

**Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year A  
(May 18, 2014)**

**Scandal in the Church**

Scandal! Scandal in the Church! That's what our first reading is all about. Not about the scandals that have rocked the Church over the past couple of decades, but scandal that happened back in the first century when the Church was very young. It was a scandal of favoritism, of discrimination. So right from the beginning it seems the Church was beset by problems. But as we heard they found a way of solving the problem to everyone's satisfaction.

What happened?

It seems as though there were many widows in Jerusalem at that time, widows who could not help themselves. They were poor. So they looked around for support. And they found it in this new Christian community that had as one of its chief activities taking care of the poor. It was a community interested in everybody, a community that believed we all have the same origin, the same God and Father of all, who had sent his only Son for our salvation, so great was his love for us.

It seems that the community had started something like a food distribution center or possibly a soup kitchen and every day the widows came to get their portion. Now at first everything went well. There were no problems and everyone was taken care of. But gradually things began to change. There was an influx into Jerusalem of foreigners, Jewish people who had lived in other countries, among them widows, Jewish Christians who had lived outside of Israel and who had never learned to speak the language of the country. They were immigrants and what's more, their language was Greek instead of the local Aramaic. So presumably the apostles or whoever was tending the soup kitchen could not understand them when they spoke and did not take care of their needs properly. They took care of their own, the widows of Jerusalem, but neglected the foreign-born widows. Well, it soon became a cause of great scandal in the Christian community, as well it might. For the apostles even to appear to play favorites was hardly proper. And to their credit as soon as they realized

what was going on they set about straightening out the situation.

First they gathered the community to discuss the problem. It was sort of like a parish council meeting in which the whole parish took part and helped to resolve the unjust situation. The apostles said their own work had become too burdensome for them to assume the responsibility of running the soup kitchen and they needed someone to help. So they appointed seven men, all of them Greek speaking, who could understand the needs of these poor widows and make sure they were taken care of. Some people claim these were the first deacons in the Church. Their task was to be impartial in the way they dealt with all.

As I reflect on this situation and its implications for us, it seems to me that over there in Jerusalem they had been caught in that very old, but also very contemporary trap of dividing humanity according to color, race, and tribe. This is a division that always leads to discrimination as we have seen so often in our own country in racism and in attitudes toward immigrants who, like those widows of the past, come to us poor, needy, and unable to speak our language. Often too it leads to war as have seen in Iraq, in the Sudan, and in Israel.

In the Gospel Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." This means there is room for everybody. Everyone is welcome. The Church of Jesus Christ, to say nothing of the Kingdom of God, is not an exclusive club.

Dear friends, we are all the Body of Christ, and it is our task, too, to cooperate in the effort to build the Kingdom of God. In our second reading we heard St. Peter describe us as living stones that build the Church. We are all involved in this enterprise. The Church is not just the pope or the cardinals or the bishops, the Church is all of us and we all have a responsibility in bringing about the reconciliation that is so sorely needed. The early Christians managed to deal with scandal in the Church in a way that was acceptable to everyone. They managed to do this by remembering what Jesus had said to them: "Love one another as I have loved you." That's what they did, and if we are to be Easter people, people of the resurrection, people of life, not death, people who accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, then that is what we must do as well. We must believe in the Holy Spirit's continued presence in the Church, whether we agree with

everything the Spirit does or not, and with the help of that same Spirit we will work with one another, with our bishops and with Pope Francis to make the Church's future even better than its past.