

Sunday 26

Today's Gospel and the first reading from the Book of Numbers are two peas in a pod. Indeed, since the First Reading is much older, we might be tempted to think that the Gospel reading was modeled on it. But we could also say that the Lord, who knew his scriptures, knew how Moses had acted, approved of the way he acted, and followed suit.

What are these readings telling us? They are telling us that the Holy Spirit breathes wherever it wills and is not limited to particular organizations, even churches. Moses felt overburdened by his job as leader of the people and therefore asked God to give him helpers. God obliged by pouring out on seventy-two men the same spirit that He had given to Moses, the spirit of prophecy. But two of these men received it separately, in the camp, we are told, and not in Moses' tent, with the other seventy. When Joshua, Moses' second-in-command, heard about these two men prophesying, he said to Moses: "Moses, my Lord, stop them." But Moses replied: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!"

The situation is similar with Jesus. His disciples notice that a man who is not a member of their group is nevertheless healing people in Jesus' name, and they want Jesus to forbid him from doing this. Jesus refuses by saying that such a man, since he is healing in his name, cannot at the same time speak ill of him. Then he adds the more general statement: "For whoever is not against us is for us."

Therefore, both Moses and the Lord Jesus are not people who hug their own power and prestige to themselves. No, they are willing to share it with others. May all the people receive the prophetic gifts, Moses says. Let us look on everyone as a friend until it proves otherwise, Jesus says.

Are we willing to accept this very generous kind of thinking and living, or are we more prone to hug our power and prestige to ourselves? I must confess that at times I find myself veering away from the Lord's generosity to a more exclusive position when it comes to the relationship between our church and the other Christian churches. Coming at this relationship from an historical perspective, I cannot forget the fact that we are the original church and that the other churches, whether orthodox or Protestant, are branches of this original tree. Nor can I forget the fact that we

have a different understanding of leadership in the church. In the Catholic Church leadership is restricted to male celibates. Moreover, these men are called priests because the Mass at which they preside is considered a sacrifice. Orthodox churches also have priests, but Protestant churches do not because they do not consider the Eucharistic celebration at which their leaders preside a sacrifice. Hence they call their leaders ministers, not priests. So, given these differences, I tend to think of the Catholic priesthood as being in some sense superior.

But the Spirit blows where it wills. Who would deny the possibility that a leader of a recently formed Christian church might have more of that spirit and be more a follower of Jesus in his or her daily life than a priest? And that is more important than an historical pedigree.

Pope John Paul II was very much aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit outside the Catholic Church and indeed even outside Christianity. That is why he was willing to invite the leaders of the religions of the world to a day of prayer each year at Assisi. Present there in 1987, he spoke of the presence of the Holy Spirit in other religions: “There are undeniably differences that reflect the genius and spiritual ‘riches’ which God has given to the

peoples. Perhaps instead of demanding, ‘Why are you not one of us? We might ask, ‘What are your gifts to the Kingdom?’”

This month of October will be the fiftieth (56th) anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. That council saw itself as a renewal of our church in so many different ways, as a new coming of the Holy Spirit upon itself. Today some want to say that this council produced bad fruit and was therefore a bad tree. I don’t believe that for a second. The Holy Spirit guided the church at that council, and the good fruit of that council is still present among us for those who have eyes to see. As we commemorate this council’s fiftieth anniversary, we ought to study its documents once again and see what they can say to us now. As we do so, we could repeat that old familiar prayer: “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and enkindle in them the fire of thy Divine Love.”