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CATECHESIS ON THE PAPACY

Peter and the Call of the Gentiles

By Father Francis Martin

The work that is traditionally called “The Acts of the Apostles,” could really be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” In this, his second volume, St. Luke continues to recount “all that Jesus did and taught,” but now he is recounting how Our Lord Jesus Christ accomplished his work through his Holy Spirit directing the Apostles and the early Church. How often do we read phrases such as “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and ourselves” (Acts 15:28); “they had been prevented by the Holy Spirit from preaching the message in the province of Asia... they tried to go into the Bithynia but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (Acts 16:6-7).

We must bear in mind that St. Luke is not only recording these and other events to show us how the life of Christ was continued in the early Church, but also alerting us and giving us a model of the manner in which the Holy Spirit continues that life in every generation of the Church. We see an example of that guidance in the life of Peter, the leader of the Apostles, as he is instructed prophetically to move the Church “out into the deep,” by including Gentiles in what was up to that moment a Jewish movement.

It suffices to read the Old Testament, particularly the psalms, to appreciate that, at the heart of the Jewish faith there was an awareness that God cared about everyone and was planning to call all the nations to join themselves somehow to the privileges of the Chosen People. Thus we read in Psalm 86: 8-10:

There is none like you among the gods, my Lord,
no deeds like yours.
All the nations whom you have made
will come and bow down before you, my Lord,
and glorify your name.
For you are great, and a worker of wonders;
you are God, you alone.

We reflect this same awareness when at the Easter Vigil we pray, “grant that the fullness of the whole world pass over into being children of Abraham and into the dignity of Israel.” Israel envisaged this happening by all the world embracing the Jewish way of life. Peter and the early Christians shared this view, but they now realized that the Israel to which all the world would be invited was the new, the fulfilled, Israel created by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Yet even then, they could not grasp the profundity of the changes that this implied.

Such was the situation on that day when Peter went up to the roof terrace of the house of Simon the tanner to pray. You recall how Peter saw a large sheet come down bearing all kinds of animals and reptiles and heard a voice telling him, “Get up, Peter, slaughter and eat.” To which Peter replied, “Certainly not sir, for I have never eaten anything unclean.” He heard in response: “What God has made clean, you are not to call profane.” Peter was still thinking about this when the Holy Spirit told him to go downstairs and greet and then accompany a delegation sent by a God-fearing pagan centurion who also had had a vision. Peter went and greeted them, and then, in

obedience to the directive of the Holy Spirit, he invited them in a treated them as guests – the very kind of association forbidden to Jews. (See Acts 10:9-16).

The next day Peter and some of the Jewish Christian brethren arrived at the centurion's home in Caesarea. Peter, in response to the centurion's request, began to witness to what God had done in his Son Jesus Christ. As he spoke, "the Holy Spirit fell on upon all who were listening to the word" and they began to speak in tongues and glorify God. Peter then proposed: Can anyone withhold the water of Baptism from these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then, once again by accepting their hospitality, he transgressed the customs of the Jews. When this latter gesture was questioned by his fellow Jewish Christians, Peter bore witness to the work of the Holy Spirit, and then they began to honor God saying, "God has granted life-giving repentance even to Gentiles." (See Acts, chapter 10 and 11).

Who can calculate the effects of Peter's obedience? The divine guidance of the Holy Spirit and the obedience of Peter opened up and fulfilled the religion founded by God: now all the nations will glorify God and enter into his salvation. The work of preaching the Good News still must go on, yet we can see that this event wrought a change that has affected the subsequent history of the whole world.

Can we not see continued realizations of this type of prophetic enlightenment and obedience realized over and over again when successors of Peter have moved the Church to a new place in history? In our own day, we think of John XXIII calling the Vatican Council II, Paul VI calling for a new period of evangelization, John Paul II becoming once again a "missionary bishop" and bringing the message of Christ to all the world, or Pope Benedict's commitment to inter-religious dialogue in an atmosphere of honesty and reason. Think of the contribution to world peace when the two religious groups, Christianity and Islam – who between them make up almost half of the world's population – can hear together God's call to peace. May the obedience and daring that is part of the grace of Peter, remain in Benedict and fill the soul of the next pope, for the sake of the Church and the world.

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