

Sixth Sunday of Easter C/2007

Since the feast of Easter, we have seen that through the work of the Apostles, and especially of Paul and Barnabas, the early Church has grown and spread to the gentile lands, making new disciples and bringing new members within the community. That growth was not only beneficial to the Church, but it also brought problems and tensions, as we heard in today's first reading. Would all those new converts be only baptized, or should they also be circumcised and respect the Law of Moses?

That was a tough issue the Church had faced in its beginning. To resolve the matter, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas and some of them should go to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles and the elders. From that meeting a consensus was reached that only baptism and few laws were important for the Gentiles in order to facilitate social contact with Christians from Jewish background.

This text is very important because of the teachings it contains. First, the discussion over what to observe by Gentiles joining the Church shows that whoever announces the Gospel must be very careful to distinguish between the content of the message and the way a culture expresses it. Nobody has the right to impose his way of praying on others, as if it were the best or the only possible way. When we try to impose our own views and traditions on others, we overlook the central place the word of Jesus plays in Christian community.

Second, the fact that Paul and Barnabas refer to the Apostles in Jerusalem, instead of resolving the problem privately themselves, is a sign that the Church is not a private affair; it is a structured community, which has a hierarchy whose role is to guide and gather all the believers in fidelity to the spirit and the word of Jesus Christ. Such a process can clarify the importance of Councils in the history of the Church and the role of leadership the pope plays in the Church.

Third, in order to resolve the conflict, the apostles refer to "the Holy Spirit and us", which means the Holy Spirit and the college of the apostles. These are two important instances without which the work of the Church becomes a pure human business or runs the risk of sinking in the illusion of taking one's private interest as the interest of the whole Church. However, it is also true that the Holy Spirit does not act magically. It is only through prayer and the patient listening to the word of Jesus that the Spirit speaks to our heart, and allows us to come to discernment, and to good decisions. Otherwise we will be misleading by taking our emotions for spiritual insights, our personal desires for the truth to impose on others.

According to the Gospel of John, the Holy Spirit is strengthened in us only when we love Jesus. To love Jesus means to keep his word. To keep his word means to love his Father. It turns out, then, that love is the basis of everything. God loves Jesus; Jesus loves God; God loves us; Jesus loves us; we love God through Jesus; we love one another. Human beings and God, and human beings with one another are all bound together by the bond of love. How can we prove that we love Jesus? – By our obedience to his word. Without keeping his word,

there is no way of showing that we love him. That word we keep is not just Jesus' word, but that of his Father who has sent him into the world. That is why when we keep Jesus' word, there is a circularity of relationship of love that goes from Jesus to us, and from us to the Father, and from the Father to Jesus and to us, and vice versa. Then, Jesus and his Father can make their dwelling within us, because we love them. In that perspective, we become, each one in particular, a space where God dwells, a home to the Lord. What a challenge than to be a home to the Lord! What an effort it requires to be that shelter to the Lord!

All that helps us understand why the Holy Spirit is important as that wise lawyer, that Jesus calls Advocate, who is there to guide us and help us in this mission. The Holy Spirit is Jesus' ally that he leaves us. His role is double. On the one hand, he has to teach us everything. Not that Jesus has forgotten some things to tell us. The truth, however, is that Jesus could not detail all the consequences and concrete applications of his message over time. The Spirit is there in order to instruct us about what to do and how to do it. In this regard, we are the perpetual learners of things of God until the end of our life.

On the other hand, the Holy Spirit will remind us of all that Jesus said. In fact, as the Church grows over time, it will be confronted with new situations, new context and new issues. The role of the Spirit is, then, to bring us back to things Jesus said so that we remain on the right path. In other words, Jesus is assuring us that we will always find suitable answers to our questions, a reply in harmony with his teaching, if we keep listening to his word and open our hearts to the work of his Spirit. It might ask of us courage and radical change, but we are not helpless and alone.

When we leave room for the Holy Spirit, then, we can be filled with the gift of peace. There is no more valuable thing someone can wish for himself than peace of heart. To have it is like possessing a wellspring in his field in time of drought, or enough food in storage in time of famine. Such a peace does not mean necessary absence of conflicts; but rather it is a spiritual means that helps us deal in the right way with our problems. The peace that the world gives is a peace of escape, which comes from avoidance of trouble and from refusing to face things. The peace that Jesus gives is a peace of heart that strives for new relationships between individuals and among peoples and nations, beyond differences, oppositions and conflicts.

May God fill the heart of each one of you with his peace, especially these beautiful women who have given us life we are celebrating today. May peace be with all the mothers who mourn the loss of their beloved ones, and those whose heart is broken because of the behavior of their children! God bless you all.

Acts 15, 1-2, 22-29; Revelation 21, 10-14, 22-23; John 14, 23-29



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