

[Numbers 11:25-29; Psalm 19; James 5:1-6; Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48]

Today is Priesthood Sunday, a day not only to pray for more vocations to the Priesthood of Jesus Christ, but to think about those priests who had an impact in our lives. I think in one of my previous Priesthood Sunday homilies, I mentioned who the top five priests of all time were in my life. Some of them have since died or have gotten older. I am flattered and humbled when people tell me that I have had an important spiritual impact in their lives. On the flip side, when someone says, "I don't go to church anymore because of Fr. Nick," it causes me to pause and to reflect.

My contemporary colleagues and I have gotten older-looking and heavier. We used to talk about favorite vacation spots and life events. Now we compare ailments and medical prescriptions. Yet most of the newly-ordained and recently-ordained priests of Detroit are fit and look like they just graduated from high school! Oy! When we used to gather before the pandemic, one of the issues we talked about was change. How priesthood has changed, how the Church has changed. Changes in the Church cause division among believers. It is a painful experience, one that at first glance should be avoided, discouraged and perhaps even crushed.

But having members in our Church that push for a clearer understanding of our teachings and practices may result in growth and development for the Body of Christ. Change is necessary for a growing body.

History has shown that change is usually difficult to accept, and those who push for radical change are often expelled, excommunicated or persecuted.

In two of our readings today we see changes happening in the outpouring and the action of the Holy Spirit. And we see how both Moses and Jesus are tolerant of those who do not fully fit the mold of the disciples. Moses and Jesus are entirely open to those who had not been recruited and trained in the "officially sanctioned and approved" methods and procedures of their religion.

These two great leaders both use the same criteria in judging whether to silence those who are accused of "rocking the boat" or to allow them to go

on their own way. Were these “disturbers” doing harm or doing good by their activities? Were they hindering or promoting God’s work?

Where and when have you received help – a “cup of water” -- from a surprising source? Where and when have you heard prophetic words in an unexpected place? Where and when have you seen the Spirit at work outside the faith community? What good have you seen the name of Jesus do?

When have you seen your riches get in the way of mercy and justice?

What are some changes that we clergy and lay people face today? In our day, there are some thirty million ex-Catholics in the United States. One in ten Americans once was a Catholic, but is no longer practicing the Catholic faith. We Catholics number the largest denomination of Christians in the United States. Former Catholics make up the second largest group. Why is that?

Yet, the Church in America continues to show signs of life and growth. There are more Catholics now per priest than there ever has been, largely due to the shortage of priests and an increase through participation in the RCIA – the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

This change from the American Church of the 1950’s and 1960’s can be seen as a great grace as more and more lay people step up to the plate to take on the legitimate ministry and service that is rightfully theirs by virtue of their baptism. Synod ’69 – an Archdiocesan-wide gathering in 1969 -- radically changed the complexion of our diocese and turned it into the most innovative dioceses in the country. Synod ’16, held five years ago, is doing the same now.

Being a practicing Catholic is no longer just about “pray, pay and obey.” Now, we are called to recognize that by virtue of our baptism, we have a dignity to pursue ministry and service in the Church. You should no longer see yourselves as mere volunteers and “Fathers Little Helpers,” but each of you is seen as a steward of God’s generous kindness to humanity and to the world, called to holiness, called to live out your mission by being proclaimers of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Who are the “little ones” Jesus is referring to in the Gospel? Those who turn to God and to us with a child-like trust and hope.

What do you make of Jesus saying, “Whoever is not against us is with us?” How do we show that we are “for” Jesus? How have we witnessed, as individuals and as a faith community, to our beliefs, our Christian actions and our commitment to be disciples of the Lord?

I find it thrilling that Mark includes this story about the fellow casting out demons outside the Jesus crowd. It should give hope to every parent worried that their children or grandchildren don’t go to church, are marrying outside the tradition, or espouse ideas that are unfamiliar or even frightening. Lots of good things happen outside the tent, as we see in our First Reading. What each of us should be most concerned about are the shortcomings in our own testimony.

Let us make our words the words of Saint Pope John XXIII:

“In essential matters, let there be unity;

In nonessential matters, liberty;

And in all matters, charity.”

And as Pope Francis says at the end of each of his Sunday Angelus talks:

“Non dimenticare a pregare per me. Buon Pranzo i Arrividerci.”

“Don’t forget to pray for me. Have a good Sunday dinner, and we will see you again.” AMEN!