

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR B)

September 26, 2021

Numbers 11:25–29 • James 5:1–6 • Mark 9:38–43, 45, 47–48

I.

Last Sunday afternoon,
several teenage parishioners began their preparation
for the Sacrament of Confirmation.

At the orientation session,
I talked to them about what Confirmation **is** and what it is **not**.

Confirmation is **not** a “graduation sacrament” or rite of passage to adulthood.

After all,
the standard age for Confirmation is as young as seven,
and in the case of an emergency,
the sacrament can and should be administered even to infants.

Confirmation **is** the sacrament of the Church’s mission:
a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit that empowers a person
to give witness to his or her faith in all aspects of life.

In short, Confirmation is a renewal of Pentecost.

I tried to make these points by juxtaposing two things happening that day:
one international, the other local.

In Naples, in southern Italy,
thousands of people gathered at the city’s cathedral
to witness the liquification of the blood of St. Januarius.

San Genaro, as he’s known in Italian,
was a bishop who gave his life for the faith during the persecution of the Church
by the Roman Emperor Diocletian in the year 305 AD.

There is no scientific explanation for the liquification of St. Januarius’s blood.

Hordes of people gather to witness this phenomenon because, on some level, they want to draw closer to God.

Back in Richmond, that same day,
I received a call to visit a person in the hospital who asked to see a priest.

This person also wanted to be close to God at an important moment in his life.

So, I showed the confirmands the sick kit I would be using to make the visit later in the day.

As I told the confirmands,
these two events, separated by thousands of miles,
were both profound expressions of Catholic faith:

St. Januarius generously made the ultimate sacrifice;
and a person who, without even realizing it,
was giving witness to the faith by asking to see a priest.

II.

Today's Gospel is about Christian witness:
receiving God's gift and making it fruitful.

Today's Gospel does so by juxtaposing two themes:
the generosity of God's grace on the one hand,
and the urgency of avoiding sin, which imperils that grace,
on the other hand.

First, the generosity of grace:

“Teacher, 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.
For whoever is not against us is for us.’”

Then, the danger—the mortal danger—of sin:

“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.
It is better for you to enter into life maimed
than with two hands to go into Gehenna,
into the unquenchable fire.”

There is a connection between these elemental themes of grace and sin.

It’s the whole-hearted and fruitful response to God—discipleship:

“Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink
because you belong to Christ...
will surely not lose his reward.
Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,
it would be better for him if a great millstone
were put around his neck
and he were thrown into the sea.”

When it comes to discipleship,
the grace of God always acts first.

Grace then also helps us respond to God.

The generosity of God’s grace is meant to flourish in a person’s life.

In other words,
the generosity of God seeks and brings about a generous response in someone.

That is what sainthood is:
not perfection—which is impossible—but generosity.

To be holy is to respond to God with one’s whole life;
to apply the values of the Gospel to all aspects of one’s life;
and to love God and neighbor above all things and in all things.

The generosity of a holy life is like the outpouring of God’s Spirit
in the First Reading—
it knows no boundaries:

“Two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad,
 were not in the gathering but had been left in the camp.
 They too had been on the list,
 but had not gone out to the tent;
 yet the spirit came to rest on them also,
 and they prophesied in the camp.”

III.

Today, I’d like to offer two recommendations
 for cultivating a generous response to God’s grace.

First: “cut off” whatever leads to sin.

Many Catholics are surprised to learn that all Fridays, even outside of Lent,
 are still penitential days.

We are obligated to undertake some work of penance every Friday,
 unless it’s a major feast day
 (*Code of Canon Law*, canons 1250–1251;
Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1438).

The recommended penance in the United States is to abstain from eating meat,
 although a person is free to choose another penance
 (National Conference of Catholic Bishops,
Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence, 1966, no. 23).

Other forms of penance include fasting from the normal amount of food,
 spending extra time in prayer,
 or performing a work of charity.

These penitential practices help us to say “no” to sin,
 precisely so that we say “yes” to God.

A second recommendation:
 Don’t just **come** to Mass; **pray** the Mass.

The responses we make to God in the Mass
 propel us to respond generously to God out there.

The Mass—
the re-presentation of Christ's death and resurrection—
is an "engine" that "powers" us to love like Jesus Christ.

Praying the Mass includes outward and inward elements.

The outward elements are singing, making the responses clearly,
and the various postures.

These elements express an inward participation,
which is uniting ourselves to Christ's death and resurrection
that takes place on the altar,
and which envelopes us.

Abundant grace—infinite grace—surrounds us.

It makes holiness possible,
when we respond generously to God.