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Pope Francis places his hand on the head of a woman who cries with emotion

Pope Francis blesses a woman at the end of his weekly general audience Feb. 22, 2023, in the Vatican audience hall. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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"It is very sad to see the church as if it were a parliament," which is what happens when Catholics rely more on their personal opinions than on the Holy Spirit, Pope Francis said.

"The church is something else; it is a community of men and women who believe in and proclaim Jesus Christ, moved by the Holy Spirit and not by their own ideas," he said Feb. 22 at his weekly general audience.

Continuing a series of talks about evangelization and mission, the pope said it is natural for Catholics to have different opinions on all sorts of things, which is why, when making decisions about the life of the church, they must do like the early disciples did and seek the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The Acts of the Apostles recounts how the disciples were divided over the question of whether pagans who came to Christianity were required to follow Jewish law.

"They could have sought a good compromise between tradition and innovation: some rules are observed, others are left out," the pope said. "Yet the apostles do not follow this human wisdom, but adapt themselves to the work of the Spirit, who had anticipated them by descending upon the pagans just as on them."

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"Despite having different sensitivities and opinions, they listen to the Spirit," he said. The Spirit taught the disciples something, "which is also valid today: every religious tradition is useful if it facilitates the encounter with Jesus."

Without listening together to the Spirit, he said, the church runs the risk of falling prey to "ideological divisions" and arguments based on whether one considers oneself a "conservative" or "progressive," he said. "But where is the Holy Spirit? Watch out, the Gospel is not an idea or an ideology, it is a proclamation that touches and changes your heart. But if you hide in an idea, whether it's of right or left or center, you are making the Gospel a political party, an ideology or a social club."

Pope Francis asked the thousands of pilgrims and visitors in the audience hall, "How many of us pray to the Holy Spirit? 'No, father, I pray to Mary, I pray to the saints, I pray to Jesus, sometimes I say the Lord's Prayer so I pray to the Father,'" he imagined some of them responding.

But it is the Holy Spirit "who moves your heart, who carries you forward, gives you consolation and the desire to evangelize and be a missionary," he said.