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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
September 26, 2021
26th Sunday of Year B Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

In recent years, so many of society's institutions—government, church, education—have endured such storms of protest and criticism, one might have wondered about their very survival. But if some good has resulted from all those controversies, it may be that the caretakers of these institutions, those in charge, as well as those on the receiving end, may have a more realistic idea of just what these institutions can and cannot provide. So, also, with regard to the church. Even an institution that represents God can't claim to be God, or God-like. It can't be all-knowing, all-caring, never erring. Even the Church has to recognize its limitations, as we have come to see only too well in recent years.

If we listen carefully to this morning's passage from the Book of Numbers, we see that the Hebrews of old should have suffered from no such illusions about the capabilities of their own religious and social institutions. Moses set them straight from the beginning, while they were still on their way to the Promised Land. The Spirit of God, the charism, or gift of prophecy, the possibility of being a doer of God's will, is not confined to the religious elite, to the religious professionals, to the 70 elders. Even those who have not been sealed and certified, ordained and consecrated, even ordinary people may have something important to say and do.

This passage reminds us that religious institutions, such as the church, need these voices on the periphery to remind it of what it is all about—perhaps, at times, to goad it into activity to do God's work, to live up to its responsibilities. And, as Moses says, “I wish that all the people of the Lord were prophets.” Moses does not tell those outside, those different, perhaps dissident voices, to shut up. He only wishes that there were more of them. That is the response of one who is secure in his role of leader, who is not afraid or threatened by contrary opinions. That is often a hard lesson for “leaders” to learn, especially when they have invested so much of themselves in a form of life or pattern of action that is now being criticized by some “loud mouths,” especially if these leaders have made decisions that have affected their own lives and the lives of others, based on a belief that now does not appear as secure as it once did. It's easy for those on the inside to think, or want to think, that they have all the answers.

It was difficult for the apostles, as well, to learn this lesson. After Jesus sends them out to continue His work, they come back complaining, crying like 10-year olds,

that some other guys have grabbed a piece of the action. After all, they were "the apostles," weren't they? Who did these other characters think they were? They complain to Jesus as if He were some kind of religious Col. Sanders or Ray Crock or Tom Carvel, as if Jesus were the founder of some company, and as if they, the apostles, had been given the exclusive franchise on the "god-market," as if God were limited to the human structures that had been set up. Like Moses, Jesus tells the apostles, "Don't shut them up; anyone who is not against us should be seen as being on our side; not a threat, but an ally." The reaction of Jesus is not one of defensiveness, fear or anger. Jesus is not paranoid that His authority will be diminished. His only concern is that the work of his Father will be accomplished—how, or by whom, matters much less than the work be done. Nor does it matter who gets the credit for doing God's work. Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union once remarked, "Imagine how much good could be accomplished, if people weren't worrying about who was going to get the credit."

This morning's readings are probably best addressed to those who have positions of authority or leadership within the church--that they might have ears to listen to the voices of all, no matter from what quarter those voices may arise. Actually, though, these readings are addressed to all believers to be willing to recognize when God may be working outside of the customary channels and procedures, that we might be able, as Pope John XXIII said, "to read the signs of the times," to discover the new, the unexpected arenas where God is working. Basic here is the belief of the Scriptures, the "the Spirit breathes where it wills." Like the wind, the Holy Spirit appears in the strangest of places and moving seemingly intractable objects. What we all need is the ability to recognize that Spirit wherever and whenever it is moving. Even from the mouths of the most unlikely, even at times rather obnoxious people, can come the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So long as the message they bring is in harmony with the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we can't turn them off, just because they are not labeled "Catholic" or "Christian" or even "religious.". What matters is that God's will be done. The agents of God's will may not be people of our own choosing, but, then again, it is God who makes the selection. Still, it is easier for those on the inside to criticize those outside their own grouping. Again, what matters is that the Lord's work be done, the works of justice, mercy and peace--again by whom, and how, and where, matters much less than it gets done. If there is any lesson to be worth today's Scripture readings, it is that God can work through any single one of us, and that we should be prepared to discover that presence of God in others, even prepared to find God's presence within ourselves, encouraging each one to come forth and voice one's opinion in all charity and honesty.

Today's Scripture passage reminds us that a Roman collar gives no monopoly on

religious insight or wisdom. The same is true for the other major institutions of our society. They maybe too fragile to survive on their own power. They need the movement of the Holy Spirit that comes from the outside, unexpectedly, at times even strangely. Let us pray that we not suffer from the blindness that prevents us from seeing God working, or from the rigidity that would keep us from responding with a generous heart. The Spirit breathes where it wills, in the most unlikely of places, and sometimes through the lives of the strangest of people.