

Paul recalls an episode in Antioch in which he saw Peter recoiling from eating with Gentiles (i.e., non-Jews). Paul publicly decries Peter's actions, condemning them as hypocritical (v. 13) and "not in step with the truth of the gospel" (v. 14). What should a Catholic make of the first pope being publicly reprimanded by his fellow apostle? Allow me to respond to this general question by considering three more specific questions.

Was Peter, in fact, in the wrong? Paul tells us in verse 12 that although Peter once shared table fellowship with Gentile converts in Antioch (i.e., those who were never Jews but had become Christians), he stopped doing so upon the arrival of a certain envoy from Jerusalem which Paul calls "the circumcision party." This "party" (a faction, really) was a specific group of Jewish converts to Christianity who held that it was necessary for Gentile converts to follow the letter of the law of Moses. That is, they demanded that Gentile (male) converts be circumcised in order to be saved. Apparently, they also continued their tradition of ritual purity by refraining from eating with Gentiles, even if those Gentiles were fellow converts to Christianity, thus prompting Peter's response.

Paul decries this move by Peter because it explicitly contradicts the unity to be enjoyed by Jews and Gentiles in Christ. And such a move from Peter was not only hypocritical in relation to the teachings of the apostles, but in relation to his own earlier actions, as we read in Acts, when he explicitly renounced the division between Jew and Gentile and ate with the Gentile, Cornelius (ref. Acts 10:28-29). Peter's actions in this later episode [in Galatians] show a lack of the same courage.

Was Paul out of line for reprimanding Peter? Although our faith rightly upholds the dignity of the papacy, and the thought of scolding the pope may seem like a grave offense, it is helpful to keep in mind that the pope—whether Peter or his successor—is human and can err! The Church has always professed that when the pope "proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals," that he is preserved from error by the constant guardianship of the Holy Spirit (CCC 891, emphasis added; cf. *Lumen Gentium* 25). This does not mean that everything the pope does is without error. We need to be able to draw the basic distinction between pope's behavior on the one hand, and his efforts to communicate definitively a teaching that pertains to faith and morals on the other. It is the latter of these two, not the former, which is divinely protected from error.

Since Peter's actions in Antioch were just that—acts—rather than doctrinal proclamations, Paul was not out of line in reprimanding his fellow apostle. On the contrary, Paul was acting in courage and good faith, out of obedience to the teachings of Jesus and His Church. As history attests, many popes—through their actions—have fallen into sin and worldly corruption, and this scandalizes both the faithful and the world in need of a clear presentation of the gospel. Paul's admonishment does not in any way call into question Peter's doctrine, or even his typical conduct; only the incident of his scandalous behavior in Antioch.

So Paul uses the occasion to make two important points. Pastorally, he calls Peter to a higher standard of conduct so that his actions align with his teachings (see Gal 2:14). Theologically, he uses Peter's misstep to teach the Galatians that it is not circumcision that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ (see the following section, Gal 2:15-21).

How has this passage been read throughout Christian history? There is no official interpretation that Catholics must follow in reading this passage. Some Church Fathers (Jerome, Origen, Chrysostom) read the confrontation as a literary fiction that Paul crafted to make his point about justification by faith. Others, such as Augustine and Aquinas, saw the confrontation as authentic: Peter was in need of correction from Paul (which is how I read it). In the time of the Reformation, Luther often cited this episode, seeing himself on Paul's side, to justify his own critiques of papal authority. But this was a polemical interpretation which concludes that Paul was rejecting Peter's leadership and doctrine, which the text itself does not support.

Concluding thoughts. However tense or awkward it may be when two apostles collide, we must keep in mind that this text has been preserved and handed down to us as Scripture and is therefore trustworthy and potent in its revelatory value.

Through Paul's written account of the experience, the Lord continues to speak, and to aid us in understanding the nature of Christian unity, and the way to live in friendship with one another in Jesus Christ. We certainly do not need to worry that this episode severed ties between these beloved pillars. There are numerous other occurrences throughout the New Testament that witness to the bond of faith and fidelity shared by Peter and Paul. Let us use this occasion, then, to pray for the boldness of Paul, for the humility of Peter, and for the integrity of our Holy Father and the Bishops in full communion with him.