

Sixth Sunday of Easter 2013 Year C

We can consider that this Sunday's readings teach us about how the Holy Spirit guides us, the Church, in all our steps. The guidance and teaching of the Holy Spirit is sure, but gradual. And it sometimes, or often, requires quite a journey and even heated debate, and soul-searching, before clarity can be achieved. Human life is like this, and the Church is not exempt. In Acts 14:22, a few verses before our first reading, after Paul has been stoned for giving witness to Christ, his companion disciples comfort the other disciples by saying that it is only through many trials and tribulations that we are to enter the Kingdom of God.

The Holy Spirit guides the Church. A supreme, or perhaps the supreme, occasion for this is a Church council. Acts 15, in our first reading, tells us about what we hold to be the first Church, even "ecumenical," council. There was an important controversy to resolve. The early Church was Jewish. Deeply ingrained in Judaism was the need to separate Jew from Gentile, pure from impure, holy from profane. This idea is inculcated from the first verses in the Bible, when God separated light from darkness, the waters above from those below, and so forth. The early Church had more "conservative" members, even Pharisees, who were strictly observant of Judaism's traditions, especially the hallmarks of Sabbath, circumcision and the kosher laws. These members seem to look to James as their leader, and it was this group who, when they came to Antioch, pressured Peter and Barnabas to keep a kosher table and separate themselves from their fellow Christians who were Gentiles and did not keep kosher. This is what led to Paul's confrontation with and strong words to Peter, in Gal 2. For Paul, clearly, we were all to be one in Christ, without distinctions between Jew and Gentile or even male and female, Gal 3:27-28. And the Eucharistic table was to be one, not two, one for Jewish Christians keeping kosher and another for the uncircumcised who ate everything.

The Church leaders gathered in Jerusalem and a bitter and prolonged debate took place between those who insisted that strictly following the whole Law of Moses was necessary in order to be saved and those who had witnessed the rebirth of Gentile believers in Christ who did not so keep the Law. After the debate, Peter spoke, then James also spoke. They referred to their experiences. The whole Church came to a unanimous agreement (but is Luke, the author of Acts, again giving us an idealized picture?). No undue burdens were to be placed on believers. And this was a decision of the Holy Spirit and the Church leaders.

We see here that the Holy Spirit's guidance of the of the Church to the whole truth does not take place easily or without great soul-searching among the many members of the body.