

5th Sunday Easter A (John 14:1-12) (Acts 6:1-7)

Have you ever noticed that in most communities, including parish and church communities, there are often disagreements, sometimes hostile and harsh? Sometimes I comment, "Wherever two or three are gathered together, there is conflict, dissention, and disagreement." At least that's how it was among the followers of Jesus two thousand years ago. Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells us that the Greek Christians complained against the Hebrew Christians and they had to hold a meeting to resolve the conflict. And that's how it seems to happen today. Conflict and criticism are always with us. It seems that no matter how hard you try, someone will always complain. This happens a lot in churches.

There is no situation where people, even people of faith, get together, and there aren't going to be moments of tension and conflict to negotiate. To believe otherwise, leaves us open to disillusionment. This is true even for those who think themselves in the perfect marriage, the perfect job, the perfect parish, the perfect friendship. Conflict must be dealt with in mutual respect, with authentic humility, and fair dialogue.

Notice when the murmuring arose in the early Church, the apostles listened and took immediate steps to resolution. The issue at hand was the growing distrust over the distribution of the common goods in the Church. And there was the suggestion that the unfairness was motivated by racial bigotry and nationalistic pride. The apostles didn't pretend this conflict didn't exist. The Church is in trouble, not when we have conflict, but when we avoid honest naming of the conflict, perhaps because we want to be thought nice and be liked by everybody, or because we labor under the myth that in the Church there is never conflict. Ignored conflict doesn't go away, it just becomes infected.

Notice how the apostles dealt with a conflictual situation. They didn't avoid the issue or fall into the trap of denying the problem. They gathered the community of disciples from both sides of the conflict, to prayerfully discern, and "filled with the Spirit and wisdom," they arrived at a solution agreeable to all, in this case the ordination of seven deacons whose mission was to take care of the neglected widows and others in need. The deacon, Saint Stephen, became the first of the Christian martyrs to give his life for Christ. And as the Acts of the Apostles tells us, "The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly."

Only in a climate of peaceful discernment of spirits can conflict be resolved, can the loving word of God spread. And in this climate of peace and mutual healing, moved by the Holy Spirit, can we faithfully follow Jesus, who is indeed, the way, the truth, and the life. And for his presence in our lives we give thanks.

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