

For a few days we do things differently and it can be quite disturbing to leave one's usual routine and the comfort of regularity. One has to think and plan and I wonder whether Pope Francis's letter to the Curia, the Civil Service he relies on to regulate the Church, may help us understand why this reveals the issue which is at the heart of being Church, of being God's people, and goes all the way back to Stephen and Jesus and, indeed, Moses, Abraham and even Adam – so it's at the heart of being fully human too.

And the issue centres on the resistance to God's will through lack of love. Luke uses Stephen to run through this narrative of fear versus love from its very beginning, from the choice of Abraham to be the seed of God's particular people to its culmination not in the law or the founding of the physical Temple in Jerusalem but in the life and death of Christ and its continuation in the life of the Holy Spirit – the only guarantor of the law of love which characterises God's presence among us. When the Pope addresses his Curia, it is this law of love which he identifies as central to its task and mission:

*Sixty years after the Council we are still debating the division between 'progressives' and 'conservatives' but that is not the difference: the real central difference is between lovers and those who have lost that vital passion. That is the difference. Only those who love can fare forward.*

What upsets Stephen's listeners is that he has this passion and they do not. The passion they have is born out of fear heavily disguised under a cloak of conventionality, sticking to the rules or theories or theologies which have evolved to tame and contain the dynamic of love. This is not about overturning tradition but of grasping the true nature of the Tradition of God's dealings with his people going back to Abraham and beyond: a Tradition of trust in which we dare to risk everything, as Stephen does, in his obvious emulation of Christ:

*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*

We are never here for ourselves only, or for any particular way of expressing God's love. We love – and all the particular ways fall into place, find their meaning, are forgiven – even the differences that bedevil us at Christmas.

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