

Homily for the twenty-sixth Sunday, b cycle, September 26, 2021

Only recently I dined with an older married couple from our neighborhood. The husband is a baptized Christian and a member of the Methodist church. His wife and the mother of his children is a baptized Roman Catholic, who has not practiced the faith in many years. She told me why. Years ago, her mother, who was born and raised in the Bible belt of Kentucky, was a Protestant, and who married a devout Roman Catholic, her father. She became gravely ill and was not expected to live. Her husband contacted his parish priest and requested that he come to his home and offer prayers for his wife. The priest refused. He said, "She's not one of us. She is a protestant". Such an uncharitable response left her daughter disconsolate and angry. Her anger lingers to this day.

In today's gospel, an apostle, Saint John, complains to Jesus, "We saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us". Jesus replied, "Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me".

In his commentary on this reading, Pope Benedict writes, "If a stranger to the community does good works in Christ's name, so long as he does it with upright intentions and with respect, members of the Church should not feel jealous but rejoice". Where the grace of God is on display, one's response should be gratitude.

On this very point, Saint Paul seems to agree. In his letter to the Church at Philippi, He writes, "Some preach Christ out of rivalry.....What difference does it make, so long as in every way, whether in pretense or in truth Christ is being proclaimed and in that I rejoice (Phil. 1: 15-18).

Anyone who does good In Jesus' name shows that he is spiritually near the Church even if he is not actually a member of it and has at least the beginning of faith. The Church has no quarrel with people who use the name of Jesus to do a good deed and uses one of the sayings of Jesus----- He who is not against us is with us----- to support the view.

Several years ago, while I was a patient at Albany Medical Center, a woman--- a total stranger---came into my room late at night. She carried a bible in her hand. I assumed she was a Protestant. She asked me for permission to offer prayers that I may regain my health. I replied, "Please do". I would never reject the prayers of another person. In this instance, we each could boast of a common Lord in heaven. Turning her away simply because she was not a Catholic was never an issue for me personally!

In a film dating back to 1967, "The Shoes of the Fisherman", which is based on the novel of Morris West, the first non-Italian pope in many centuries, Pope Kiril, a one-time prisoner in a Soviet labor camp, is the main character. In one scene, he finds himself in the house of a dying man. He is in the company of a lady doctor. He begins to offer prayers. The doctor points to the Star of David on the wall and whispers to the Pontiff, "There are no Catholics here. This is a Jewish household. After a slight pause, the pope begins to pray a traditional Jewish prayer in Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people. The dying man's brother joins him in prayer, as do the elderly women from the corner of the room.

Whatever we do to assist others comes from God.

A kind gesture in the name of Christ will not soon be forgotten and will be greatly appreciated. In our age of bitter rancor, division, incivility and even hatred, we must keep in mind that some walls are demolished in the wake of even the smallest act of kindness.

To quote Mother Teresa, "We are pencils in the hands of God"