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Council of Jerusalem, the Advocate, and Pastoral Strategy

Biblical Reflection for 6th Sunday of Easter C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, MAY 4, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- The early Church community in Jerusalem was not without its problems! Several of the controversies are evident in today's first reading from Chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles.

When some of the converted pharisees of Jerusalem discover the results of the first missionary journey of Paul (vv 1-5), they urge that the Gentiles be taught to follow the Mosaic law. Recognizing the authority of the Jerusalem church, Paul and Barnabas go there to settle the question of whether Gentiles can embrace a form of Christianity that does not include this obligation. The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35) marks the official rejection of the rigid view that Gentile converts were obliged to observe the Mosaic law completely. From here to the end of the book of Acts, Paul and the Gentile mission become the focus of Luke's writing.

Early Church controversies

If the Gentiles are to become Christian, does that imply they must observe the customs of the Jewish converts to Christianity? This would mean imposing circumcision, dietary restrictions, and marriage regulations. The scene from today's first reading not only presents us with one of the first great controversies of the early Church, but also gives us some excellent insights into our own understanding of tradition and continuity, and the resolution of conflicts in the Church.

In the reading from the Book of Acts, some unauthorized members of the Jerusalem church tried to insist upon circumcision as a necessity for salvation within the church at Antioch. The classical problem of the early Church revolved around the necessity of the Mosaic law for salvation. Jesus certainly kept it perfectly, from his birth, for he was circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21) and he never annulled the force of the Mosaic law. In fact he states quite clearly: "Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have come, not to abolish them, but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). Yet, Peter on the impulse of the Spirit had baptized the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius without requiring circumcision.

The Apostles and elders gathered for deliberation and came to an agreement with the Mother Church at Jerusalem that the Mosaic laws were not to be required, nor the many traditions of the rabbis. The converts, out of courtesy, were asked not to partake of blood, nor of animals improperly slaughtered without draining the blood, nor of strangled animals for the same reason, nor of marriages within certain blood bonds.

Tradition and history

The Council of Jerusalem therefore settled a doctrinal issue about circumcision and the Mosaic law, but did it

ZENIT

in a way to preserve peace. This is a very good model for handling questions of tradition, continuity and conflict today. Both the theological issues and the feelings of people are very important. Peter and Paul show a remarkable respect for the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of ordinary people and situations. Even when the Spirit seemed to shatter the sacred traditions that existed for centuries, Peter and Paul knew that the Holy Spirit was not bound by tradition and history.

Neither Peter nor Paul were afraid of taking their cases and questions to the leaders of the whole Church. Through prayer, fasting, consultation and voting, decisions are made. Underlying all of this is the desire to preserve peace at all costs, without compromising on principles and human rights. After all, Jesus' farewell gift to the Church is peace, not division and discord. Our judgments and decisions must lead us and all future generations to our final goal, the New Jerusalem established on earth, the reign of justice, joy and peace among us.

Defense attorney

Today's Gospel reading (John 14:23-29) reminds us that those who encounter Christ and enter into a friendly relationship with him welcome into their hearts Trinitarian Communion itself, in accordance with Jesus' promise to his disciples: "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (14:23).

In John 14:16 Jesus says that he will send "another Advocate" to be on our side. John uses the Greek word "parakletos," which literally means "one called alongside," and a standard use of the term for one called alongside to help in a legal situation is defense attorney. There is a legal tone to some of what Jesus says about the Advocate, yet the picture is more exactly that of a prosecuting attorney.

Jesus himself is going to be crucified and die; in the eyes of the world he will be judged, found guilty, and convicted. Yet after his death, the "paraclete" will come forward and reverse the sentence by convicting the world and providing Jesus' innocence (16:8-11).

Jesus was our first Advocate with the Father. The new Advocate is not a kind of a proxy sent to replace the absent Lord: on the contrary, it assures his presence as well as the Father's. They will "come to" the one who remains faithful to Jesus' word, and they will dwell "with" him. Not with the others -- those who do not love the Lord and do not keep his word.

The paraclete dwells in everyone who loves Jesus and keeps the commandments, and so his presence is not limited by time (14:15-17). That may be the way in which the coming of the paraclete is "better." These words of Jesus about the paraclete illustrate beautifully how the audience to which he speaks at the Last Supper extends beyond those present at that moment in history. Jesus words are also addressed to us today.

The paraclete is just as present in the modern disciples of Jesus as he was in the first generation. No one should think that Jesus has abandoned his Church in our times. He continues to send us God's Spirit of Truth. We are told in the Gospel that the "one whom the Father will send will teach us everything, and remind us of all that Jesus has said to us" (v 26). This reminding or calling to memory is beautifully expressed in a new term used in the Catechism of the Catholic Church to describe the work of the paraclete: "The Holy Spirit is the Church's living memory" (No. 1099). The Holy Spirit will increase our gifts to the extent that we love Jesus and our brothers and sisters, dwell in his Word, obey the commandments, and share what we have received so generously and freely with others.

A model

The Council of Jerusalem left us a model for dealing with difficult situations in the Church. Both the

ZENIT

theological issues and the feelings of people were very important for the apostles. Even when the Spirit seemed to shatter the sacred traditions that existed for centuries, Peter and Paul knew that the Holy Spirit was not bound by tradition and history. We could say that this same pastoral strategy or methodology is at work today in some of the liturgical changes we will be experiencing in the English-speaking world.

On April 28, 2010, Benedict XVI met with the International Vox Clara Committee at the Vatican. This group of cardinals, bishops and liturgical experts has worked very hard over the past years to establish and finalize the new translation of the Roman Missal in the English language. Their work has often been misunderstood, criticized and unfairly judged in many circles. I found the Pope's encouraging words to the Vox Clara Commission to reflect in many ways the pastoral sensitivity and sense of history that reigned at the first Council of Jerusalem.

Let us recall Benedict XVI's words to this liturgical committee, and in so doing, learn from them as we prepare to "receive" the new translation of the Roman Missal for the English speaking world: "I thank you for the work that Vox Clara has done over the last eight years, assisting and advising the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in fulfilling its responsibilities with regard to the English translations of liturgical texts. This has been a truly collegial enterprise.

"St. Augustine spoke beautifully of the relation between John the Baptist, the vox clara that resounded on the banks of the Jordan, and the Word that he spoke. A voice, he said, serves to share with the listener the message that is already in the speaker's heart. Once the word has been spoken, it is present in the hearts of both, and so the voice, its task having been completed, can fade away (cf. Sermon 293).

"I welcome the news that the English translation of the Roman Missal will soon be ready for publication, so that the texts you have worked so hard to prepare may be proclaimed in the liturgy that is celebrated across the Anglophone world. Through these sacred texts and the actions that accompany them, Christ will be made present and active in the midst of his people. The voice that helped bring these words to birth will have completed its task.

"A new task will then present itself, one which falls outside the direct competence of Vox Clara, but which in one way or another will involve all of you -- the task of preparing for the reception of the new translation by clergy and lay faithful. Many will find it hard to adjust to unfamiliar texts after nearly 40 years of continuous use of the previous translation.

"The change will need to be introduced with due sensitivity, and the opportunity for catechesis that it presents will need to be firmly grasped. I pray that in this way any risk of confusion or bewilderment will be averted, and the change will serve instead as a springboard for a renewal and a deepening of Eucharistic devotion all over the English-speaking world."

[The readings for the 6th Sunday of Easter are Acts 15:1-2, 22-29; Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23; John 14:23-29]

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