Study Notes for the Sunday Mass

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"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus." 1 Timothy 2:5

Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week's study is long, but important. We challenge our readers to stick through it as we think that you will find great rewards in following the study.
The first reading from Acts we look at records the findings of an important meeting in the church called the Jerusalem Council. After this, we continue the study in Revelation in which we see how God presents a new, perfect Holy City that was made in heaven for the saints to dwell in forever. Then we close with the Gospel of John in which we see Jesus' foretelling of the promise to send the Holy Spirit to live in the hearts of all believers.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Acts and records the event known as the Jerusalem Council. Leading up to the reading Paul had endured some tremendous persecution to the extent that while in Lystra he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19-20). It's possible that during this time Paul experienced his visions of heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1-6). After Paul's miraculous recovery, he traveled with Barnabus back to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch and "appointed elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23). Here Paul said, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (v. 22c). Thus, Paul continued his leadership of the Gentile church and next journeyed to Jerusalem for a very important ecumenical council, meaning a gathering of all of the church leaders from both the Gentile and Jewish realms.

First Reading:

> *Acts 15:1-2 NAS95 1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.*
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> *[If you would like to read the section that was omitted it is included at the end of this week's study.]*
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> *Acts 15:22-29 NAS95 22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas--Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."*

As the reading opens, Doctor Luke records how some men from Judea began teaching that as Christians they must adhere to the practices of the Mosaic Law especially concerning the matter of circumcision (v. 1). This was the reason that Paul and Barnabas went down to Jerusalem, to discuss this extremely important issue. (The complete text of the ecumenical council meeting is included at the end of this study in the "Going Deeper" section). Evidently, James was the leader of the meeting; this is the James who wrote the biblical Book of the same name and a relative of Jesus. His leadership is implied since, at the conclusion of the council, he stood up unopposed and made the pronouncement that we see in verses 22 – 29. While this was an important finding of the council, we must remember the occasion that led to the initiation of the important gathering as well as the culture in which the events happened. Without saying it, James' bottom line gave believers confidence that they did not have to be circumcised according to the Mosaic Law. But they were to hold to other "essentials" including abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from the eating of blood, eating of meat from animals that had been strangled, and from the sexual sin of fornication (v. 29). These things were so repulsive to Jewish Christians who had just come out of Judaism that the Gentile believers were asked to be considerate in these ways for the sake of unity. Obviously when we read over this list, we understand the degree to which the Jewish and pagan cultures clashed and the context in which the early believers were immersed. This cultural context greatly influenced the findings of the leaders in the meeting. If converted Jews and pagans were going to get along in the family of God, these bare essentials would help them achieve unity. We know later, Saint Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 8 that eating food sacrificed to idols was acceptable only if it did not violate one's conscience and that of those around them (1 Corinthians 8:10-13). The principle elicited by Paul in First Corinthians would seemingly also apply to the practices of eating strangled food and blood. However, the prohibition of sexual sin stands out on the list as a universal principle for believers of all time (for Old Testament believers and New Testament believers).

One of the big ideas in the reading is how God entrusted the ministry of the church to frail, imperfect believers to safeguard the treasury of truth with great diligence. The leaders of the church back then in this very crucial era in which the New Testament Scriptures were recorded were tasked with many great responsibilities. They were responsible for both keeping the church pure from false teachings while at the same time balancing the important cultural factors of their day including the movement of the church away from a purely Jewish organization to one containing a large proportion of Gentiles. The findings of the Council were important because it showed how the church leaders were willing to subjugate the Mosaic Law through their acceptance of Jesus' fulfillment of it through His death and resurrection. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). To the extent that the Law served to safeguard the conscience of the Jewish believers, it was important to them for conscience sake, but they were not to foist these legalistic practices upon the Gentile church.

Some application points that you could consider are regarding how cultural "baggage" affects our Christian walk and how that influences other believers. In what ways do we foist a list of requirements upon other believers around us who don't come from exactly the same cultural context as ourselves? Perhaps a good case would be a Christian who worships in a way that is different than your style (maybe they raise their hands, maybe they pray a spontaneous prayer) or a believer who votes for a different political candidate than you do. Is it possible to still be united in Christ, but differ on some of the unique expressions of faith? A good principle to follow, coined by St. Augustine in this matter: "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the continuing study of the Book of Revelation. The context of the reading is after the conclusion of Jesus' one thousand year (millennial) reign on earth, a period during which Satan will be bound. Just prior to Jesus beginning this reign on earth, some three and one half years before, He had returned to the earth in fulfillment of Acts 1:11 and gathered all of the believers both living and dead with him to heaven. Believers that were already dead were rejoined with their bodies and given new glorified ones. Believers alive at Jesus' coming were gathered to Jesus in their living bodies after which they received their glorified bodies as well. Jesus had told His disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:3). It's evident that the New Jerusalem is the place that Jesus went to prepare and this perfect city is now being presented to the believers of all time as an eternal dwelling place. After the return of the Lord Jesus all believers now have real (but glorified), physical bodies so they require a real place to live. In contrast, when saints die in the current age they go to heaven without their physical bodies and without the need for physical lodging. Therefore, Scripture seems to indicate that God provides them the New Jerusalem as their dwelling place from the moment they receive their glorified bodies at the time of the return of the Lord Jesus to earth. In summary, people with only a spiritual body in heaven rest in that spiritual place, whereas when they rejoin their physical bodies they will again require a physical resting place. This is in spite of the fact that the New Jerusalem is somehow built in heaven!

After Jesus' thousand-year reign on earth, Satan was released from his bonds and allowed to lead one last rebellion against God. In this huge battle of Gog and Magog (Revelation 20:8), he allied himself with the non-believers who had secretly held out during the millennial reign of Christ on earth. As these demonic forces surround the great city (Jerusalem), fire came down from heaven and devoured them (v. 9). Afterwards, every non-believer in the universe from all time stood before the "great white throne judgment" (Revelation 20:11). First, the devil joined the beast and the false prophet who were already in the lake of fire. Then the Scripture makes a very sobering statement concerning the universal judgment of non-believers, "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). The lake of fire is called "the second death" (v. 14) about which Jesus said in the next chapter, "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8). God describes everyone who fails to trust in the Lord Jesus for salvation by these characteristics, regardless of how "good" they may have perceived themselves to be before the judgment against God's standard of perfection. As believers we understand that our perfection comes only through our acceptance of Jesus' finished work on the cross for us.

As the cataclysmic events grind to a sudden halt John records how the earth as we know it will be destroyed and replaced by a new creation in which there will no longer be any sea (Revelation 21:1). At this point one of the angels that poured out the last seven plagues introduced the bride of Christ, the group that we know as the church (v. 9). Today's reading opens with the New Jerusalem descending from the sky down towards the new earth. How the New Jerusalem that descends from the sky and the new earth relate to one another is unknown. We don't know if the city "touches down" or remains a heavenly dwelling place but within sight of the new earth, a form of "satellite city" in the sky.

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 24-27 which were omitted are included below.

> *Revelation 21:10-14 NAS95 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear*

jasper. 12 It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. 13 There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Revelation 21:22-27 NAS95 22 I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; 26 and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; 27 and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

John described the New Jerusalem coming down out of the sky as a city with twelve gates marked by the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, signifying that the Old Testament pointed the way to this eternal city. The foundation of the city, though, was laid by the "twelve apostles of the Lamb" (v. 14) identifying that this beautiful city was built on the testimony of the New Testament disciples (learners), who later were called apostles (sent ones). In the intervening verses that were omitted from the reading (vv. 15-21) John provides greater details about the gates of the holy city, the walls as well as the size, some fifteen hundred miles square (v. 16). He described the street of the city as "pure gold, like transparent glass," (v. 21) something which is hard to understand. How can gold be like transparent glass? Suffice it to say that our categories of beauty can't contain the world that is to come.

Rejoining the reading in verse 22, John describes how there is no need for a temple in the New Jerusalem because, "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." In verse 24 the Gentile nature of the church is specifically mentioned when John says, "The **nations** will walk by its light, and the **kings of the earth** will bring their glory into it," something about which we read in the first reading. The city is by definition a pure place in which "nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (v. 27). We saw a similar list of prohibited people in the introduction. The principle of repetition marks this as an important point. "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8) The "holy city, Jerusalem" (v. 10) will be just that, holy, forever and nothing unholy will enter it forever.

We can find rest in the fact that in spite of the current difficult circumstances we may be experiencing, or the haunting memories of things that have happened to us in the past, we will find eternal rest in a perfect place prepared by God for us. We will never again have to question whether someone is walking with the Lord, for everyone will be in perfect harmony with God. We won't be living in some ephemeral city consisting of wafting clouds as depicted in the media about heaven, but rather we will live in a perfect, physical city with a perfect, holy God forever. In this place we will find perfect fellowship with people from all walks of life, both Jews and Gentiles, and this will mark the perfect end of discrimination forever in ways that the civil laws could never do.

An important take away point is for us to remember that this world is not our home and it's not all there is. The world will tell us that the one with the most toys wins, but we are not playing their "game." We are live with an eternal perspective that is not satisfied with the finite and dead end satisfactions of this

world. When these things are in their right place, we can enjoy them. What is eternal about this world is the human soul. That is why it is important to settle the question of our eternal destiny now. This passage tells us how we can know if we are permitted into the New Jerusalem, God's eternal city. "Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" will be allowed to enter. How do we know if our name is written there?

The Bible tells us that it is the Lamb's book, which is significant. Who is the Lamb? None other than Jesus Christ (John 1:29 tells us that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away sins of the world). When sin entered the world through Adam, a blood sacrifice was required for the forgiveness of sin (Hebrews 9:22). All through the Old Testament, lambs were sacrificed in place of the person who deserved to die for the sins they committed. Jesus' death and shed blood, as the Lamb of God, was the final and complete sacrifice to provide forgiveness for sins (Hebrews 10:12). First Peter 1:3-5 and 1:18-21 explain the importance of Jesus' sacrificial death for the salvation of our souls:

> 1 Peter 1:3-5 NAS95 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
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> 1 Peter 1:18-21 NAS95 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. 20 For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you 21 who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Therefore, you can have assurance that your name is written in His book of life if you are trusting in the Lamb of God to take away the penalty for your sin and looking to Him to give you a new life that is eternal. If you have not consciously made this choice to trust in Jesus' sacrificial death to cover the payment for your sin, you can pray right now to tell Him that you would like this free gift, which provides forgiveness of the debt you owe God and assurance that your name is written in the Lamb's book of life.

The Gospel reading will teach us more about belief in Jesus, for Jesus told His disciples about how they could demonstrate their belief and love for Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John chapter 14. Jesus had just told His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them (John 14:3), which was mentioned in the discussion on the second reading. Jesus also told His disciples that He wouldn't leave them as orphans, that He would come to them through the promise of a Helper, "that He may be with you forever" (John 14:16). In today's reading, we learn about this Helper Jesus promised to the disciples and to all believers who trust in His name. This discussion was prompted by the question in 14:22: "Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?"

Gospel Reading:

John 14:23-29 NAS95 23 Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. 24 He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me. 25 These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. 26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. 28 You heard that I said to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. 29 Now I have told you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe."

The reading opened with Jesus clarifying why He is disclosing certain things to the disciples and not to others. Jesus explains that those who love Him will keep His commandments (v. 23a). He is telling those closest to Him, the twelve disciples, these things so that they might no longer be slaves, but instead, be intimate, like friends, knowing the will of God (John 15:15). He says, *IF* you love me, then you will keep my word (meaning obey Him from the heart and have His value system become your value system). Loving God naturally leads us to keeping the commandments of God; it is love in action: loving God leads to godly actions. It seems that one of God's love languages is following Him, instead of following our own inclinations and misguided desires.

Next, Jesus, who had just told His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them, told them how both the Father and the Son would "make Our abode with him"—him being the one who loves Jesus and keeps His word (v. 23d). So while Jesus was predicting His physical departure from this world, He reassured His disciples that He would still be with them, by making their hearts His new home.

He would make their hearts His home by sending the Holy Spirit to live inside of them. Jesus reminded them that this promise of the sending of the Holy Spirit weren't just His words, but the Word of the Father Who sent Him (v. 24), therefore all three Persons of the Godhead were involved. Jesus' promise was that He would send the Holy Spirit to them to "teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (v. 26). This was to comfort them and bring them peace (v. 27) because He had earlier told them that He was going to be leaving them (John 14:3). Looking back on what Jesus said, it is important to note that the Holy Spirit can't teach us all things or bring things to our remembrance if we are not putting His Word in our heart. We know that the Holy Spirit is the person who inspired the Bible, since Saint Peter said, "for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21). We cooperate with God's work in our lives when we read, study and integrate the truth of God's Word in our daily lives.

Jesus told them all of this ahead of time so that when the Holy Spirit came, they would remember His promise of sending Him to them and be comforted. This is exactly what we find in the Book of Acts. After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, many of His followers were confused and discouraged. But then, the promised Holy Spirit came, launching the Church in Jerusalem during the feast of Pentecost. The disciples, who had cowered in an upper room a few weeks earlier were now emboldened and spoke new and unlearned languages to preach the good news of salvation through Jesus. Such strange things were happening that Peter had to give an explanation to a large crowd who had gathered inquiring about the disciples. Peter's explanation was that Jesus had sent the promised Holy Spirit. Jesus, sending the Holy Spirit, was the "culprit" for these signs and wonders: "Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (Acts 2:33). The sending of the Holy Spirit fulfilled what

Jesus had predicted when He said that he wouldn't leave the believers as orphans (John 14:18) and that the Holy Spirit would teach them and bring to remembrance all things. He stands ready to do the same for us. The Holy Spirit is the Person of the Godhead who empowers believers for ministry.

The big idea in the reading is that Jesus promises not to leave any of us as orphans; but rather, He promises to give us peace through the presence of His Holy Spirit. We cannot overstate the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives as believers in Jesus Christ. The Spirit's ministry to the hearts in whom He dwells is important not only for spreading the Gospel around the world but also for empowering us to accomplish all of the purposes of God in our lives. There are many Christians who are trying to live the Christian life on their own strength, living as an orphan. That is not God's intention. He specifically tells us that we are to rely on the Spirit to live the Christian life. If we don't know how to do this, we can ask Him to teach us. When we read Scripture, we can look for what it tells us about walking in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:18) relying on the Spirit to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), being filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), and having our mind set on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8).

There are manifold ministries of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer; here are just a few of the things the Holy Spirit gives us:

- A second birth, a spiritual birth, making us "born from above" or "born again" (John 3:3) with a regenerated soul (Titus 3:5).
- Confirmation that as a believer we are an heir of God and fellow heir with Christ (Romans 8:15-17).
- Membership in God's universal church, which is baptism with the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).
- The ability to understand and apply the Scriptures to our lives (1 Corinthians 2:12).
- Intercession on our behalf in prayer (Romans 8:26–27).
- A seal or guarantee until the day that we are redeemed in heaven (Ephesians 1:13-14).

We encourage you to look up each of the verse references and ponder how the Holy Spirit empowers you to accomplish God's purposes in your life.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we considered how one's cultural background impacted their Christian beliefs and how these beliefs affected the other believers around them. When was there a time in which you met another Christian from a much different cultural context than your own? In what ways did you need to reexamine your core beliefs in order to provide them with the grace or leeway to accept them as brothers or sisters in the Lord?

2. In what ways can you identify with Jesus' disciples who were discouraged when He said He was going to leave them? How have you felt like an orphan? Identify which characteristics of living as an orphan or living as a child of God in the **table below** resonate with you. Talk to God and other solid Christians about your desire to be shored up in the areas you are still living like an orphan. Praise God for the confidence He has given you as a child of God.

Orphan	Child of God
Anxious and worried about needs: no sense of God's infinite resources. It feels like I have to make life work on my own and who I am is not enough.	Content about God's provisions: Has a sense that my God shall supply all my needs according to His riches in glory (Phil. 4:11-19).
Infused with a sense of conditional love and acceptance; you're only as good as your last performance.	Infused with a sense of unconditional love and acceptance; failure is not fatal (1 John 3:1).
Highly defended from a sense of vulnerability; needs to be safe, secure and right. Criticism either demolishes me or propels me to show them wrong. Either way, I protect myself from the gnawing voices	Learns that feeling inadequate is a natural consequence of the Fall. Instead of turning to self-protection, I try to find my adequacy in Christ (2 Cor. 3:5). This allows

of criticism. Shrinks back in fear and resists taking God-directed risks.	me to be realistic about my weaknesses and honest about my vulnerabilities with God and others. It allows me to overcome fear and take God-directed risks.
Prays when "on" or in crisis.	Prays throughout the day, knowing that the Spirit dwells in me and wants to relate to me (1 Thess. 5:17).
Uses "Christian freedom" to indulge the flesh, such as biting and devouring each other, being conceited, provoking and envying others. Gal. 5: 19-21 says: "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; **20** idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions **21** and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like."	Uses "Christian freedom" to "serve one another humbly in love" (Gal. 5:13). Starting to see the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23): **22** "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,**23** gentleness and self-control." These are coming from the inside of my being, not just being imposed from the outside or merely trying to conform to Christian standards.
Needs to be in control and persuade people to see things my way. I am controlled by a need to impress people.	Becoming Spirit-controlled, which frees me up to submit to God-given authority, to let other people be "right" and to care more about incarnating Christ than impressing people.

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