GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 1st October 2008

Saint Paul (6)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Paul's relationship with the Twelve was always one of respect and veneration that did not fail when he defended the truth of the Gospel, which is nothing if not Jesus Christ, the Lord. Let us reflect today on two episodes that show the veneration and at the same time the freedom with which the Apostle addresses Cephas and the other Apostles: the so-called "Council" of Jerusalem and the incident in Antioch, Syria, mentioned in the Letter to the Galatians (cf. 2: 1-10; 2: 11-14).

In the Church, every Council and Synod is an "event of the Spirit" which considers the petitions of all the People of God as it takes place. This was experienced first-hand by all those who received the gift of participating in the Second Vatican Council. For this reason, St Luke, in telling us about the Church's First Council, held in Jerusalem, introduces the Letter which the Apostles sent on that occasion to the Christian communities in the diaspora: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15: 28). The Spirit, who works in the whole Church, takes the Apostles by the hand, leading them on new roads to implement his plans; he is the principal artisan who builds the Church.

And the Assembly of Jerusalem also took place at a time of no small tension in the primitive community. It was a matter of settling the question of whether or not circumcision was compulsory for the Gentiles who were adhering to Jesus Christ, the Lord, or whether it was lawful for them not to be bound by the Mosaic law, that is, the observance of the norms

required in order to be upright, law-abiding people, and especially, not to be bound by those norms that concerned religious purification, clean and unclean foods and the Sabbath. Paul also refers to the Assembly of Jerusalem in Gal 2: 1-10, 14 years after his encounter with the Risen One at Damascus - we are in the second half of the 40s A.D. - Paul set out with Barnabas from Antioch in Syria, taking with him Titus, his faithful collaborator who, although he was a Greek, had not been obliged to be circumcised in order to join the Church. On that occasion Paul explained to the Twelve, whom he describes as those who were "of repute", his Gospel of freedom from the Law (cf. Gal 2: 6). In the light of the encounter with the Risen Christ, Paul realized that as soon as they adhered to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Gentiles no longer needed as a hallmark of justice either circumcision or the rules that governed food and the Sabbath: Christ is our justice and all things that conform to him are "just". No other signs are necessary in order to be just. In the Letter to the Galatians, St Paul tells in a few lines how the assembly went. He says enthusiastically that the Gospel of freedom from the Law was approved by James, Cephas and John, "the pillars", who offered him and Barnabas the right hand of ecclesial communion in Christ (cf. Gal 2: 9). Since, as we have noted, for Luke the Council of Jerusalem expresses the action of the Holy Spirit, for Paul it represents the crucial recognition of freedom shared among all who participate in it: a freedom from the obligations that derive from circumcision and from the Law; that freedom for which "Christ has set us free" so that we might stand fast and not submit again to a yoke of slavery (cf. Gal 5: 1). The two accounts of Paul and Luke of the Assembly of Jerusalem have in common the liberating action of the Spirit, for "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom", Paul was to say in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 3: 17).

However, as very clearly appears in St Paul's Letters, Christian freedom is never identified with libertinage or with the will to do as one pleases; it is actuated in conformity to Christ and hence in authentic service to the brethren and above all to the neediest. For this reason Paul's account of the Assembly ends by recalling the Apostles' recommendation to him: "only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do" (Gal 2: 10). Every Council is born from the Church and returns to the Church: in this case it returns with an attention for the poor who are primarily of the Church of Jerusalem, as seen in various annotations in Paul's Letters. In his concern for the poor, to which he testifies in particular in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 8-9), and in the final part of his Letter to the Romans (cf. Rm 15), Paul demonstrates his fidelity to the decisions made at the Assembly.

Perhaps we are no longer able to understand fully the meaning that Paul and his communities attributed to the collection for the poor of Jerusalem. It was a completely new initiative in the area of religious activities: it was not obligatory, but free and spontaneous; all the Churches that were founded by Paul in the West took part. The collection expressed the community's debt 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 sharing is so great that he seldom calls it merely a "collection". Rather, for him it is "service", "blessing", "gift", "grace", even "liturgy" (cf. 2 Cor 9).

Particularly surprising is the latter term which gives a value that is even religious to a collection of money: on the one hand it is a liturgical act or "service" offered by every community to God and on the other, it is a loving action made for people. Love for the poor and the divine liturgy go hand in hand, love for the poor is liturgy. The two horizons are present in every liturgy that is celebrated and experienced in the Church which, by her nature, is opposed to any separation between worship and life, between faith and works, between prayer and charity for the brethren. Thus, the Council of Jerusalem came into being to settle the question of how to treat Gentiles who came to the faith, opting for freedom from circumcision and from the observances imposed by the Law, and it was settled by the ecclesial and pastoral need that is centred on faith in Jesus Christ and love for the poor of Jerusalem and the whole Church.

The second episode is the well known incident in Antioch, Syria, that attests to the inner freedom Paul enjoyed: how should one behave when eating with believers of both Jewish and Gentile origin?
Here the other epicentre of Mosaic observance emerges: the distinction between clean and unclean foods which deeply separated practising Jews from Gentiles. At the outset Cephas, Peter, shared meals with both; but with the arrival of certain Christians associated with James, "the Lord's brother" (Gal 1: 19), Peter began to avoid contact with Gentiles at table in order not to shock those who were continuing to observe the laws governing the cleanliness of food and his decision was shared by Barnabas. This decision profoundly divided the Christians who had come from circumcision and the Christians who came from paganism. This behaviour, that was a real threat to the unity and freedom of the Church, provoked a passionate reaction in Paul who even accused Peter and the others of hypocrisy: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal 2: 14). In fact, the thought of Paul on the one hand, and of Peter and Barnabas on the other, were different: for the latter the separation from the Gentiles was a way to safeguard and not to shock believers who came from Judaism; on the contrary, for Paul it constituted the danger of a misunderstanding of the universal salvation in Christ, offered both to Gentiles and Jews. If justification is only achieved by virtue of faith in Christ, of conformity with him, regardless of any effect of the Law, what is the point of continuing to observe the cleanliness of foods at shared meals? In all likelihood the approaches of Peter and Paul were different: the former did not want to lose the Jews who had adhered to the Gospel, and the latter did not want to diminish the saving value of Christ's death for all believers.

It is strange to say but in writing to the Christians of Rome a few years later (in about the middle of the 50s a.D.), Paul was to find himself facing a similar situation and asked the strong not to eat unclean foods in order not to lose or scandalize the weak: "it is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble" (Rm 14: 21). The incident at Antioch thus proved to be as much of a lesson for Peter as it was for Paul. Only sincere dialogue, open to the truth of the Gospel, could guide the Church on her journey: "For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rm 14: 17). It is a lesson that we too must learn: with the different charisms entrusted to

Peter and to Paul, let us all allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit, seeking to live in the freedom that is guided by faith in Christ and expressed in service to the brethren. It is essential to be conformed ever more closely to Christ. In this way one becomes really free, in this way the Law's deepest core is expressed within us: love for God and neighbour. Let us pray the Lord that he will teach us to share his sentiments, to learn from him true freedom and the evangelical love that embraces every human being.