

10. May 2023

Clarity in doctrine, clarity in the way

Acts 15:1-6

Then some men came down from Judaea and taught the brothers, 'Unless you have yourselves circumcised in the tradition of Moses you cannot be saved.' This led to disagreement, and after Paul and Barnabas had had a long argument with these men it was decided that Paul and Barnabas and others of the church should go up to Jerusalem and discuss the question with the apostles and elders. The members of the church saw them off, and as they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria they told how the gentiles had been converted, and this news was received with the greatest satisfaction by all the brothers. When they arrived in Jerusalem they were welcomed by the church and by the apostles and elders, and gave an account of all that God had done through them. But certain members of the Pharisees' party who had become believers objected, insisting that gentiles should be circumcised and instructed to keep the Law of Moses. The apostles and elders met to look into the matter

Controversies over the doctrine and direction of the Church have existed from the beginning, and even existed in the context of Judaism. Such controversies will arise again and again, and it is important that we know how to deal with them properly.

In today's reading, we hear that Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to clarify the question of circumcision. We see, then, that it was the apostles who had the authority to decide.

In the Catholic Church, the body that decides on controversial points is in Rome, and we can be thankful that the Lord has given us this authority. It carries out its office properly when it acts and decides in conformity with the faith handed down to us by Tradition. If there should be a contradiction on this point, the critical aspect must be resolved until the truth prevails.

But why is it so important to remain in right doctrine? Not a few Christians are of the opinion that practice is more important, and that doctrine does not rank first, but

second or third, or that, in certain circumstances, it is not even necessary to adhere to it to the letter.

This, however, is a grave error, because right doctrine leads to right practice. Deviation from right doctrine, and thus also from the truth that has been entrusted to us, will eventually lead to confusion and easily open the door to laxity. This is why we speak of "orthopraxis", i.e. right practice derived from right doctrine.

Today's reading shows us how important it is to clarify the controversies that arise. This decision of the apostles concerning circumcision will set the course of the nascent Church.

We already know what the outcome of this discussion was. Thanks to this decision, Christians have "direct access" to the Lord, without the need to first enter into the Old Covenant, so to speak. But only the Council of the Apostles could make this decision, because even those who argued that all converts should be circumcised had their arguments.

But the Holy Spirit gave Peter and James the necessary light. Thus they were able to recognise through the events of the mission that the Holy Spirit had been given to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews themselves, and that they should not impose on them more burdens than were necessary according to the Scriptures (cf. Acts 15:7-21).

This way of proceeding in decision-making, as the Acts of the Apostles tells us, will be a model for the whole journey of the Church down the centuries. Proposals for renewal and change must be examined to see if they are truly of the Holy Spirit. Such changes cannot be in contradiction with existing doctrine and practice. It is the task of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith today to examine this.

We can be very grateful that the Lord grants us clarity on decisive questions through the authority of the Church. In the end, the truth will always prevail, although this does not mean that there cannot be times of confusion, as happened, for example, during the Arian crisis in the 4th century. Again and again, false doctrines will try to creep into the Church in order to weaken her from within, because false doctrine will eventually lead to false practice as well. The enemy does not sleep!

It is important that those who bear responsibility in the Church defend the truth that has been handed down, that they constantly proclaim it, that they point out errors, that they protect the flock and show them the good pastures. To do this, they themselves must allow themselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, without straying from the paths He has laid out. If this does not happen - or not enough - then the Church will suffer under a heavy burden and the faithful will be led into error. Courageous defenders of the faith will have to arise, ready to protect it even at the cost of persecution. The Lord will reward them!