

12. May 2023

The authority of the Church

Act 15:22-31

Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose delegates from among themselves to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas, known as Barsabbas, and Silas, both leading men in the brotherhood, and gave them this letter to take with them: 'The apostles and elders, your brothers, send greetings to the brothers of gentile birth in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. We hear that some people coming from here, but acting without any authority from ourselves, have disturbed you with their demands and have unsettled your minds; and so we have decided unanimously to elect delegates and to send them to you with our well-beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have committed their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accordingly we are sending you Judas and Silas, who will confirm by word of mouth what we have written. It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves not to impose on you any burden beyond these essentials: you are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from illicit marriages. Avoid these, and you will do what is right. Farewell.' The party left and went down to Antioch, where they summoned the whole community and delivered the letter. The community read it and were delighted with the encouragement it gave them.

The young Christian community had to go through a difficult situation... Some in its own ranks did not support the direction taken by the Church at the Council of the Apostles concerning the reception of the Gentiles. The question was particularly difficult because these were not problems that came from outside; they came from within the community. How to deal with such a situation?

Here the question of authority arises: who determines the direction of the Church and who delegates?

We know that in the first instance it is the Holy Spirit Himself who determines the course of the Church, who corrects deviations and grants a more precise understanding and knowledge. After Him, there are the apostles instituted by the Lord, as well as St. Paul, who was subsequently called by the Risen One and recognised by the other apostles. Thus developed the authority of the Church, which is a visible reality in

Catholicism. We can say that it is the "hierarchical line" of the Church, which also has the mission to instruct and proclaim. But, unfortunately, it does not always fulfil this task....

On the other hand, there are again and again people who feel directly called by the Holy Spirit and want to serve the Gospel in the way that is proper to them. We could speak here of an aspect of a prophetic dimension. As long as their proclamation does not contradict the Church's basic guidelines for evangelisation, pastors should accept the mission of such people with gratitude, and there should be no problems. The problem only arises when there are contradictions, as was the case with those who demanded circumcision for all who wanted to become Christians. That is where the authority of the Church must intervene! If it fails to do so, it becomes co-responsible for the confusion created among the faithful by false doctrine, and it does not fulfil the task entrusted to it, which is to watch over the authentic proclamation of the Gospel.

But what happens if, in our time, the same people delegated by the Church no longer proclaim right doctrine, but relativise it or reduce it? Think, for example, of certain theologians, teachers of religion, etc... Are they still corrected with the same clarity as they used to be in the time of the apostles?

With deep sorrow it must be said that often there is no such correction any more. It seems to be becoming common in the Church to say openly things that do not correspond to doctrine, without being held accountable for it. And what is the result? Bewilderment, disquiet, confusion... These are the very consequences described in today's reading. Perhaps, with the passage of time, indifference and habit are added, after having listened for so long to false doctrines.

Therefore, the legitimate authority of the Church must be supported again and again, and it must be reminded to correct both those who, without being appointed to do so, proclaim false doctrines, and those who do so on behalf of the Church. Neither the one nor the other act in conformity with the Holy Spirit on this point.

As I have mentioned several times in my meditations, the correction is not exclusively "one way"; that is to say, it is not only the hierarchy that corrects; but, in case the hierarchy does not fulfil its mission properly, a correction is also necessary for the hierarchy. Certainly this would be in the first instance a task for the Holy Spirit, who

exhorts us to remain faithful to the doctrine handed down, to understand it better and to proclaim it with authority. But, if the Holy Spirit is not heeded, then it is quite possible that those who realise that false doctrines are being proclaimed will have to make a correction in an appropriate way, because God's people must be preserved from error.