

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Avoiding Over-Simplifications

In the Gospel, Jesus' disciples make a mistake that will be repeated throughout history. They try to simplify the world into two groups of people: us and them. The man who was exorcising in Jesus' name was not an explicit follower of Jesus. He was not one of "us;" he was one of "them." He was not in the group, and so the disciples wanted to stop him.

In the same way, Joshua wanted to stop the two elders from prophesying in the book of Numbers. They were not in the group with Moses when the Lord shared the Spirit with the other elders. Joshua did not see the two as one of "us," but as one of "them."

But Scripture gives us an important detail. These two elders, Eldad and Medad, had their names written on the list. They were marked out by the Lord to serve Him. They did not need to be a part of a particular group for the Lord to work through them. The world cannot be simplified into "us and them" based on membership in external groups.

Many wise Christian saints and writers have applied this to the Catholic Church. We cannot deny that God can work outside the visible boundaries of the Church. If the Lord has chosen some person to serve Him, He will work through that person wherever he or she may be. We can never condemn people or ignore their merits simply because they are not members of the Church. They can still be doing God's work.

The mistake we usually make today is the opposite extreme from the disciples' mistake in the Gospel. Many people today simplify the world into a single group so that "everybody is okay." Everyone serves the Lord, they say, so membership in a group is meaningless. We should not try to convert the world or baptize people into the Catholic Church because God can work through people wherever they are.

To correct this mistake, we should remember the episode from chapter 19 of the Acts of the Apostles. A group of traveling Jewish exorcists tried to cast out demons like St. Paul by using the name of Jesus. The demon merely laughed at them and drove them away. The Lord did not work

through them. Even though they called on Jesus' name, they had no intention of following him on the way of life he taught us.

St. Augustine reminds us that non-Christians who respect Christ's name are not meant to remain apart from Christ. They are meant to follow Christ through baptism into the Church (*Harmony of the Gospels* from *Ancient Christian Commentary on the Scriptures* page 128). God can work through people outside the Church, but He does so calling them into the Church which his son established.

Scripture teaches us to avoid these two mistakes: dividing people into "us and them" and combining people so that "everybody is okay." Over-simplifications like these rarely tell the whole truth. Instead, the truth is that we must recognize God's work and presence where we find it, inside the tent and outside, and that we must continue to invite all people into the communion of the Catholic Church, the Body of Christ, in which Jesus wants all people to be members, sharing his divine sacramental life.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella