

THURSDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK OF EASTER  
(for symposium on immigration, May 7, 2015)

In this year that commemorates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, I'm going to begin this homily with a brief history lesson. The Catholic Church recognizes a total of only 21 ecumenical councils, beginning with the First Council of Nicea in the year 325, and I expect most historians would say that the five most influential councils were that one at Nicea, Chalcedon about a century later, the Fourth Lateran Council during the high Middle Ages, the Council of Trent at the time of the Protestant Reformation, and Vatican II. But guess what! You could make a strong case that the most important council of all did not even make that list of 21. It's the one we heard about in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, a continuation of yesterday's first reading. It is usually called the Council of Jerusalem, a gathering of the early leaders of the church, all of them born Jews, in order to confront the issue of what obligations would be imposed on Gentile converts. As you heard yesterday if you attended Mass then, after their missionary journey through Asia Minor, Paul and Barnabas arrived in Antioch of Syria and joyfully proclaimed how the Lord had opened the "door of faith" to the Gentiles, but some Christians there were very upset that Paul was not requiring these new converts to observe all the precepts of the Mosaic Law, such as circumcision and a plethora of dietary regulations. The controversy was so heated that Paul and Barnabas were sent down to Jerusalem to get the matter settled.

That's where today's reading began, with the words: "After much debate had taken place, Peter got up" and spoke. Although he and Paul later had some disagreement back in Antioch, here at the Council of Jerusalem they were of one mind. In Peter's words, "Why are you now putting God to the test by placing on the shoulders of [these new] disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?" When Peter finished speaking, the controversy was settled when James proposed a compromise: Gentile converts would not have

to observe the entire Mosaic law, but only certain provisions of it. This was crucial for the entire later history of the Church, for if those who had been insisting on much more had had their way, what we call the “catholic” or “universal” church might well have remained just a minor movement within Judaism. The great theologian Karl Rahner was therefore surely correct when he once wrote that this Council of Jerusalem was arguably the most important one in the history of the Church.

Now you might be wondering whether this “history lesson” has anything much to say to us today. I think it does, and not least with respect to the topic of our morning’s symposium, for here, too, we are faced with a very contentious issue that provokes as much heated debate as that which once took place in Antioch and Jerusalem. I don’t at all pretend that there are simply two sides to the issue, for there is a whole spectrum of positions possible, with all sorts of nuances and qualifications. Moreover, as one of today’s participants recently brought to my attention, current data indicate that we may well be overlooking the immigration issues that matter the most today, such as the fact that two years ago China replaced Mexico as the country sending the most immigrants here, that the influx of young and unaccompanied minors from Central America has declined dramatically over the past year, and that there are now more Mexicans returning to their native land than are coming into the U.S., according to data from both countries.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there remain millions of undocumented or illegal immigrants in the United States, and this does raise lingering and thorny questions. For simplicity’s sake, let me illustrate two stances that point in rather different directions.

If you are familiar with monastic life, you know that our final prayer service each day is called Compline, which we regularly begin with a short reading. This year we have been using a little book with readings for each day of the year. Some of them are by well-known persons like

Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, and Henri Nouwen, but there is also an interesting one by a man about whom I know nothing more than his name, Miguel de la Torre, and what he here says about himself.:

If I could say anything to the American people, what I would say is that we are coming because of the poverty that we are forced to live in and that we just want to try to reach that dream, the dream of being able to work and provide for our families. Each one of us that you find in the desert has left behind a family that we loved. Many of us end up lost in the desert, and some of us die. Our families will never hear from us again or know what has happened to us. We who are called wetbacks are just coming to work, so please have some compassion for us when we are risking our lives in the desert. I have twenty [companions] and all of us work hard on the farm. They work the land just as I do. Look at my hands. You can see the calluses on them from working the land. My hands are proof that what I am saying is true.<sup>2</sup>

Accounts like that, especially the man's request for understanding and compassion, have led many to do whatever they can to assist immigrants in such ways as getting permission to remain in this country if they can show they would be at severe risk for their very life if deported. But beyond the specific case of refugees who have a clear right to seek asylum, there are those like Miguel de la Torre who are often helped to find a place to live, employment, and the like. Those who assist the Miguels of the world are guided by such teachings as those found in the document titled *Strangers No More*, issued jointly by the Mexican and American bishops a dozen years ago. At one point, those bishops wrote: "Regardless of their legal status, migrants,

like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary” (no. 38). And then in the conclusion of the entire document, the bishops said: “In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere. As a sacrament of unity and thus a sign and a binding force for the whole human race, the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters. It is the task of the various dioceses actively to ensure that these people, who are obliged to live outside the safety net of civil society, may find a sense of brotherhood in the Christian community. Solidarity means taking responsibility for those in trouble” (no. 103).

There are, however, others who emphasize a rather different side of this picture. They point out that those who have entered this country surreptitiously, whether by climbing over a fence in the Arizona desert or crossing the Rio Grande in South Texas under cover of darkness, are knowingly breaking the law and must take responsibility for their illegal behavior if apprehended. For example, a woman named Heather MacDonald, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute and co-author of a book titled *The Immigration Solution: A Better Plan than Today's*, said the following in a speech she gave this past February in Naples, Florida:

... We must reassert the primacy of the rule of law. At the very least, this means rehabilitating deportation and ceasing to normalize illegal immigration with our huge array of sanctuary policies....

...People who come into the country illegally or overstay their visas do so knowingly. They assume the risk of illegal status; it is not our moral responsibility to wipe it away....

Immigration is not a service we provide to the rest of the world. Yes, we are a nation of immigrants and will continue to be one. No other country welcomes as many newcomers. But rewarding [or simply turning a blind eye to] illegal immigration does an injustice to the many legal immigrants who played by the rules to get here. We owe it to them and to ourselves to adhere to the law.<sup>3</sup>

I think these few quotations help give a sense of why the issue of migration or immigration is so contentious. But that question of how to treat Gentile converts in the early Church was also difficult. What helped solve that problem was a spirit of compromise: neither side got entirely what it wanted, but the decision reached at the Council of Jerusalem proved acceptable and salutary. Those of us gathered here may not have the level of authority held by those so-called “pillars” of the early Church, but we do have a voice as concerned citizens. Indeed, there are a number of voices gathered here for this symposium, certainly representing different points of view. May those who speak do so both forthrightly and charitably, and may we listen to one another with open minds. If so, we will conclude our morning’s symposium both better informed and with wider political and intellectual horizons than when we began.

1 Gerald F. Seib, "Immigration Debate Caught in a Time Warp," *Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 2015.

2 Miguel A. de la Torre, "From a Recent Migrant Who Crossed the Border," in *A Maryknoll Book of Inspiration: Readings for Every Day of the Year*, ed. Michael Leach and Doris Goodnough (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 180.

3 Heather MacDonald, "Practical Thoughts on Immigration," *Imprimis: A Publication of Hillsdale College*, 44, no. 2 (Feb. 2015).