

Acts 11 Exegetical Meditation



On the surface Acts 11 seems to be quite uneventful, but with a closer look there is actually one piece of information that is uniquely to be extracted from this text. I cannot underline enough the importance of the formation of the Christian community at Antioch for proper understanding of who the Catholic Church is.

Acts 11 Breakdown:

St Peter defends his actions- Acts 11:1-18

The spread of the gospel to Antioch- Acts 11:19-26

The Famine all over the world and the charity of the Christians- Acts 11:27-30

The first half of the chapter witnesses Peter recount the events that transpired in Acts 10 with Cornelius and his household upon questioning from Jewish Christians for reaching out to the Gentiles. Peter's speech is telling in that his language is evidently expressive of his confidence. Nevertheless, he was clearly not boastfully preaching to them his renegade ways. His central claim was that grace was manifestly present in the room when they heard about Jesus, and so he could not by virtue of God's authority demonstrating itself withhold God's grace of Baptism from them. Remember, Peter is the divinely appointed Vicar of Christ (see Mt 16:19), God's Vice-President if you will. The response of the disciples questioning Peter is appropriate. They were correct to question! This is in seed form the eventual declared doctrine by the Second Council of Lyons that every baptized member of the Church has a right to a ruling in matters of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. The pope is not infallible, but they trust him because of the authority of God at work in the grace of the Gentiles. Thusly, they stopped objecting and glorified God for God's work not out of blind obedience to a pope.

St Barnabas is sent to Antioch to watch of the new believers there. He was the natural choice as a native of Cyprus, consequently a Hellenist that would be best suited to deal with the new Gentile converts there. Barnabas recruits Saul of Tarsus (St Paul, but still referred to as Saul before his priestly ordination in Acts 13). They catechized the Antiochian Christians and formed the first Christian community separate entirely from worship within the synagogue. They formed a society, with Jesus Christ as the center. Of course, Jesus was the center of the

Jewish Christians in everything that they did. Nevertheless, they were still clearly attached to their old but now superfluous habits of the old law. In Antioch, it becomes clear for the first time that the Catholicism is truly distinct in an absolute manner from Judaism. That is no small affair.

The chapter concludes with prophets from Jerusalem pronouncing an upcoming famine over all the world under Claudius (this famine did indeed happen in the mid 40's AD during Claudius's reign). The communal decision to ask each individual to give generously according to financial capacity. Notice, that they gave to St Barnabas and St Paul, who in turn gave the relief "to the presbyters" (Acts 11:30). The presbyters, or elsewhere translated as the "ancients" were the priests of the Church. Barnabas and Paul were not yet ordained priests, and so they needed to go through the divinely ordained chain of command and provide for the needs of the Church universal. This is how the Church operates today. Unfortunately, our current day is unusual for there is clearly something amiss in the financial handlings of the Church universal. Nevertheless, the law of the Church to provide for the needs of the people still reigns. The Christian is always bound to give to his brethren through the Church, however the Catholic Christian today should adopt a discerning spirit in what that looks like.