

Sixth Sunday of Easter C/2013

The readings of this sixth Sunday of Easter talk about the growth of the Church. They show that like with anybody, the growth has brought to the Church joy and tension, chance and risk. They also show that in order to find its peace, the Church had to rely on its wisdom and the strength of the Holy Spirit.

The first reading describes the first council of the Church in Jerusalem as problems raised with the entry of the pagans in the Church. In fact, Christians of Jewish background wanted to impose on the new comers the respect of the whole range of the Law of Moses.

It was then decided that Paul, Barnabas and some others should go to Jerusalem to meet the apostles and the elders in order to discuss that question. At the meeting, they reached a consensus, thanks to the wisdom of the elders and apostles and the power of the Holy Spirit, that only a few things should be asked of the Gentiles entering the Church.

Basically, the request was about abstention from meat sacrificed to idols, abstention from blood from meats of strangled animals and from unlawful marriages.

What is behind this text is the idea that the Church is a body and all the members in particular are like a link in a chain. Therefore, whenever individuals use their personal gifts and talents for the advancement of God's kingdom, their work has to be assessed by the Church as a whole. Another idea is the truth that the Church is a structured body that has a hierarchy. Whenever individuals are dealing with matters that concern the survival of the whole Church, they cannot resolve them privately, but always in reference to the established authority.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel in which Jesus promises the Holy Spirit to his apostles as another teacher who will remind them everything he taught them.

First of all, Jesus makes a distinction between the one who loves him and the one who does not. While the one who loves him keeps his word, the other does not. Jesus says also that the word he is pronouncing is not his own, but that of his Father. Given such a truth, it follows that the one who loves him and keeps his word, is loved also by the Father. As consequence, the Father and Jesus will come and dwell in him.

Then, Jesus assures his disciples about the sending of the Holy Spirit who will come from his Father. Once he will be there, he will teach them and remind them of all his teaching, even though now he is telling them while he is still with them.

In the end, Jesus leaves his peace to the disciples. He tells them that it is not like a world peace, but a special one. That is why they should not be afraid or troubled. Instead they have to rejoice because he is going to the Father. Finally, Jesus gave the reason why he told in advance the disciples all that, namely that when everything happens they might believe.

What do we learn from these readings? The first point I want to bring is the importance of the Church as a structured community. One of the criticisms some non-denomination churches raise against the Catholic Church is about hierarchy. They hold that the stress

put on hierarchy and authority diminishes the freedom individuals may have inside the Church.

And yet, when we look at the first reading of the day, we see that Paul and Barnabas referred to the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem in order to resolve the dispute they had. They could do so only because they were convinced that the Church is not a private business, but a body that holds together.

In that sense, their individual charisms that have allowed them to bring Gentiles into the Church through their teaching was not a pretext to deny the authority of the apostles. They considered themselves as a link in the chain of many others who preceded them in the vineyard of the Lord. Their work was part of an ensemble to which they belonged.

The role of the hierarchy, then, is to guide and gather all together in fidelity to the spirit and the word of our Lord Jesus. Such an understanding explains why we had Councils in the history of the Church and today we have the popes and the bishops, etc.

The second point I want to bring is about the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The Acts of the Apostles say, "It is a decision of the Holy Spirit and of us". The Gospel says that the Holy Spirit will teach you and remind you..."

According to these words, the role of the Holy Spirit is double. He is a teacher and he is a reminder. Does it mean, by saying that the Spirit teaches us, that Jesus did not teach us what he should? Not at all; what it means is that in the new situations and new problems we will be facing over time, the Holy Spirit will teach us how to remain faithful to Jesus. That is why we are perpetual learners of the things of God until the end of our life.

Why should the Holy Spirit remind us things as though we did not have memory? Once again, as the Church grows over time and all over the world, we will be confronted with new situations, new contexts and new issues. It is, then, the role of the Spirit to bring us back to the essentials of our faith so that we remain always on the right path of the teaching of Jesus.

Is that the whole role of the Holy Spirit? No. he is also our Advocate? What does it mean? It means that he is the one who pleads our cause. In modern terms, that would mean that he is our Lawyer. The role of a Lawyer, as it were, is to defend and to find attenuating circumstances that can make the case of the accused light. The Holy Spirit intercedes continually for us before the Father.

Let us pray that Jesus may fill us with his Holy Spirit so that we live in peace with one another in following Jesus faithfully. Let us ask Jesus to help us love him by loving his Father so that both may dwell in us. May God bless you all!

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



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Contact: www.mbala.org

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