

6th Sunday of Easter - C
Acts 15:1-2, 22-29;
Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23;
John 14:23-29
Little Flower - 5/5/13

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's reading from Acts gives us an abbreviated version of the disagreement that led to the Council of Jerusalem and the results of the Council. It seems to me that there are at least two lessons to be learned from this reading.

The disagreement that occasioned the Council of Jerusalem was whether Gentile converts to Christianity had to be circumcised. We are told that "*some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved.'*" Because of the dissension and debate this caused, it was decided to refer the question to the Church in Jerusalem. The Church in Jerusalem responded, "*It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities....*"

The primary decision of the Council of Jerusalem was the decision to be an inclusive Church. In other words, the Church would welcome Gentiles wanting to become Christian without, in effect, forcing them to become Jews. At other critical points in the Church's history, the Church has chosen inclusiveness over exclusiveness. For example, the first heresy in the Church was Gnosticism. Gnosticism would have created a two-tiered Church, the enlightened and the non-enlightened. The Church quickly rejected Gnosticism. For another example, because of persecutions and the risk of betrayal, those who wanted to become Christian in the early Church went through rigorous preparation and had to demonstrate serious commitment. However, after the barbarian invasions, the Church decided to welcome the barbarians into the Church with little preparation and little commitment. Our Church is an inclusive Church.

Today there are some people in the Church who want to effectively exclude other people from the Church who do not fully accept or live all the Church's teachings. They want to create a Church of saints. I would suggest this was not the way of Jesus. When people challenged him for eating and socializing with tax collectors and sinners, he responded, "*Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners*" [Mk.2:17]. The only people Jesus consistently criticized were the self-righteous and those who judged others. As an inclusive Church, the Church will always be a Church of both saints and sinners.

Second, the Council of Jerusalem is often understood to be the forerunner of and prototype for the Church's later Ecumenical Councils. The last Ecumenical Council was the Second Vatican Council from 1962-1965. Even though it took place only 50 years ago, society and the world have changed so much since then that I sometimes wonder if perhaps the Church needs a new Ecumenical Council. As the Council of Jerusalem suggests, councils are called to respond to the needs of the times. Whether we need another Ecumenical Council or not, the Church has to continue to respond to the challenges of today. One of the greatest of these is the need for a New Evangelization.

My brothers and sisters, no matter what challenges the Church, our Archdiocese, or our parish faces, especially as we move forward with *Connected in the Spirit*, we need to take seriously Jesus' words in today's Gospel, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.*" As Catholic Christians we believe that the Holy Spirit continues to work within the Church. In today's Gospel, Jesus spelled out at least one of the roles of the Holy Spirit in the Church: "*The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you.*"