

Right from the beginning of the Church, we see a heresy had sprung up. This is what the first reading is about.

Let me set the scene: Paul and Barnabas had been preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles, to non-Jews, to uncircumcised people. And the Gentiles were listening, believing, and becoming baptized, but some Jewish Christians came in and were saying “If these non-Jews want to be Christians, they have to be circumcised (Jewish mark of being in the covenant with God) also and follow the whole Mosaic Law.”

Now Paul and Barnabas react to this: “Whoa, whoa, whoa. This is not a requirement of following Jesus – that you also have to be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law.” This must have become pretty heated because the reading says “Because there arose no little dissension and debate by Paul and Barnabas with them.” I think this is a nice way of saying that this was a big argument, and they realized that this was not a question they could answer for themselves. So they decided: we need to bring this question to the Apostles.

So they did as we heard. They chose representatives to go down to Jerusalem with the question, and the exact question was: to be a follower of Jesus, is it enough to believe and be baptized or must one also be circumcised and follow the whole Mosaic law?

So the Apostles and elders (priests) gathered together in Council to discuss this question and invoke the Holy Spirit. This is the first church council, and it is now called the Council of Jerusalem. Their decision of course was that to become a follower of Jesus, to find salvation, it is enough to believe and be baptized. One does not also have to be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law.

But I want to point out how this decision was given. They sent this message back to the Gentile Christians with the words, “it is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us...” This is Jesus fulfilling His promise that we heard in the Gospel: “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will teach you everything.” So we see, the Holy Spirit works in the Church to keep the Church in the truth and to lead the Church into all truth.

And at times throughout the life of the Church, definite decisions are made about questions that arise. These decisions are made by the Pope and the bishops all together, and they are protected by the Holy Spirit when they teach together for the whole Church.

Let me give you some examples. The question of “Is Jesus fully God and fully man?” was taken up and answered by the Council of Nicea. The question of “What exactly is the power of the Pope?” was taken up by Vatican I. There are many more examples.

For us, great spiritual and theological truth to be understood here, that is, we can have absolute trust that the teachings of the Church are true and that we can build our lives around them. Why

can we have this absolute trust? Because of the promise of Jesus. Jesus wouldn't lie to us – He sent the Holy Spirit which leads the Church into all truth.

So even if there is a teaching that we may have a hard time understanding or that we have difficulty fulfilling, well, that's part of the struggle of the Christian life, trying to understand and to do what God asks of us. Sometimes that's not so easy. That's part of what it means to carry the cross. But if we have difficulty with a teaching, what we can't do is jump to the conclusion that it must not be true. People do that, especially with moral teachings. They jump from "I'm having difficulty wanting to live this teaching" to "well, because I'm having difficulty, this teaching can't be true." This leads to what's called "Cafeteria Catholics."

But that would be to say that Jesus' promise isn't true – that the Holy Spirit doesn't guard and guide the teaching of the Church.

So what does God ask of us? Trust and submission. Even when we personally have difficulty believing a teaching or putting it into practice, God asks us to trust that what He has revealed is true – because the teachings of the Church are protected by the Holy Spirit. And also trust that if I submit to it in spite of my difficulties, God over time will bring me around so that struggle and difficulty will turn into true life for me because I'm following that teaching.

**Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church on the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, 2013.**