

Looking to Trusted Authorities for Guidance
6th Sunday of Easter
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When my sons Matt and Zach were pre-teens, they argued regularly about whose turn it was to take the empty bottles and cans out to the recycling bins. Whenever the basket was full, both swore that they were the last one to take it out and the other brother never took a turn. It was easy to forget who had done it last, so whenever Julie or I would say, "It's time for one of you to take out the recycling" a fight would erupt. Since they couldn't work out a solution, they appealed their situation to a "trusted authority". That "trusted authority" was better known as Mom.

Julie made a chart for them that was titled "Recycling," and hung it on the refrigerator door. As each boy completed his turn of taking out the recycling, he had to sign his name and date the form. So the next time we asked them to do the recycling, they would both walk over to the chart to see whose turn it really was. On their own they couldn't devise a solution, but when they consulted with a "trusted authority", the solution was pretty easy.

The need to consult with trusted authorities follows us into adulthood. When my car starts making a funny noise, I take it to a mechanic for diagnosis. If I have a chronic ache or pain, I go to a doctor for a checkup. In both cases, I'm seeking input from a trusted authority.

In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the early Church struggled with the question of male circumcision, a requirement of Mosaic Law. The Jewish converts to Christianity insisted that Gentile converts had to obey all Jewish religious Laws. Because of this, Acts tells us, "There arose no little dissension and debate." And so all agreed to appeal their case to a "trusted authority."

Unfortunately, the reading from Acts that we heard is a truncated version of the story. The missing verses tell of Paul and some other disciple's trip to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and the other apostles to discuss the matter. Both sides presented their reasoning to the assembly. Peter opposed requiring the Gentile converts to follow Jewish Law saying, "We are saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus, in the same

way as they". James tells the others to, "Stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God." This decision was agreed to and the letter we heard was sent to the Gentile communities.

We consult "trusted authorities" about car maintenance and health issues. The Antioch Church consulted with the Jerusalem Church before establishing rules for Gentile converts. So, what "trusted authorities" do we consult when considering moral questions?

Today's readings offer us some good places to look for guidance. Jesus says, "Whoever loves me will keep my word." Since we know that Jesus word is in the Bible, do we include the Bible in our daily reading or prayer life? Since we know that teaching authority on matters of faith and morals rests in the Magisterium of the Church, do we consult the CCC when grappling with moral issues? Since we know that the Holy Fathers, collectively, are the successors of Saint Peter, do we consult their writings when we are considering serious moral questions?

There was an interesting article about this question in this week's Catholic Voice. The Pew Research Center surveyed 35,000 people from across the US, asking them to identify their religion and then asking them where they look for guidance when considering moral questions. Regardless of how actively the Catholics surveyed practiced their religion, nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of them said they looked to their own conscience when considering moral questions. I agree that is a good starting point. The deeper question is, "How well do we form our consciences?" It seems logical that we would want to look to the thoughts of "trusted authorities" just to check or perhaps to challenge our own conclusions.

Let's look at some survey results. Of all Catholics surveyed, only 21% look to Church teachings, just 15% look to the Bible and a mere 11% look to the Pope "*a great deal*," when considering moral questions. The responses from Catholics who said they pray every day and attend mass weekly, were a bit higher. 44% of that group said they look to Church teaching, 35% said they look to the Bible and 29% responded that they look to the Pope "*a great deal*" when considering moral questions. So the more invested these Catholics were in daily prayer and attending mass, the more likely they were to look to these "trusted authorities" when wrestling with moral questions.

Since I always choose to see the glass as “half full”, here is some better news. When the responses of Catholics who look to Church teachings, the Bible and the Pope “*a great deal*” are added to those who look to those sources at least “*some*”, 82% look to Church Teachings, 76% look to the Bible and 72% look to the Pope for guidance. So on the whole, the vast majority of the active Catholics surveyed *do* consult the “trusted authorities” available to them, *at least some of the time*, when wrestling with moral questions.

Is the Church always right? Ask Galileo and I’m sure he’d say, “No!” After all, he was silenced from discussing the silly notion that the sun is at the center of the universe. Is the Pope infallible? Yes, but only on matters of faith and doctrine. (Just for the record, Papal Infallibility was only defined by the Vatican in 1870, and since then, only Pope Pius XII, has spoken infallibly. In 1950 he defined our Catholic belief in the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.) Should every word of the Bible be taken literally? Of course not. So how can we be confident that these “Trusted Authorities” will lead us to the right conclusions?

As much as we trust our prayers to God, nobody gets it right every time. God gets it right every time, but sometimes we don’t understand his message clearly. We pray for Divine Guidance. When we pray, we trust that we connect with Jesus who promised in today’s Gospel, “I will come back to you”. He also said, “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything.” The apostles knew that they were powerless without the guidance of that “trusted authority”, The Holy Spirit. The apostolic letter to the Gentile converts acknowledged this saying that their writing was, “...the *decision of the Holy Spirit* and of us”.

Perhaps the question we need to humbly ask ourselves is this: “When I express an opinion on questions of morality, on important moral issues that affect my life and our world, can I say, ‘It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of me’, or is it just my opinion?” If we’re unsure, isn’t it comforting to know that we can prayerfully “check in” with our “trusted authorities?”