

Following the Spirit
May 22, 2022
Gospel of John 14:23-29
Fr. John

All during the season of Easter, the first reading of the Sunday liturgy is taken from the book called the Acts of the Apostles. It is a chronicle of the earliest Christian communities and many of the struggles and challenges which they encountered in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ.

One of these challenges was addressing the question of whether and how those of Gentile [non-Jewish] background could be admitted into the company of believers. Since all of the earliest followers of Jesus [and Jesus himself] came from a strong Jewish background, allowing gentiles to suddenly be welcomed might be seen as a betrayal of their historical religious tradition.

So some of those early Jewish Christians took it upon themselves to proclaim that all who wanted to follow Christ must adhere to the Jewish rites of initiation [circumcision for males and strict dietary laws for all]. Paul and his associates were against this because they had brought many gentiles to become believers in Christ. Many of the elders of the Church in Jerusalem took the opposing view.

So this issue became the cause of a potential major rift in the Church, almost at its very beginning. It called for the leaders of this fledgling faith community to meet in order to discern what direction God wanted them to go. Some scholars have referred to this gathering as the Council of Jerusalem, the first of many that would follow over the next two millennia - the most recent of which was the Second Vatican Council [1962-65]. The ultimate decision, as the council put it, was given by the Holy Spirit that no further burdens be placed upon the gentiles other than the one's that pertained to the Christian faith which they embraced.

So what do we learn from all of that? Well, first of all, that prayer and inviting the Holy Spirit into the situation is a good practice no matter what the issue might be. Furthermore, it is a good practice for decisions that we have to make on both a **personal** level and a **community** level. On a personal level, I wonder how many consider prayer or even making a short retreat before making a major decision in their lives. [eg. before marriage; a major career change; a move to another community]. On a communal level, it is important to also consult and pray with members of the community who are respected for their wisdom and good judgment. Perhaps this is why Pope Francis has called for a Church-wide consultation in his synodal approach to discern the direction the Church needs to be going in the 21st century.

The decisions that arise in consultation with the Holy Spirit may not always be the popular or most attractive ones. They may, at first seem disastrous [some of those early traditionalist Jewish Christians reverted back to their former faith]. However, in the long run, the Holy Spirit wins out. Had the decision gone the other way, Christianity would

have remained only a sect within Judaism and would have disappeared within a few generations.

Jesus did not leave detailed instructions to deal with every ethical, moral, and social issue that would arise for the Church to deal with. He simply said that the Church would always have an **Advocate** - the Holy Spirit to guide it and 'to teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.'

Those of us with parents or elders who have formed and shaped our values in our youth probably know this from our experience in making good choices in our adult lives.

It's that same Holy Spirit still at work in the Church and in our individual lives as well.