

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 22, 2022
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore Street
Scranton, PA 18508
John 14:23-29

The very first question that rocked the Church from her earliest days we see resolved in today's lesson from Acts. The question was this: Must Gentile converts to Christianity observe the law of Moses, that is, all of the commandments found in the first five books of the Old Testament? In practical terms this was a question of diet and circumcision, what Christians would be permitted to eat and whether males would have to have their foreskins removed. The resolution was actually quite simple.

What the apostles decided, guided by the Holy spirit, was that observance of the Mosaic Law was not necessary for salvation. In fact, if we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, then placing the requirements of the Old Covenant upon new converts was inconsistent. God had descended in the person of the Holy Spirit upon the uncircumcised, so how could it be necessary after that to do what God had not first required? But the apostles also recognized that the resolution of this dispute centers around the question of authority. If there is disagreement, who has the capacity to decide which party is correct and what the policy of the Church will be?

We see the apostles address this question in today's lesson: *"Since we have heard that some persons from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions...."* In other words, the people who took it upon themselves to go down to Antioch from Jerusalem to tell the Gentiles to all get circumcised did so without the blessing of Holy Mother Church. They relied on private judgment and expected the Church to conform to their wishes.

Private judgment is destructive precisely because it causes the types of conflict we have read about in Acts 13 and is contrary to the peace of which Jesus speaks in today's Gospel: *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."* Private judgment breaks the peace and ignores the reality that the Church is not a fight club but the institution from God that unites men to God and to each other. Private judgment causes disunity, and this fracture in the Body of Christ is what troubles the faithful and unsettles their minds.

The Apostles' answer is to make a decision upon which they all agreed and then to communicate that decision by letter. Moreover, they sent to deliver the letter men who would give credence to the decision, *"Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,"* St. Luke tells us. So the unity is not something merely handed down and demanded, but they live it, by being present with the people on both sides of the issue, relating to broken sinners as Jesus had to the apostles themselves, that is, face to face.

The Church has been rocked in our own day by this same issue of private judgment. Practicing Catholics routinely ignore what the Church actually teaches and then take positions that trouble the faithful with words and unsettle their minds. It then falls to the successors to the Apostles, our bishops in union with the Pope, to re-articulate what the Church actually teaches and then to discipline those who threaten the unity of the faithful.

We saw this reality on full display this past week, when Archbishop Cordileone of San Francisco barred Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the House of Representatives, from receiving our Lord's Body and Blood in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The Archbishop did this only after ten years of discussions, some of them face to face, by which he explained that her advocacy for the legal slaughter of the unborn is inconsistent with Catholic faith and practice. Indeed, it is an exercise in private judgment that flies in the face of the Church's ancient confession and her current health and well-being. Mrs. Pelosi professes to be a devout Catholic and regularly receives Holy Communion at Mass, which scandalizes the faithful, since they know her positions are not in union with the Church, and therefore contradict the very meaning of the word "union." "Communion" actually means "union with." There must be consistency between what we say and what we do. Yet Mrs. Pelosi is wildly inconsistent, receiving the Sacrament of Unity but relying on private judgment and breaking union with the Church.

Besides the fact that this situation sows confusion and serves as a poor witness to the Church's integrity and outreach, Archbishop Cordileone is concerned for the soul of one of his lost sheep, one who has strayed particularly far from the fold. I got to know Archbishop Cordileone fourteen years ago when I was a speaker at the Diocese of San Diego's Catholic Men's Conference, so I know he is sincere in both his commitment to the Church's teaching and his zeal for souls. He knows that to permit such a public figure, third in line to the Presidency of the United States of America, to persist in manifest grave sin without any censure is for him to fail in his duty as her shepherd. Thus, he has described his action as pastoral, not political, and exclusion from the Lord's Table that is meant to lead Mrs. Pelosi to repentance, while at the same time providing the Catholic faithful with a consistent witness to the Truth. He went so far as to say his conscience could not permit him to allow this contradiction to endure any longer. And, of course, I believe him.

This action was a long time coming, but our rejoicing, such as it may be, must be deferred until the public repentance the Archbishop has required has been made manifest. Until then, we simply observe a soul in peril, even if we can take some satisfaction that the Church's witness is less compromised today than it was last Sunday. We would do well, therefore, to make sure that our own witness is as consistent as the one Archbishop Cordileone expects and upon which the Apostles insisted when the Church was in her infancy. When we excise our own hypocrisy, we not only have peace and the assurance of eternity with those we love; we also invite our neighbors to embrace the fulness of the Truth, neighbors who are now suffering under the tyranny of their own private judgment and the many alienations such arrogance engenders.

How grateful we can be that from the beginning of the Catholic Church, the words Holy Communion mean union with the teaching of the Church and with the Church's faithful. That gratitude is multiplied in that the Church still has shepherds who insist our words have implications for how we are to behave.