

The Holy Spirit Will Guide You into All Truth

By Matthew Ramage

May 26, 2019 – Sixth Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 15.1-2, 22-29; Revelation 21.10-14, 22-23; John 14.23-29

“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you” (Jn 14.26). This intriguing line in today’s gospel is drawn from Jesus’s great farewell discourse at the Last Supper, also known as the High Priestly Prayer. A closely related text from this same prayer, recorded exclusively in the Gospel of John, reads, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (Jn 16.13).

What does it mean to say that the Holy Spirit will remind us of all that Christ taught? And how is it, precisely, that the Holy Spirit is to guide the Church into all truth? The answer to these questions has everything to do with the concept of the apostles’ divinely given authority, which runs through all of our readings today.

Saved through Grace

Today’s first reading, drawn from the earliest book of ecclesiastical history known as Acts of the Apostles, recounts the story of the first internal threat that the nascent Church had to confront: the so-called Judaizer controversy. In this text, we learn that something seriously contrary to Christ’s will had been happening among the first Christian faithful: some people were claiming that you had to be circumcised according to the traditional Mosaic practice or else you could not be saved (Acts 15.1).

In response to this claim, the apostles gathered together to discuss the matter in a meeting that became the prototype for all future “ecumenical councils” of popes and bishops that have made judgments on important matters of faith, morals, and Christian living for the past two millennia (the Council of Nicaea, the Council of Trent, the Second Vatican Council, and so on). Amidst this gathering, it was Saint Peter – the leader of the apostles – who stood up and reproved those who would “put a yoke upon the neck” of Gentile converts to the faith, one which “neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15.10). In reality, Saint Peter forcefully reminds his listeners, “We shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15.11).

This one word, grace, makes all the difference between the Old Law and the New Law of Jesus Christ. It is a constant theme also in the writings of Saint Paul that we regularly hear at Mass. As this apostle teaches, we are saved by the free gift of God’s grace, not through “works” of the Jewish law (Rom 11.6). Contrary to what many Christians suppose, neither Paul nor Peter is denying the importance of performing acts of love for our fellow man. When they speak of “works,” they do not have good deeds generally in mind but rather *works of the Jewish law* – especially circumcision that was being pushed by certain people in the early Church (for other good illustrations of this, see Rom 3.28-30 and Gal 2.16).

But let’s get back to Acts of the Apostles. Immediately following Saint Peter’s speech comes the selection that the Church chose to be read in today’s liturgy. After the vicar of Christ submitted his judgment that would-be Gentile converts need not be circumcised in order to be baptized, the apostles drafted a letter – what might be thought of as the Church’s first “encyclical” – to inform the wider Christian community of their decision. Importantly, the apostles did not

see this as a mere human discernment that had taken place. The judgment that they arrived at was made because it had “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15.28). In a nutshell, this episode in our first reading reflects the reality that from her very first days the Church already had a functioning teaching hierarchy, structured around the authority of those figures who would eventually be known as the pope and the college of bishops.

The Holy Spirit and the Apostles’ Mission

Our second reading, taken from the Book of Revelation, contains symbolically charged images deployed in order to make the same point. In this passage, Saint John has a vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, our eternal home with God. This city has a distinct structure, with twelve angels guarding twelve gates on which the names of the twelve tribes of Israel are inscribed. The city wall, meanwhile, had a foundation made of twelve courses of stones, on which were inscribed the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, Jesus Christ (Rev 21.10-14).

The number twelve was highly significant for a Jew in Jesus’s day (or in any period, for that matter). In the Old Testament, the twelve tribes of Israel were often portrayed through twelve stones (see Ex 28.21; Jsh 4.3; 1 Kgs 18.31). This explains why Jesus willed for there to be twelve apostles. By making this choice, Pope Benedict XVI says in *Jesus, the Apostles, and the Early Church*, “Jesus wants to say that the definitive time has arrived in which to constitute the new People of God, the people of the twelve tribes, which now becomes a universal people: his Church.”

In our gospel Jesus brings one pivotal dimension of the apostles’ mission to the fore: the mission of the Holy Spirit working through the hierarchy of the Catholic Church to “remind” us of Christ’s truth and to “teach [us] everything.” How does this tie back to the first two readings?

The body of twelve apostles with Peter at its head continues to exist today in the magisterium of the Catholic Church, the teaching authority instituted by Christ comprised by the pope and bishops in communion with him. One of the main tasks of the Church’s teaching authority is very simple: in her ordinary preaching day in and day out, the pope and bishops are often simply reminding us of the truth revealed by Jesus Christ (Jn 14.26). Popes and bishops don’t have to utter infallible statements every time they speak in order for their words to be valuable. Most of the time, in fact, they are just reminding us of the truth that we already know but have yet to learn how to fully live.

For example, on a specific occasion a homily can speak to us in a profound way even if we have heard its main message what feels like a thousand times. Or, in prayer, a switch might be flipped and a biblical passage we’ve encountered time and again throughout our life may all of a sudden make sense to us. These are but a couple of illustrations of how the Holy Spirit reminds us of Christ’s truth through the ordinary events of our daily existence in the Church.

The other task of the Church that pertains to today’s gospel concerns how the Holy Spirit works through the magisterium to guide us “into all the truth” (Jn 16.13). We might be puzzled: didn’t Christ himself reveal the fullness of truth? If so, then why does Jesus say that it is the Holy Spirit who will ultimately lead us to it? As the great convert and soon-to-be saint John Henry Newman famously wrote, doctrine *develops* within the Church over the centuries. It is not that we today know Christ more intimately than the apostles did, says Newman. However, it can be said that we have a more articulate or more “explicit” faith than those in the early Church were blessed to enjoy.

Greater Clarity

But how do we arrive at this greater clarity in our faith over time? Developments of doctrine come about precisely through the ministry of the pope and bishops, the successors of the apostles whom Christ charged with the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God. When challenges arise in the Church, the pope and bishops take them up, pray and discern, and ultimately render a judgment guided by the Holy Spirit – just as the apostles did in our first reading. Sometimes the hierarchical authority of the Church has to denounce heresies or false teachings. For example, we have the Creed, which gives us a precise articulation of the core truths of our faith. But we didn’t have this precise gift until the year 325 A.D., when the Church drafted it in response to heresy.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, then, even heresies are providential. As Joseph Ratzinger once wrote before becoming pope, heresies looked upon with the eyes of faith turn out to be “not so much gravestones as the bricks of a cathedral.” This is just another instance of the fundamental truth taught by Saint Paul: *where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more* (Rom 5.20).

The same could be said with regard to the faults of all those entrusted with preserving and transmitting our faith today. The pope and bishops are frail human sinners, just as Saint Peter and the apostles were. Yet if we keep Christ's word transmitted to us by the Holy Spirit through the mediation of those whom he has chosen as his humble instruments, Jesus promises that he and the Father will come and make their dwelling in us (Jn 14.23). If we love him, Christ says, we ought to rejoice that he has gone to the Father and sent the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth through his holy Church (Jn 14.28).

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For Further Reading

- *Florentine Bechtel, "Judaizers," [The Catholic Encyclopedia](#)*
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church, [##74-100](#)*
- *Marcellino D'Ambrosio, "[Holy Spirit and the Catholic Church](#)"*
- *Bl. John Henry Newman, [An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine](#)*

In Short . . .

- *From her earliest days the Church had a teaching hierarchy structured around the authority of those who would eventually be known as the pope and the bishops.*
- *Much of the time the hierarchy are just reminding us of the truth that we already know but have yet to learn how to fully live.*
- *Development of doctrine does not mean that we know Christ more intimately than the apostles did but that we have a more articulate or more "explicit" faith.*
- *Jesus promises that he and the Father will come and make their dwelling in us.*
- *Christ's word is transmitted to us by the Holy Spirit through the mediation of those whom he has chosen as his humble instruments.*