

26TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B
DO NOT STOP THEM

“You must not stop him: no one who works a miracle in My Name is likely to speak evil of Me. Anyone who is not against us is for us” (Mark 9: 39-40)

Our Differences, Our Gifts, Our Opportunities: Religious intolerance continues to cast a dark shadow on human history. This stems from our insistence on our self-conceited opinion and idea of God. When we consider our positions as absolute, it opens the cracks for tensions and resistance. Yet God reveals Himself as perfect diversity. The Trinity is a powerful revelation of the nature of God, Who accommodates, communicates, and shares His Being with others. Our very creation in the image of God with varieties of race, nation, language and colour is a beautiful gift that speaks the language of God’s immense love of diversity, and His intention that we should live together in harmony with our differences to complement each other. But experience has shown that man prefers isolation to communion, the love of self to the love of all, prefers what differentiates to what unites. The First reading (Num. 11: 25-29) and Gospel (Mk. 9: 38-43,45, 47-48) of today relate to this shameful side of our human nature. Once again, they offer us the opportunity to learn the Will of God for us in this.

Do Not Stop Them: From the Gospel narrative, the disciples are yet to understand the novel identity of the Messiah that Jesus has been teaching them for the last two Sundays. This Messiah has come to be rejected and to suffer for the entire human race and save them from their sins. In Him, there is no exclusion – everyone is a firstborn child. Here, they are, still thinking in terms of power, authority, privilege, and exclusiveness. They are more concerned about an “outsider” who seemingly usurped their prerogative than seeing the goodness done in the name of Jesus. John complained to the Master that they saw a man casting out devils in His Name and they tried to stop him. Jesus rebuked him saying: “Do not stop him: no one who works a miracle in My Name is likely to speak evil of Me. Anyone who is not against us is for us” (Mark 9: 39-40). This response of Jesus affirms the response and action of Moses in the First Reading (Numbers 11: 25-29), where Eldad and Medad, who were among the seventy elders chosen by Moses to assist him in bearing the burden of the people of Israel but were not with them at the Tent, were prophesying in the camp and Joshua complained: “My Lord, Moses, stop them” (Numbers 11: 28). Moses responded in a way that must have shocked Joshua and elders: “Are you jealous on my account? If only that the whole people of God were prophets, and the Lord gave His power to them all” (Numbers 11: 29). Moses’ reply is tied to that of Jesus in one simple message, get rid of your self-distinctiveness and open your heart, mind, and eyes to rejoice in goodness wherever it is found. St. Paul corroborates the response of Jesus when he writes: “No one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12: 3). The lesson here is that the Name of Jesus is given to all men, and whoever believes and has faith in Him can use it for great things. Similarly, no one person or group of persons has the monopoly of God’s power. The Spirit blows wherever it wills to manifest the glory of

God. St. Paul puts this differently: "Some preach Christ from envy and rivalry. ... What difference does it make, if in every way, whether in pretence or truth, Christ is proclaimed? And in that I rejoice" (Phil. 1: 15-18). Sometimes, we are like Joshua and John, we feel the strong desire to isolate, differentiate and separate others from ourselves or our groups. We like to see ourselves as the privileged ones, with some exclusive prerogatives that cause us to look down and discriminate against others. Exclusion and the fear of inclusion is a sign of both ignorance and arrogance and could reflect some inner (inferiority) complex. John Morley, a British Liberal statesman and journalist once wrote: "Toleration means reverence for all the possibilities of truth, it means the acknowledgement that she dwells in divers' mansions, and wears vestures of many colours, and speaks in strange tongues. It means frank respect for freedom of indwelling conscience against mechanical forms, official conventions, and social force. It means the charity that is greater than faith and hope." Inclusion, not exclusion, is the pragmatic statement of the New Kingdom, the Christian community inaugurated by Christ.

A Word for Us Priests and Leaders: Moses and Jesus are focusing on an all-embracing involvement of everyone the Spirit wills to engage. They are correcting the idea of wrongly thinking that anyone has the exclusive preserve of the Spirit of God to prophesy or the use of the Name of Jesus to perform miracles. The Name of Jesus is the name given to all men, who believe in Him, and by His Name, man will be saved (Acts 4: 12). The Spirit of God is beyond human control and cannot be circumscribed, limited nor arrogated by any individual or group of persons. The fact that one is outside the communion does not mean that the Spirit of God cannot manifest in Him to perform certain actions. The clergy, as pastors and administrators, must always bear in mind the demand of humility and openness to request, and harness the services of the lay and the religious in the parish to enable the parish to benefit from the gifts of the Spirit bestowed to all its members. They must make the Church home and a family, where every individual has a right to self-expression and use of their gifts and talents. Church leaders and pastors must be open to pastoral inclusion and collaboration with the laity, who, as God's children, are also enormously gifted for service in the community of faithful. If the Church today must grow, we must open the windows and doors to welcome all men and women of goodwill to live, learn and love together. Jesus is again saying to the Church: "Do not stop them."

These Little Ones: Notice that if God generously rewards little acts of kindness to one of His own, He also severely punishes evil acts, especially when they lead "any of these little ones" astray. "Little ones" here refers to children in their innocence, those growing in the faith, the weak, the ignorant and the vulnerable. Our relationship with "these little ones" is very crucial to our eternal destination. St. James, in the Second Reading (5: 1-6), focuses on this while addressing the excesses, abuses and negligence of the poor by the rich in his community. The caution to guard "these little ones" touches on scandals. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (#2884) describes scandal as: "an attitude or behaviour that leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his neighbour's tempter. He damages virtue and integrity ... Scandal is a grave offence if by deed or

omission another is deliberately led into a grave offence.” Scandal can be very subtle and gently invasive because it is sometimes committed inadvertently. This call for caution, prudence, and self-awareness. Our acts of negligence, imprudence, selfishness, betrayal of trust could be scandalous; they could become stumbling blocks in the path of others. Let us be careful about what we do and not do; what we say and not say; where, when, to whom we do and say them.

Cut It Off: It is a known fact that the way we live here and now determines what happens to us in the here-after. So, Jesus teaches: “And if your hand ... foot ... eye should cause you to sin, cut it off, for it better for you to enter into life crippled ... lame ... blind than to have your two hands ... two legs ... and two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die nor their fire go out” (Mark 9: 43-49). Certainly, Jesus is not asking any of us to carry out this teaching literally, but He is using these images to emphasise the seriousness of the premium we should place on the salvation of our souls. Eternal life is so supremely important that we should be prepared to act very rigorously against anything that seems to or stands in our way. William Barclay explains this passage thus: “It means that it may be necessary to excise some habit, to abandon some pleasure, to give up some friends, to cut out some things which have become very dear to us, to be fully obedient to the will of God.” The challenge here is a call to personal self-assessment: What do I need to cut off? Who do I need to dissociate from? What relationships are not helpful? Who or what must I let go of?

My dear friends, we have been called by faith to embrace one another in love. Let us not consider ourselves worthier than others but be humble in openly embracing and loving everyone else lest we become scandals and stumbling blocks to these little ones entrusted to our care. May the God of grace be sufficient for us all.