



September 27, 2009 The Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

*“Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!”—
Numbers 11:29*

Dear Friends;

The prayerful desire of Moses, that the Spirit of God be poured out on all the people, was fulfilled in Jesus. The Risen Lord breathed his Spirit into us the people of God. And we celebrate that gift in our baptism.

Moses' expression is a response to those who would control the Spirit, make it subject to their personal control, or a basis for power and the brokering of that power. The story begins with an inspiration of Moses to appoint seventy elders (leaders) of the community. They would assist Moses in leading and ministering to the community. They were given a share in the Spirit that was given to Moses.

There were two, Eldad and Medad, who were on the list to be appointed, however they missed the official gathering. But amazingly the Spirit happened to also land on them as well. And they were doing the same prophetic work as the others.

Joshua an assistant of Moses complains to Moses that the two uninitiated were “prophesying,” Moses recognizes that it was jealousy that motivated the complaint. Moses knows that God will do what God will do, we cannot control God. We must welcome the outpouring of the Spirit wherever it may be.

The sixty-eight that had the Spirit come upon them at the ministration of Moses represent the need for an organized approach to ministry and leadership within the community of faith. We need institutions they help us extend our work over time and generations. Without the institution of the Church it would be hard to say how long the Gospel would continue to be proclaimed.

However, there is a danger in institutions. They can become self-serving and forget their mission. They can become rarified and ossified (quaint and dried up). Often they can suppress the imagination and new ideas that would bring the institution vitality and energy.

Eldad and Medad are reminders of the charismatic part of the faith community. There are those who are gifted with wisdom and understanding that comes, not from an institutional bureaucracy, but a gift from God. These people are often a threat to those who would keep everything to a mind-numbing sameness. These people are most often not ordained but represent an emerging adaptation or development. We need these people to call us to life.

It is important for us to remember that Jesus was not a person of the institution—he was not a priest, nor a member of the religious hierarchy. He was a charismatic lay-teacher. He was part of a movement that sprang up when Judaism was in exile when there was no temple or place to exercise the official cultic religion. This movement continued even after the reestablishment of the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus led from the Spirit which is why the establishment keeps asking him from where he got his teaching.

The Catholic Church has historically been faith community that relies heavily on structure, hierarchy and institution. Clergy traditionally dominated the life of the faithful. The laity were basically instructed as passive recipients of the ministrations of the “ordained priests.” That structure it was recognized by Pope John XXIII needed some fresh air.

So John inaugurated the Second Vatican Council which ushered in a new era. One of the important things that the Council does is to recognize the need for the charismatic expression of the Spirit. The structure can sometimes suffocate the Spirit. The Council leaders recognized that there was need for a corrective. The Church needs to be described first as the “people of God” before we speak of structures and hierarchies.

The Spirit is poured out on all by virtue of our baptism. The Spirit is found in the whole community—the priesthood of all the believers and the ordained priesthood together. Ordained priesthood is meant to serve the priesthood of believers by calling them to use their gifts for the mission of Christ in the world. In this “Year of the Priest” it would be good for priests and laity alike to recall the words of St. Augustine (5th century), “With you I am baptized, for you I was ordained.”

Peace,

Fr Ron