

# First disciples create a model for dealing with contention in the church

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 9, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

Sometimes things are happening in the world around us that provide a very good context to listen to the Scriptures, as we're doing this morning during this liturgy. What's going on, you may have heard about, is controversy within our church. This past week, there was a demonstration [in Detroit] of people who call themselves Fortunate Families. They were demonstrating in front of the archbishop's office because they're families who have committed gay members within them, or lesbian members.

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <p>They refuse to say, "I can't go to holy Communion because I accept my child into my home," so they're demonstrating. This evening, there's going to be a Mass at Marygrove, and it's sponsored by Dignity, a Catholic organization of gay and lesbian people. We've been notified that there's going to be a group there demonstrating, protesting. They call themselves the Cardinal Newman Society. They feel Dignity -- this group -- ought not to be able to celebrate Eucharist.</p> | <p>This is a very difficult struggle going on in our church -- trying to come to grips with church teaching regarding homosexuality and perhaps a need for some new understandings on our part. But if you were listening, that's nothing new that there would be this kind of dissention going on in the church. It was there right at the very beginning. When you listen to the Acts of the Apostles this morning, Luke has kind of glossed things over so it really doesn't seem as difficult as it was, but this is a struggle that went on for probably 30 or 40 years. Luke was writing in the late 80s, but the struggle started right at the beginning, practically, 30 or 40 years before.</p> | <p>Sixth Sunday of Easter<br/>         Acts 15:1-2, 22-29<br/>         Psalms 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8<br/>         Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23<br/>         John 14:23-29<br/> <a href="#">Full text of the readings</a> [1]</p> |
|--|--|---|

It was an intense struggle. It was all about whether you had to be a Jew and maintain that in order to be a follower of Jesus. In the first church, for the first decade or so at least, were all Jews. There weren't any Gentiles. They were all Jews, and they maintained their practice of going to the temple; they maintained all the Jewish rituals; they maintained the Jewish law. But then, with Paul and the revelation he received from Jesus, he began to talk to the Gentiles, and these people refused to accept the Jewish law, especially the law of circumcision.

So there was this terrible controversy: those who said, "No, you can be free of the law," and those who said, "No, you must obey the full law." We might think, Well, what's the big deal? That rite of circumcision goes right back to the beginnings of Judaism and the covenant between God, Abraham and Sarah, which was marked by the sign of circumcision. It's a very long-standing tradition. Now they're being told, "No, you don't need it; let it go." For many, that was a very difficult thing to do.

In fact, in the account in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is kind of shown in a very favorable light because when they gather to settle this dispute, he tells about his experience (It's recorded in the 10th chapter of Acts) of being shown by God that he no longer had to obey the dietary laws and that he could go into the home of a Gentile, which he did -- Cornelius -- and baptized him and his family. Peter says, "God showed me I should do this."

Even after that, as you read in the letter of Paul to the church in Galatia in the second chapter (this is during this long period after the beginning of the dispute and before the settlement) when Peter came to Antioch, Paul says (this is the in-between time), "I confronted him to his face since he was in the wrong." Peter had gone back to

the former practice. Some people were complaining and were very upset because they were saying circumcision isn't necessary, so then Peter wavers and goes back to the other practice and Paul says, "No, that's wrong. God has shown us a new way in Jesus."

In fact, Paul gets so harsh about it that later on, in the same letter to the Galatians, and says, "I myself, brothers and sisters, could I not preach circumcision?" "Well, of course," he's saying, "then I would no longer be persecuted." Then where would be this scandal of the cross -- the new wisdom that God has shown us in Jesus that the Jews thought was a scandal -- a God who dies helpless on a cross? Everything is new in Jesus, and Paul says, "Would that those who confuse you mutilate themselves."

In other words, when they're being circumcised, the knife slips. Paul's point is vivid in his anger in what he says. That dispute was going on over 20, 30, maybe even 40 years. Finally, they come to resolve it. This is what's important for us to try to listen to and to follow as we deal with dissention and disputes and struggles within our church today. It's not something new. This has gone on from the very beginning. How do those first Christians resolve the dispute?

First of all, they were very aware of what Jesus spoke to them at the Last Supper. Jesus didn't give them a blueprint of how to build the church. What he did give them, he promises at the Last Supper: "I will send my Holy Spirit, and the Spirit will show you all truth. I have many things to tell you, but you can't bear them all now, but when the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will guide you into the whole truth." The Spirit will guide you. We have to be open to the Spirit.

That's a very important responsibility that each of us carries -- to try to be open to God's Spirit. As we heard in the book of the apocalypse, in the new Jerusalem, there's no temple because God is present for everyone, but we have to be alert to God. In the Catholic catechism, there's a definition of what our conscience is, and it's actually taken from the Second Vatican Council: the divine voice echoing in the depths of our heart as a law written by God in human hearts.

The divine voice of God echoing in the heart of each one of us, but we have to be quiet at times. We have to separate ourselves from all the things going on in the world around us in what people call now "centering yourself" -- going into the depths of your heart and hearing God speaking to you. God is there, but we have to take the time to listen. As we learn from the Acts of the Apostles, the apostles and elders together with the whole church decided what to do; they listened to the whole church.

There's a great teaching in our church called the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the believing people. God speaks not just through the pope or to the bishops, the hierarchy. God speaks in the depth of the heart of each of us. The church has to enter into dialogue as that first community of disciples did to listen to one another, draw from the depths of the Spirit speaking to all of us, and then come to our conclusions. Now you might say, "That's impossible; that will never happen."

I just discovered yesterday or the day before that actually something very similar to this has just happened in a church in Germany. The bishops there gathered together 300 people for a four-day period to discuss what changes, what reforms needed to be developed within the church. Afterward, the president of the German Bishops' Conference spoke, and he said that one of the things that he, the bishops, and the church now were going to call for would be the ordination of women to the diaconate.

That's something we've been told you can't even talk about. Now the German church is saying, "Yes, we're calling for that." We're in a new time. We need more ministers in our church. There are women who claim and hear God speaking within them, calling them to minister. Now the German church having gathered together, listened to one another, and listened to the Spirit speaking to them are saying, "We need this reform now." And we do, I think.

It seems very obvious that we have just an extraordinary lack of ministers in our church. Why else are we closing all of our churches? We don't have enough ministers. Basically, that's the real reason. Now the church is listening in Germany, at least. That means, though, the church can do the same thing everywhere. We need to do that in our church. It starts with each one of us.

Try to listen deeply to what God is telling us about these things that are going on in the world around us, about the whole issue of homosexuality, about the issue of ordination of women, about the issue of how we bring peace into our world, about giving up violence, listening to God, bringing about change in ourselves and then trying to be bringing about this change in our church as we enter into deep dialogue with one another.

It happened in the beginning; just now it's happened in Germany; and it could happen here. We need to pray, each of us take our responsibility, listen and then begin within our parish community, and then spread this throughout our diocese that we resolve these issues in the way that the first community of disciples showed us. Listen to the Spirit whom Jesus promised and whom Jesus has sent, discuss with one another in a spirit of love, and then you'll know what God is asking of us in every circumstance, even those that are most contentious.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 06/27/2017 - 02:10):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/first-disciples-create-model-dealing-contention-church>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/050513.cfm>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>