

Dear brothers and sisters,

The respect and veneration for the Twelve, which Paul had always cultivated, did not diminish when he frankly defended the truth of the Gospel, which is nothing other than Jesus Christ, the Lord. Today, we wish to pause on two episodes that show this veneration, and at the same time, the freedom with which the Apostle addressed Cephas and the other apostles: the so-called Council of Jerusalem and the incident in Antioch of Syria, related in the Letter to the Galatians (cf. 2:1-10; 2:11-14).

Every council and synod in the Church is an "event of the Spirit" and gathers together the solitudes of the whole People of God. Those who participated in the Second Vatican Council experienced this in first person. Because of this, St. Luke, in informing us about the first council of the Church, which took place in Jerusalem, introduces in this way the letter the apostles sent in this circumstance to the Christian communities of the diaspora: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us" (Acts 15:28). The Spirit, who works in the whole Church, guides the apostles by the hand in the hour of taking on new paths or fulfilling their projects. He is the principal artisan of the building up of the Church.

Nevertheless, the assembly in Jerusalem took place in a moment of not little tension within the community of the origins. It regarded responding to the question of whether it was opportune to demand circumcision of the pagans who were converting to Jesus Christ, the Lord, or whether it was licit to leave them free of the Mosaic law, that is, free from the observation of the necessary norms for being a just man, obedient to the law, and above all, free of the norms relating to the purification rituals, pure and impure foods, and the Sabbath.

St. Paul in Galatians 2: 1-10 also refers to the assembly in Jerusalem: Fourteen years after his encounter with the Risen One in Damascus -- we are in the second half of the decade of the 40s -- Paul leaves for Antioch of Syria with Barnabas, and also accompanied by Titus, his faithful coworker who, though of Greek origin, had not been obligated to be circumcised when he joined the Church. On this occasion, Paul presents to the Twelve, defined as those of repute, his gospel of freedom from the law (cf. Galatians 2:6).

In light of his encounter with the risen Christ, he had understood that in the moment of passing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, circumcision was no longer necessary for the pagans, nor the laws regarding food and regarding the Sabbath, as a sign of justice: Christ is our justice and "just" is all that which conforms to him. Other signs are not necessary in order to be just. In the Letter to the Galatians, he refers, with few words, to the development of the assembly: He enthusiastically recalls that the gospel of liberty from the law was approved by James, Cephas and John, "the pillars," who offered to him and to Barnabas the right hand in sign of ecclesial communion in Christ (Galatians 2:9).

As we have noted, if for Luke the Council of Jerusalem expresses the action of the Holy Spirit, for Paul it represents the recognition of the liberty shared among all those who participated in it: liberty from the obligations deriving from circumcision and the law; this liberty for which "for freedom, Christ has set us free" and let us not submit again to the yoke of slavery (cf. Galatians 5:1). The two forms with which Paul and Luke describe the Assembly of Jerusalem are united in the liberating action of the Holy Spirit, because "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom," he would say in the Second Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 3:17).

For all that, as clearly appears in St. Paul's letters, Christian liberty is never identified with license or with the freewill to do what one wants. It is carried out in conformity with Christ, and therefore, in the authentic service of man, above all, of the most needy. Because of this, Paul's report of the assembly closed by recalling the recommendation the apostles gave him: "Only, we were to be mindful of the poor, which is the very thing I was eager to do" (Galatians 2:10).

Every council is born from the Church and returns to the Church: On that occasion it returned with the attention to the poor, which from Paul's various notes in his letters, are above all those of the Church of Jerusalem. In the concern for the poor, particularly testified to in the Second Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 8-9) and in the conclusion of the Letter to the Romans (cf. 15), Paul shows his fidelity to the decisions that matured during the assembly.

Perhaps we are not yet able to fully understand the meaning Paul and his communities gave to the collection for the poor of Jerusalem. It was a totally new initiative in the panorama of religious activities. It was not obligatory, but free and spontaneous. All of the Churches founded by Paul in the West participated. The collection expressed the debt of these communities to the mother Church of Palestine, from which they had received the ineffable gift of the Gospel. The value that Paul attributes to this gesture of participation is so great that he rarely calls it a "collection": It is rather "service," "blessing," "love," "grace," even "liturgy" (2 Corinthians 9).

This last term, in particular, is surprising; it confers on the collection of money a value even of veneration: On one hand, it is a liturgical gesture or "service," offered by each community to God, and on the other, it is an action of love carried out in favor of the people. Love for the poor and divine liturgy go together; love for the poor is liturgy. These two horizons are present in every liturgy celebrated and lived in the Church, which by its nature opposes a separation between worship and life, between faith and works, between prayer and charity toward the brothers. Thus the Council of Jerusalem is born to resolve the question of how to behave with the pagans who arrived to the faith, choosing freedom from circumcision and the observances imposed by the law, and it ends with the pastoral solicitude that places at the center faith in

Christ Jesus and love for the poor of Jerusalem and the whole Church.

The second episode is the well known incident in Antioch, in Syria, which allows us to understand the interior liberty that Paul enjoyed. How should one behave on the occasions of communion at the table between believers of Jewish origin and those of Gentile background? Here is revealed the other epicenter of the Mosaic observance: the distinction between pure and impure foods, which deeply divided the observant Hebrews from the pagans. Initially, Cephas, Peter, shared the table with both, but with the arrival of some Christians linked to James, "the brother of the Lord" (Galatians 1:19), Peter had begun to avoid contact at the table with pagans, so as not to scandalize those who continued observing the rules regarding food purity. And this choice was shared by Barnabas. That choice deeply divided the Christians come from circumcision and those come from paganism.

This behavior, which truly threatened the unity and liberty of the Church, brought a fiery reaction from Paul, who arrived to the point of accusing Peter and the rest of hypocrisy. "If you, though a Jew, are living like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Galatians 2:14). In reality, the concerns of Paul, on one hand, and Peter and Barnabas on the other, were different: For the latter, the separation of the pagans represented a way to teach and avoid scandalizing the believers coming from Judaism. For Paul, it constituted, on the other hand, the danger of a misunderstanding of the universal salvation in Christ offered as much to the pagans as to the Jews. If justification was brought about only in virtue of faith in Christ, of conformity with him, without any work of the law, then what sense was there in still observing the [rules on] purity of food when participating at the table? Very probably the perspectives of Peter and Paul were different: for the first, not losing the Jews who had embraced the Gospel, for the second, not diminishing the salvific value of the death of Christ for all believers. It is interesting to note, but writing to the Christians of Rome a few years later, (around the middle of the decade of the 50s), Paul will find himself before a similar situation and he will ask the strong that they not eat impure food so as not to lose the weak or cause scandal for them. "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble" (Romans 14:21). The incident in Antioch showed itself to be a lesson both for Peter and for Paul. Only sincere dialogue, open to the truth of the Gospel, could guide the path of the Church: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). It is a lesson that we should also learn: With the distinct charisms entrusted to Peter and Paul, let us all be guided by the Spirit, trying to live in the liberty that finds its orientation in faith in Christ and is made tangible in service to our brothers. It is essential to be ever more conformed to Christ. It is in this way that one is truly free, in this way the deepest nucleus of the law is expressed in us: the love of God and neighbor. Let us ask the Lord to teach us to share his

sentiments, to learn from him the true liberty and evangelical love that embraces every human being.

[The Holy Father then greeted the pilgrims in several languages.]

[Translation by ZENIT]

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