.

Luke, of all the evangelists, immediately links this feeding account with Jesus' prediction of his passion and his instructions about bearing one's cross daily (9:18-27). To celebrate the Eucharist in memory of Jesus (22:19) is to share not only his mission (9:1-6) but also his dedication and destiny, symbolized by the cross (9:18-27). The Eucharist is intended to nourish and strengthen us for continuing faithfully in our way of life.

Feeding the new Israel

Let us situate today's Gospel passage (Luke 9:11-17) in Luke's Gospel. Chapter 9 begins with the mission of the 12: they are sent to proclaim the kingdom, to have power over demons, to bring the good news to the people, and to cure their diseases. Jesus gives his disciples who have just returned from preaching and curing God's people, a new charge: they are to feed reconstituted Israel with the Eucharist.

Luke teaches us two important lessons in today's Gospel. First Jesus welcomes this vast crowd of common folk, even though "the Twelve" wanted to send them away. Luke's use of "the Twelve" to indicate a special group of disciples, is a reflection of the significance of that number in the traditions among the people of Israel. In particular, it recalls the twelve tribes of Israel. By using the term "Twelve," Luke indicates that being chosen to serve in a particular way is not an excuse for distancing oneself from the crowd, the common people. On the contrary, the Twelve, like Jesus, must be welcoming.

Second, Jesus teaches that the disciples are to share whatever they have. In the sharing there will be more than enough. Logic and human reason say, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish." But Jesus asks that these meager provisions, as well as the generosity of the disciples, be stretched to their limits. Of all the

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evangelists, Luke stresses the fact that salvation reaches into the practical realities of human life.

The Sacrament of Nonviolence

The Eucharist sums up all the teaching, passion and death of Jesus, and his nonviolent way must be at the heart of the Eucharist. Luke's passion narrative is about the Lamb, who goes to his death rejecting violence, loving enemies, returning good for evil, praying for his persecutors. The Eucharist, therefore, is truly the sacrament of nonviolence. The way of Jesus to conquer evil and violence must be the Christian way: the way of nonviolence, of love and forgiveness. The nonviolent way of Jesus is historically at the heart of his teaching, and at the same time at the heart of his passion and death.

Man of the Eucharist and Martyr for the Truth

We see this how this Eucharistic reality was lived out in the life of a young Polish priest, Father Jerzy Popieluszko (1947-1984) who will be beatified as a martyr on the feast of Corpus Christi, June 6, in Warsaw's Pilsudski Square. I wish to tell you a little about this remarkable priest who has been a hero and role model to me for the past 26 years.

Jerzy Popieluszko was born on Sept. 14, 1947, in the village of Okopy in Eastern Poland. He was from a strong Roman Catholic family. After secondary school, Jerzy entered the seminary in Warsaw, rather than the local seminary in Bialystok. His training was interrupted by two years of military service, during which he was beaten several times for living his Christian faith.

After ordination, the young priest, who never enjoyed good health, held several appointments before his final appointment to the parish of St. Stanislas Kostka in Warsaw. He worked part-time in the parish, which enabled him to work as well with medical personnel. As a result of his close work with health care personnel, he was asked to organize the medical teams during Pope John Paul II's visits to Poland in 1979 and Warsaw in 1983.

August 1980 saw the beginning of the Solidarity trade union in Poland. Workers from the Warsaw steel plant, who were on strike in support of the shipyards on the Baltic Sea, requested a priest to say Mass for them. The lot fell to Father Jerzy. He stayed with the workers night and day. Solidarity represented for him a vision that he had first learned from St. Maximilian Kolbe: that of spiritual freedom amidst physical enslavement. It was this vision of the truth about the vocation of every man and woman, which Father Jerzy promoted amongst the workers by his presence.

On Dec. 13, 1981, the communist authorities imposed martial law, arresting many Solidarity activists and launching a program of harassment and retaliation against others. Many who had been on strike lost their jobs, and so their ability to support their families; others were beaten up on the streets and left for dead. Father Popieluszko became an important focus in a welfare program to support families affected by martial law.

He regularly attended the trials of Solidarity activists, sitting prominently in court with their families so that the prisoners could see that they were not forgotten. It was in the courtroom that he had the idea for a monthly Mass for the country, to be celebrated for all the imprisoned and their families. It was not a political demonstration -- Father Popieluszko specifically asked his congregation not to display banners or chant slogans. His Masses for the Fatherland became well known not only in Warsaw, but throughout Poland, often attracting 15,000 to 20,000 people. Father Popieluszko insisted that change should be brought about peacefully; the sign of peace was one of the most poignant moments of each Mass for the country.

Father Popieluszko was neither a social nor a political activist, but a Catholic priest faithful to the Gospel. He wasn't a forceful speaker, but someone of deep conviction and integrity. His sanctity lay in fundamental

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righteousness that gave people hope even in horrendous situations. He knew that all totalitarian systems are based on terror and intimidation. The Communists saw him as an enemy because he freed people from fear of the system. He exposed the hypocrisy of the Communist regime and he taught believers how to confront totalitarianism. How often Jerzy made St. Paul's words his own in his preaching: " Fight evil with good."

On Oct. 19, 1984, the young priest was kidnapped by security agents on his way back to Warsaw after a visit to a parish in the neighboring town of Bydgoszcz. He was savagely beaten until he lost consciousness, and his body was tied up in such a way that he would strangle himself by moving. His weighted body was then thrown into a deep reservoir. His killers carried out their task with unprecedented brutality, which shows their hatred of the faith that the priest embodied. Jerzy's driver, who managed to escape, told what had happened to the press. On Oct. 30, Popieluszko's bound and gagged body was found in the freezing waters of a reservoir near Wloclawek. Fr. Jerzy's brutal murder was widely believed to have hastened the collapse of communist rule in Poland.

Father Jerzy's funeral was a massive public demonstration with over 400,000 people in attendance. Official delegations of Solidarity appeared from throughout the whole country for the first time since the imposition of martial law. He was buried in the front yard of his parish church of St. Stanislaw Kostka, and since that day, 17 million have visited his tomb.

Over the past 20 years, I have been privileged to pray several times at his grave in the Warsaw working suburb, and to witness the extraordinary effect that this young priest has had on so many young people. He promoted respect for human rights, for the rights of workers and the dignity of persons, all in the light of the Gospel. He practiced, for Poland and for the whole world, the virtues of courage, of fidelity to God, to the cross of Christ and the Gospel, love of God and of the homeland. He represented patriotism in the Christian sense, as a cultural and social virtue. He was deeply devoted to the Eucharist. More than 80 streets and squares in Poland have been named after Father Jerzy. Hundreds of statues and memorial plaques have been unveiled to him; some 18,000 schools, charities, youth groups and discussion clubs have been named after him.

Because the murdered priest is being proclaimed a martyr for hatred of the faith, Popieluszko's beatification process did not require evidence of a miracle. The formal verification of a miracle is not necessary, even though many have been reported. His beatification is an example for priests, in the light of his total fidelity to Christ. Father Jerzy provides a model for us, calling us to strive that what we say and do outwardly should always agree with our inward conscience.

Blessed Jerzy Popieluszko, Man of the Eucharist, Martyr for the Truth, your life was broken and shared with the multitudes. The blood of your martyrdom has become the seed of faith for your homeland and for the Church. You are a priest forever, in the line of Melchizedek (Psalm 110). Pray for us.

[The readings for Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ are Genesis 14:18-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 9:11b-17]

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Reflection for Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ " We Cannot Live Without Sunday":
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IX4S7UdqieM&feature=PlayList&p=C587A1C80E167A91&index=11>

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