

“Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved.” This statement, made by visitors from Jerusalem to Christians in Antioch, deeply divided the early church, causing a grave crisis, almost spelling the end of Christianity. The first Christians were converts from Judaism. Circumcision was of the essence of Judaism; all Jewish males were circumcised, and still are, eight days after birth. The assumption is that it does not hurt an eight-day old baby. But, for an adult male it is extremely painful. If converts to Christianity from paganism, who were not circumcised, were required to be circumcised, no one would have become a Christian. The decision not to require circumcision allowed church to grow.

It was, however, a difficult decision, made by the apostles and the elders under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. “It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us,” they wrote, “not to place on you any burden beyond the necessities, namely: to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. Farewell.”

Today, circumcision is not required of Christian men. Some are and some are not. Christians also were asked to abstain from eating blood and the meat of strangled animals. But we do not observe that either. If you eat sausage, you are eating blood. And, I remember as a child seeing my aunt make chicken soup and taking the chicken and twirling it by the neck. These practices, like circumcision are not seen as being of the essence of Christianity.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus promises, “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything.” It is our belief that the Holy Spirit has guided the church throughout the centuries. Sometimes, it was to clarify what was not clear in the scriptures.

In today’s gospel Jesus says, “The Father is greater than I.” (Jn. 14:28) But then he also says, “The Father and I are one.” (Jn. 10:30) Which is it? Is the Father greater than the Son or are the two equal? It took three hundred years before the Council of Nicaea, guided by the Holy Spirit, formulated our trinitarian faith: three persons is one God:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit all three absolutely equal. St. John Henry Newman would call this “the development of doctrine”. Our trinitarian faith is of the essence of Christianity. Circumcision is not. Nor is the custom of women covering their heads.

Muslim women cover their heads, as do Orthodox Jewish women. St. Paul tells the Corinthians, “Any woman who prays with her head unveiled brings shame upon her head. She should wear a veil.”

(1Cor.10:5,6) Those of you who are about my age will remember when no woman would ever dare enter a church without covering her head, even if it was with a Kleenex. But, look around you. How many of you have your heads covered? Not one! The apostles, in the book of Acts, decided “not to place any burden beyond the necessities.” Surely women’s head covering is not of the essence of Christianity.

So, what is of the essence? Our trinitarian faith, working for justice, siding with the marginalized, the needy and the poor (Mat. 25), caring for our neighbor, loving one another; that is of the essence of Christianity.

Throughout the history of Christianity, the Holy Spirit has been guiding the Church to a new understanding of the meaning of scripture for our times and of what is truly of the essence of Christianity. Slavery is another example. The bible clearly approves of slavery. The author of the first Epistle of Peter writes, “Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to those who are good and equitable but also to those who are perverse.” In this country, one hundred and seventy years ago, this text and others like it were used to justify slavery. Today, we would say that slavery is wholly contrary to the will of God, despite the biblical texts. The Holy Spirit guided the church to a new understanding of what is of the essence of Christianity: freedom and equality.

Another example is the death penalty, capital punishment. Recent popes and the US Catholic bishops have all spoken against it. The bible clearly approves of it and in some cases even mandates it. For centuries the Church never questioned it. Yet, we ask ourselves, can the followers of a victim of capital punishment ever be in favor of it? How is capital punishment in line with the compassion of Jesus? Thus, the 2018

edition of the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states in No. 2267:

Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good. Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption. Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide.

Again, it is the Holy Spirit guiding the church to a new understanding of what is of the essence of Christianity.

Could there be other issues where the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church to a new understanding of the will of God. One possibility is the issue of homosexuality and same-sex marriages. In today's first reading the apostles asked Christians to abstain from "unlawful marriages". Is a marriage between two people of the same gender and unlawful marriage? If the Holy Spirit is guiding other ecclesial communities and Anglicans (Episcopalians), Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians solemnize marriage between people of the same gender, what is the Holy Spirit saying through them to the Catholic church? If we are to side with the marginalized and the oppressed, surely homosexuals are marginalized and discriminated in our society. Could we be going in a new direction with Pope Francis' famous statement, "Who am I to judge" in 2013? Then there is the call of German Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich in March of this year for a change in Catholic teaching on homosexuality.

These decisions take time and they are not easy: Nicaea, slavery, the death penalty were all difficult and painful decisions. But we believe they were the right decisions, made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who brought us to a new understanding of the intention of the Scripture and the words of Jesus.

The obligation is always to take seriously the scriptural text, to ask ourselves, what does it really mean? What did it mean then? Why is it there? To what issue did it respond? Is the injunction cultural or is it of the essence of Christianity? How does it compare to the teachings of Jesus?

We may ask ourselves: who decides? It is the mind of the church, the *sensus fidelium*, sense of the faithful. Who decided that women should no longer cover their heads in church? There was never any official statement or decree. It was a change of attitude in the whole church. The decision was made by the whole church, the pope, the bishops, the faithful, people like you and I. It was the Holy Spirit. "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us," wrote the Apostles. "The Holy Spirit will teach you everything," said Jesus.

Today, we are confronted in this country with a very difficult and divisive issue: the probability of the supreme court overturning *Roe vs. Wade* and the decision by Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco to deny communion to Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House. This brings the subject of abortion to the fore and like the issue of circumcision it is dividing our country and also dividing our church as the two most prominent Catholics in our country, the President and the Speaker of the House have a different view than many of the bishops.

We ask ourselves, what does the bible say specifically about abortion? Absolutely nothing. What did Jesus say? Absolutely nothing. What does the church say? It has said many things throughout the centuries. How does the issue align itself with the essence of Christianity? The issue is very complicated, many issues are involved. There is the conscience of individual. Then, we ask ourselves, in a pluralistic society, is the civil law the right instrument to impose moral law. What about respect for the religious beliefs of others? Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists and Jews do not share our

understanding of when life begins. And, when exactly does life begin and who determines this?

If of the essence of Christianity is concern for the poor and in the United States and over half of all abortions are procured by women of color who live below the poverty line, does the prohibition place on them a “burden beyond the necessities” unless it is accompanied by advocating for paid parental leave, no cost birth and prenatal care, free child care, affordable housing, Medicare for all? These are things that cannot be provided by private charity. In light of that, should the singular focus be on criminalization and absolute prohibition?

What about our understanding of life as a seamless garment? If all life is sacred, what about advocating to end capital punishment. What about poverty, lack of potable water and disease? And what about climate change and contamination that may bring an end to all life on this planet. And, in light of so many senseless shootings in our country, should not gun control be an equally urgent matter?

The issue is complicated. We need to pray that as the Holy Spirit has guided the church throughout the centuries through so many difficult and divisive issues, the Spirit continue to guide us today to what may be a new understanding of what is of the essence of Christianity.

So we pray:

Come, Holy Spirit, help us discern your will for our times.

Come, Holy Spirit, help us listen to your words
in the word of the scriptures and in the words of others.

Come, Holy Spirit, teach us what we must do
to be faithful to the teaching of Jesus
to care for the poor and the marginalized.

Come, Holy Spirit, help us avoid being judgmental
of those who disagree with us.

Come, Life-giving Spirit, help us affirm life, all life.

Come, Life-giving Spirit bring us your wisdom,
bring us your fortitude.

Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.