

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's reading from Acts tells the story of the first church council, the Council of Jerusalem. This reading gives us a glimpse into the struggles of the early church and some insights for living in today's church.

History teaches us that in the early church, two things attracted people to Christianity: the willingness of Christians to die for their faith and their love for one another. In fact, one ancient author wrote, "See how those Christians love one another." My guess is that most of us picture the early church as an almost ideal community of shared vision and values. The reality was far from the ideal.

As the reading suggests, there was a lot of dissension and debate over the requirements for Gentiles to convert to Christianity. One group, led by Paul and Barnabas, only required that Gentile converts reject sin, profess their faith in Christ Jesus, live a Christian life, and perhaps be baptized. However, a more rigorous group demanded that Gentile converts be circumcised and required to follow the entire Jewish law.

When the community could not resolve the disagreement, they sent Paul, Barnabas, and some others to refer the question to the church in Jerusalem. The church met, decided the question, and sent Paul, Barnabas, and some others back to Antioch with the decision. The decision was a compromise. The Gentile converts did not have to be circumcised or follow the Jewish Law in its entirety. Note what the decision said, "*It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities....*" The necessities were staying away from idolatry and incestuous marriages.

What does all of this say to us today? First, disagreements and conflicts have always been part of the life of the church. They are part of the life of parishes, archdioceses and dioceses, episcopal conferences, and the universal church. As we know from families, communities are messy. We have to find ways to resolve disagreements and conflicts constructively or learn to live with them. Too often Catholics and Christians are not very charitable toward those who disagree with them.

Second, the debate was between those who demanded more stringent requirements for admission to the church and those who favored less stringent requirements. At the Council of Jerusalem, the church opted to be an inclusive church. Historically, it is an interesting phenomenon that most of the groups who have broken off from the Catholic Church and started new churches or schismatic churches have left the Catholic Church because they thought the Catholic Church was too lax. The same has been true of groups who have subsequently broken off from the Protestant churches.

Third, the church in Antioch referred the dispute to the larger church. Sometimes we forget that we are part of a larger church. Most problems and disputes would never need to be referred to the larger church if the leaders and members of the local church would just remember to look at the big picture.

Finally, the wisdom of the early church leadership was evident in their answer to the church in Antioch. They did not want to impose burdens on Christians beyond the necessities. Unfortunately for the unity of the church, religious people often cannot distinguish the essentials from the accidentals and are, therefore, unable or unwilling to compromise.

My brothers and sisters, in the midst of the disagreements and conflicts that are part of the life of every family and community, we have Jesus' promise in today's Gospel: "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.*" As we live with disagreements and conflicts within our families and our communities, Jesus gives us the gift of inner peace, a peace that comes from God's presence, the presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, within us.