

Lectio Divina. VI SUNDAY OF EASTER. Cycle C

Vice Province of Middle East -Amman-, Sr. Maria de los Angeles Flores Pérez, May 22, 2022.

THE FIDELITY TO THE ORIGINS AND NEWNESS

Acts 15: 1-2, 22-29

“Some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved.”² Because there arose no little dissension and debate by Paul and Barnabas with them, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and some of the others should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and presbyters about this question. ²²Then the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole church, decided to choose representatives and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. The ones chosen were Judas, who was called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers. ²³This is the letter delivered by them: “The apostles and the presbyters, your brothers, to the brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia of Gentile origin: greetings. ²⁴Since we have heard that some of our number [who went out] without any mandate from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind, ²⁵we have with one accord decided to choose representatives and to send them to you along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶who have dedicated their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷So we are sending Judas and Silas who will also convey this same message by word of mouth: ²⁸ ‘It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities, ²⁹namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. Farewell.”

STUDY OF THE TEXT

What is said in these lines and what is communicated in the following sections refer to an event of true transcendence of the universal Church. If things are considered only superficially, it may seem that it is a matter related to the past times, something distant from us. On the other hand, whoever considers the deeper reasons and motives cannot fail to see that the essence and structure of the Church of Christ were positioned decisively at that time.

There is a great danger of considering the group of Jews taking a malicious opposition. In truth, however, we are dealing with a group of men who want to remain faithful but who, from their right perception, see the new proposal, that is, the proclamation and the way of living the Gospel of Paul

and Barnabas, as a danger. It should not be forgotten how deeply rooted was the conviction that the faithful observance of the Mosaic law was an indispensable requirement of all righteousness. On the other hand, Paul insisted that with the salvific work of Christ the law as the foundation of salvation had been abolished and had been replaced by the grace of God and by the saving faith manifested in baptism. It was not a question of despising the Old Testament order of salvation, **but rather of understanding consistently what God had given in Christ Jesus as His grace to humanity**. It was, therefore, a journey of great significance in world history that Barnabas and Paul undertook from Antioch to Jerusalem to defend the freedom and at the same time the unity of the Church.

The fact that they went to Jerusalem is a sign that, without prejudice to their freedom, they recognized the authority of the Church in Jerusalem and wanted to find a solution in open dialogue with its members.

The missionary accounts of Paul and Barnabas made them aware of their solidarity, with a choice to be co-responsible. Missionary contacts and information in the ecclesial sphere encourage, reanimate faith and awaken the solicitude for the communion of saints.

When Paul and Barnabas met with the "apostles and priests" in Jerusalem, they did not present the conversion of the Gentiles as a personal initiative or success, but "reported all that God had done with them". If the mission in spite of the law among the Gentiles is attributed by God himself "with signs and wonders" (Gal 14:3; Gal 15:12), as also in the conversion of Cornelius the gift of the Holy Spirit had been manifested (Gal 10:44; Gal 11:17) as a sign of God's approval, then the circumcision and other religious practices pass to a second order.

The Council's decree is attributed, in the first place, to the Holy Spirit. Here a feature of the early Church's conception of itself is revealed. It wants to be more than a juridically structured entity, a community that lives from the mystery of the "power of the Spirit," as the Risen One had assured it (1:8). Only in close union with the Spirit, in whom the glorified Lord is present, do the people in authority receive their right, their legitimacy and their efficacy.

MEDITATION

This text invites us to a fidelity like that of Paul and Barnabas, a fidelity that is so deep in the knowledge of the will of God as to teach in complete freedom the practices in the Church that are scandalous for many and liberating for others.

- Does not the Church, the Congregation, our life itself, also have to constantly go through the experience of the great difficulty of harmonizing a tradition practiced for a long time with the demands and needs of a changing reality?

- How can we respond to this reality of change without arrogance and without self-referentiality?
- How can we be faithful to the Spirit without rigidity?

The Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes* No. 11 tells us that our vocation is to respond to the promptings of the Spirit:

“The People of God believes that it is led by the Lord's Spirit, Who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age. For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human.”

“It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us» ...” Together we have decided', in daily life those who decide in communion are persons in a condition of equality, however, in Acts 15 the Spirit of God and the human being decide together, how can this be possible?

A total abandonment to the hands of God is essential to express ourselves as partners in decision, since it presupposes a union of wills and minds, that is to say, experiential identification with him and with his Kingdom. It implies docility to live under his gaze. *To live the cross with dignity, respect and courage.* To accept to die with Him in order to be raised in Him. To live with humility and joy the *parresia* (boldness) that this experience offers us. Finally, we need to have a clear look with honesty, total dependency on Him and in Him.

It would seem that this is the only condition necessary to give ourselves to His Will, to His decision, to His desire, to make sure that we have not taken over His place.

Since there is the possibility of self-deception, in the same text we have a decisive element to understand this " *It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us...*".

We read that the Apostles are chosen and sent by a community. It is the community that has seen them live in an upright, honest, discreet, firm, simple and helpful way and therefore bears witness to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in them. “We need lucidity and integrity to discover beyond our sisters’ limitations their gifts and potentialities, for “the particular way in which the Spirit is given to each person is in view of the common good.1Cor 12: 7” (C 4).

Furthermore, Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium* No. 8, tells us that “Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts for evangelization. For

if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?"

In Acts of the Apostles 15:3, we read: "They were sent on their journey by the church, and passed through Phoenicia and Samaria telling of the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers."

"The Church which "goes forth" is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice." (...) An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others" (EG 24).

"We will be present wherever the Church calls us, wherever our brothers and sisters need us, without distinction of country, culture, or religion, willing to take the risks and to accept the sacrifices which evangelization entails." (C 84)

"At the same time, today's vast and rapid cultural changes demand that we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness. (...) In her ongoing discernment, the Church can also come to see that certain customs not directly connected to the heart of the Gospel, (...) We should not be afraid to re-examine them. (...) Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the precepts which Christ and the apostles gave to the people of God "are very few". Citing Saint Augustine, he noted that the precepts subsequently enjoined by the Church should be insisted upon with moderation "so as not to burden the lives of the faithful" and make our religion a form of servitude, whereas "God's mercy has willed that we should be free." (EG 41 y 43)

Wow! What a great freedom! What a breadth of thought!

How not to fall into the trap of snobbery (treating others inferior)?

Rule of discernment: "Works of love directed to one's neighbor are the most perfect external manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit: The foundation of the New Law is in the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is manifested in the faith which works through love (...) In itself mercy is the greatest of the virtues, since all the others revolve around it and, more than this, it makes up for their deficiencies" (EG 37).

REFLECTION

- ✓ In this changing cultural context, what aspects of the Church, of your local Church, need rethinking and renewal? How could we, Dominican Sisters of the Presentation be involved in this process?
- ✓ What element(s) of the life of your community should go through discernment? Are there any sister who is being silenced, repressed or concealed?
- ✓ What are the areas where your life needs discernment today?
- ✓ When do you have a tendency to become stagnant: "it has always been done this way"?
- ✓ In what, when or with whom do you tend to use self-referentiality?
- ✓ Is there any snobbery that has crept into your life?
- ✓ What are the three inspirations of this Lectio Divina that help your will to be identified with that of the Spirit of God?

Pope Francis says that "I dream of a "missionary option", that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation". (EG 27).

What is your dream? What is that unique, unrepeatable, non-negotiable aspect that makes you who you are?

Only with a clean heart we will be able to say THE HOLY SPIRIT AND I HAVE DECIDED...

PRAYER

With Mary, the woman who said in all truth: "The Holy Spirit and I have decided", let us pray:

*Mary, Virgin and Mother,
you who, moved by the Holy Spirit,
welcomed the word of life
in the depths of your humble faith:
as you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One,
help us to say our own "yes"
to the urgent call, as pressing as ever,
to proclaim the good news of Jesus.
Filled with Christ's presence,
you brought joy to John the Baptist,
making him exult in the womb of his mother.
Brimming over with joy,
you sang of the great things done by God.*

*Standing at the foot of the cross
with unyielding faith,
you received the joyful comfort of the resurrection,
and joined the disciples in awaiting the Spirit
so that the evangelizing Church might be born.
Obtain for us now a new ardor born of the resurrection,
that we may bring to all the Gospel of life
which triumphs over death.
Give us a holy courage to seek new paths,
that the gift of unfading beauty
may reach every man and woman.*

*Virgin of listening and contemplation,
Mother of love, Bride of the eternal wedding feast,
pray for the Church, whose pure icon you are,
that she may never be closed in on herself
or lose her passion for establishing God's kingdom.
Star of the new evangelization,
help us to bear radiant witness to communion,
service, ardent and generous faith,
justice and love of the poor,
that the joy of the Gospel
may reach to the ends of the earth,
illuminating even the fringes of our world.*

*Mother of the living Gospel,
wellspring of happiness for God's little ones,
pray for us.
Amen. Alleluia!*