Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:6).

Acts 15:1-6; *Jn 15:1-8*

In today's two readings from Acts 15 and John 15, we witness the struggle of the early church to emerge from internal conflict and external persecution to a more stable sense of identity and purpose. Every movement that becomes an organization

or institution goes through this difficult process.

The essential charism and inspiration -- the mystery of Jesus -- must be preserved and yet adapted to new circumstances. The church's reliance on the Holy Spirit is evident. The early generation of believers moved into uncharted waters, daring interpretations of the Scriptures and the Jewish traditions that formed them. So, they put up their sails and caught the wind.

The Council of Jerusalem, which probably took place in the 50s, some 20 years after the Christ event, brought missionaries Paul and Barnabas back to the "Mother Church" in Jerusalem, where the question of gentile converts had to be decided. Should these pagan initiates be required to become Jews before they could be Christians? In other words, should they have to be circumcised and observe the Torah to share in the grace of forgiveness offered by Jesus?

Paul had seen the work of the Spirit in the gentile communities and come to understand that if Christ saves, no other obligations were necessary. The Good News was precisely this: Gentiles were being welcomed by God into the Covenant with the Chosen People. Universal salvation by union with Christ was all that was needed. To add other requirements diminished the complete saving gift of God in Christ.

Some say the second most important council in the history of the church -- for its universal scope and impact -- was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). It brought the church out of a tight, juridical fortress mentality into the modern world. It activated the laity to share more fully in their church, and it opened the way to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Not everyone was happy with this expansive renewal and openness to the world. Some bishops saw greater freedom for the laity as a threat to their authority and dialogue with other Christian churches and religions as compromising the Catholic church's unique status.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that to continue to grow in grace they had to remain in unity with him. A branch cut off from the vine withers and dies. So, church unity is a key to the Christian life and to an integral understanding of the mission of the church. Councils have been one way the church has adjusted to new challenges. Those who disagree with the fundamental direction the church chooses to take, whether liberal or conservative, must decide to depart or remain and resolve their disagreements.

This is why internal reconciliation and mutual forgiveness have always been essential to the unity of the church. United we stand, divided we fall.