

6th Sunday of Easter

Years ago, a popular song by the band R.E.M. sold a lot of records and won several awards—and caused great parental distress. The song was called “Losing My Religion.” Parents are generally not crazy about the music their kids are into, but in this case their disapproval was rooted in misunderstanding. “Losing my religion” is actually an expression from the Deep South—it means you’re so wound up about something you’re likely to swear or abandon your manners. Losing one’s religion is the moment when you are on the brink of civility and about to jump off. In a song about thwarted romance, which this is, the brink of civility is easily jumped.

But the reason parents didn’t like the song had nothing to do with the actual meaning of the song. It has to do with the underlying fear, familiar to most parents, that their kids are going to depart from their values and become something unrecognizable, lost, or even damned. The No. 1 reported problem parents bring to church about their children is that the kids are losing their religion; which is to say, the religion of their parents. The kids won’t go to church. They won’t be compelled by what compels their elders. They won’t bow to the same higher powers. They don’t cherish the same things, and they won’t set their feet on the road their parents have always walked. This is a great terror for many in the established

generation, who witness the departures of the upcoming generation with dread and often a sense of betrayal.

Imagine, then, how the observant Jewish community of Jerusalem felt about the instructions given by the apostles. The elders listened with dread and anger as the apostles proclaimed, first speculatively and with increasing boldness, that the teachings of the rabbi Jesus were not only intended for Israel. That Gentiles could participate in this assembly. That Gentiles could not only participate, but also that they did not have to become Jewish or take on the burden of the Jewish law to do so. To many, especially in seats of authority, this sounded very much like some new sect, within Judaism, that was losing its religion, for sure.

Rules are rules, many will say, shaking their heads over any amendments, deletions, or nuances to the established order. Such folks may also be tempted by a creeping legalism: Anything that is simply old or has been done a few times in the past can easily take on the authority of absolute Tradition. The phrase “the church has always taught” has ended many an argument.

When Tradition is tampered with, or traditions are questioned, it takes a pretty big authority to be able to trump the gravity of “rules are rules” and “the church has always

taught.” For those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that is plenty authority enough. If you further believe that Jesus promised and sent the indwelling Spirit of God to “teach us everything,” well, that’s probably got a lot of clout, too. But where does that Holy Spirit dwell, exactly? In you? In me? In the pope? In each of us, or in all of us together?

We catch a glimpse of how the apostles understood it, at least. Paul and Barnabas were bringing Gentiles into the church all the time, and they weren’t too particular about who was circumcised and who was keeping a kosher pantry. This caused distress among fellow missionaries down from Judea, who were teaching strict adherence to the law of Moses and the faith of their fathers. Did Paul simply stick to his convictions and blow off his detractors? Honestly, knowing Paul, surely he was tempted to. Perhaps Barnabas proved to be the voice of diplomacy and unity who urged a visit to the Jerusalem elders for a judgment on the matter. When the decision is finally rendered, the terms are telling: “It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden” The operative word, naturally, is **us**.

The judgment of the Jerusalem Council did not end the matter, needless to say. It merely settled it for those who trusted the authority of the apostles and believed in the indwelling Spirit of God who continues to teach the church with

divine wisdom. Others saw this decision as proof positive that the apostles had lost their religion.

From the time of the first Council of Jerusalem to the most recent Vatican Council, there have always been those who see any departure from the way of the past to be a betrayal of faith, of religion, even of God. Does the living Spirit of God remain with the church just to patrol all the doors and windows of ritual and doctrine so that the status quo is perpetually maintained? Has the Holy Spirit stopped teaching fresh lessons in each new age of humanity, and is the Spirit only concerned now with making sure we have memorized the old lessons? Clearly not: The church continues to speak on new matters of faith and morals all the time. Every advance in society, whether it be political, economic, scientific, medical, technological, or philosophical, is quickly joined by the church's own running commentary on the subject. And by the church, here, we most fully intend to imply the whole people of God within whom the Spirit dwells. It is a long, loud, sometimes exuberant and sometimes dissonant conversation. Like the long pages of Mishnah to which hundreds of rabbis have added their glosses in the margins over the centuries, many voices speak from the bottom to the top of this Body of Christ. Some of those voices—discounted in their generation as clearly losing their religion—became the canonized saints of another era. We can't be too discourteous in this conversation, as none of us can be sure yet whose voice will prove to have the last word.

The Jerusalem Council made its own decision based on what the Holy Spirit had already revealed in the lives of faith-filled Gentiles. The faithful testimony of the whole church continues to be a vital force through which the Spirit makes discernment possible. Meanwhile, John of Patmos envisions a future without a temple, and a time when creeds and rituals will no longer be necessary. (Ref. Rev 21:22) One could say we all “lose our religion” when we stand in the presence of God and no longer believe, but rather know God face-to-face. So long as we keep the faith, losing our religion may not be as bad as it sounds.