

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, May 1st 2016

“It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities” (Acts 15: 28).

The followers were divided. Jesus was no longer among them as before. He had taught them and the Spirit was sent to strengthen them, but conflicts arose as they always do. This new time will not unfold like flowers in spring. To seek unity, they gathered to pray, listen, and discern. Should Gentiles follow the same laws as Jews in the Christian movement? Who are we? Identity questions send us back to our roots and into our future to ask: what really matters? What is at the center? What is at the periphery? How is the Spirit leading us? The Council of Jerusalem was the first of many. A council’s task is not primarily one of molding a compromise that all can accept. The deeper issue is identity. Where is the center? Does it hold us together?

Pope Francis announced a synod on the family. Catholics around the world responded to questions, the bishops traveled to Rome twice for deliberation. They did not meet online. As in the first gathering of Christians, they met face to face. Looking back over this long history, Pope Francis observes in *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love):

“There are two ways of thinking which recur throughout the Church’s history: casting off and reinstating. The Church’s way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement...The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone forever; it is to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart... For true charity is always unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous” (296).

We seek to understand the world as followers of Christ. Intelligent affirmation contributes to the practice of faith. But understanding depends on being present to the persons in our lives. The practice of faith begins and ends with persons. Here we find the face of God. Judging happens in the middle, not as the gatekeeper to sort out the elect but as encouragement and direction. The Spirit teaches, but not all truths rush in at once. In this house, the gates remain open. The Word belongs to all. It puts down roots in many soils.

Who are the sheep? The goats? Whom do we cast off? Often those who labor with their hands are barely seen. Who is it that picks the fruit, sews the clothes, paves the highways, or assembles the phones? To lessen someone’s burdens, first we must see them. We are the children of a carpenter’s son. Today we remember those whose labor makes our lives possible.

God, you are the first to reach out. You love us where we are found. This is how we are freed.

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