

## Heeding the Counsellor at the Council

**Sixth Sunday of Easter – Cycle C – 26 May 2019**

**Readings:** Acts 15:1-2, 22-29; Rev 21:10-14, 22-23; Jn 14:23-29

*“The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you” (Jn)*

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. We often think that there was a ‘golden past’ in Christianity when there were no quarrels and divisions among the early Christians. This is only partly true; for, although we have heartwarming passages in scripture like Acts 2:41-47 and Acts 4:32-37, in this same Book, we see today the presence of division or rather ‘difference in opinion’ between two groups of newborn Christians: (a) Jews converting to ‘The Way’ of Christ; and, (b) so-called ‘Gentiles’—also considered as ‘pagans’—who desired to become followers of Christ. The former group regarded themselves as ‘God’s Chosen People’ since they were bound by the Mosaic Covenant, the outward sign of which was circumcision (see Gen 17:9-19). After converting to Christianity, believing themselves to be the ‘New Chose People’, they desired that everyone who followed Christ should also continue this ritualistic, covenantal tradition. By contrast, Paul and Barnabas, who were ‘going forth’ to proclaim the Good News to the non-Jews disagreed with this opinion. Therefore, the apostles and elders convened the ‘Council of Jerusalem’ approximately around the year 50 AD to resolve this issue. The Council of Jerusalem (see also Gal 2:1-12) provides a map or model for all subsequent Councils. Here, Paul, Barnabas, Peter and James are the *dramatis personae*. Setting aside details of the debate, the outcome is worth noting: “It has been *decided by the Holy Spirit* and by ourselves *not to saddle you with any burden beyond these essentials.*”
2. At the very birth of Christianity, we see that: (a) A very prominent role is given to the prompting of the Holy Spirit; for, the apostolic community believes that God’s Spirit takes its decisions, and, (b) The Church authorities enforce upon believers *only essentials*, making Christian beliefs not burdensome but liberating and life-giving. Indeed, salvation in the ‘New Covenant’ does not consist in adding or shedding matters peripheral, but in faith in the Crucified-Risen Christ and in love for God shown in love for one’s neighbour. Hence, the ‘minimum requirement’ for Christian converts by way of religious observances are only three: [1] abstinence from food sacrificed to idols. This was to ensure that no scandal was given, since eating food (usually meat) offered to idols would suggest belief in and worship of idols. [2] refrain from eating a strangled animal since it was believed that ‘blood’ (symbolizing life) came from God and had to be given back to God, which did not happen when an animal was strangled. [3] Avoid unchastity since there were prescriptions and proscriptions for certain relationships and marriages (see Lev 18:6-18).
3. In today’s gospel passage from the ‘farewell discourses’ of John’s Gospel, Jesus promises the coming of the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is described in various editions of the Gospel by the words Advocate, Paraclete, Teacher, Helper and so on. The Holy Spirit “will *teach you everything and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*” Teaching implies ‘teaching of God’s word’, and the ‘remembrance’ refers to the Spirit’s action in the sacraments. Thus, during the Eucharist the priest invokes the power of the

Spirit (*epiclesis*) to enable the community to remember Jesus (*anamnesis*). We must stress the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and also in the life of individual Christians. Is not the Council of Jerusalem a fine example of the Holy Spirit “*teaching*” the early Church and “*bringing to remembrance*” what is essential and what is not?

### **Linking the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading with the theme of the Spirit, Heaven and Jerusalem**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> reading gives us a here-and-now glimpse of the ‘new Jerusalem’ that is heaven. Here, the Bride of Christ, the Church, will dwell forever. There is an element of continuity-in-discontinuity since there are symbols that refer to the old Israel: the twelve gates, tribes, and angels. But twelve also refers to the apostles who live by the light of the Lamb (Christ). The seer John writes, “I saw no temple in the city.” Formerly, the Temple of Jerusalem was its centre and pride. But, now, it becomes redundant since Christ, the Lamb, has been sacrificed and raised. The Lamb of God, will now be present to the community through word and sacrament, as today’s Gospel indicates.

### **Three Lights from Catholic Tradition:**

*St Augustine of Hippo* (354 - 430 AD) – “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

*St. Vincent of Lérins* (died c.445) – “Now in the Catholic Church itself we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all. That is truly and properly ‘Catholic’, as is shown by the very force and meaning of the word, which comprehends everything almost universally. We shall hold to this rule if we follow *universality, antiquity and consent.*”

*Pope Francis*: – “Discernment means to ‘expose’ oneself, to go out of the world of one’s convictions and prejudices to open oneself to understand how God’s Spirit is speaking to us, today, in this world, in this time, in this moment, and how God speaks to me, now.”

### **Two Current Concerns:**

*Concern for [Non]-Essentials*: Today, we sometimes hear people boasting: “We are ancient and ‘original Catholics’, while others are ‘converts’.” Consequently, there is tendency to foist a lot of rituals and traditional practices on those who convert. Are we justified in forcing newborn Christians to accept all these? What is essential in Christianity? What is not?

*‘Back to the Basics’ Concern*: Christianity is not a religion of rules, regulations, do’s and don’ts—rather, it is a religion of ‘encounter’, of a person, Jesus! Every Christian ought to strive to reach out to the other(s) and to be ‘another Christ’ by way of word, witness and works.

**In Lighter Vein**: Joshua, a young Jew, fell in love with Mary, a devout Catholic. When Joshua proposed to Mary, she sought counsel from her parents, each of who advised her differently. “Convert him to Catholicism!” commanded Mary’s dad, but her mum said, “Love him tenderly and God’s Spirit will work wonders!” Mary’s dad wouldn’t give in and ordered her to work hard at converting Joshua to Catholicism. Mary obeyed and Joshua was duly converted. Weeks later, Joshua called off the marriage. “What’s up?” asked Mary’s dad. Mary sobbed: “Joshua wants to become a priest!”

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