

05/01/16 6 Easter C

-- All too often, I think that we believe that the first years of the history of the Church were pretty peaceful. Sure, there were some persecutions, but the apostles seemed to handle them well. Differences were easily resolved...or so we think.

-- But if we dig deeper, we discover that things weren't that smooth. In fact, crises rose in those first couple of decades that could have torn the infant Church apart. We encounter one of those in our first reading as the apostles address the question of what to do about Gentile believers. Would they be required to keep the Jewish law?

-- Jesus hadn't talked about that, since all his followers were Jews. And some pretty lively (and, I suspect, heated) debates took place over this issue. The apostles needed to resolve this to keep people together.

-- Notice how they did this. They brought the leaders together. They allowed them to speak about their experiences, especially with new converts. They also looked back to what the scriptures said about people from the outside becoming believers.

-- And after everyone had a chance to speak, they came to a decision. That decision involved some compromise. Gentile Christians would not have to observe the entire Mosaic Law and (if male) be circumcised. But they would be asked to observe a few regulations that resident aliens were asked to keep in Jewish territories.

-- How were they able to come to this resolution? They trusted that the Holy Spirit was guiding them through this process. They gathered in prayer and asked for God's guidance. And God did not let them down.

-- About two years ago Pope Francis began a process to address some challenges faced by families in our contemporary world. He invited Church leaders to gather, but he also sought input from Catholics all over the world. He told people to be honest with their input.

-- And they were honest. Not all agreed with one another. There was a lively debate, even among the top leadership of the Church. Different areas of the world had different priorities.

-- Two synod meetings took place, and just a few weeks ago, Pope Francis released his Apostolic letter reflecting on the challenges of family life. Most of the initial reaction to the letter has been favorable, even among people who disagreed with each other. Time will tell how this plays out.

-- I believe Pope Francis trusts that the Holy Spirit continues to work in the Church today, among all God's people. While he holds out the vision of marriage and family life the Church has always held, he realizes he cannot give detailed answers to all particular situations which may arise in families.

-- When the apostles issued their decision in our first reading, it brought much peace, but it did not solve all their problems. No one should expect a decree of the Pope to resolve all challenges the Church faces today.

-- But we do trust that the Holy Spirit is still alive in the Church. The Advocate is still here, teaching us what we need to know. The peace we receive is not a total lack of conflict or opposition.

-- But we receive a deeper peace—a peace of knowing that God walks with us in the challenges we face in life. May we never despair of seeking the peace that only God can give.