

When I was in high school, the faculty let students smoke on campus only if we had a permission slip signed by our parents. I still remember discussing this with them. My parents did not smoke, but my father's father did – two packs a day, one Camel and one Virginia Extra (not Slims). I never knew my grandfather; he died before I was born. My parents said, "You know that cigarettes are not good for your health. But we agree that this ought to be your decision." So Dad took the slip from my hands and signed permission for me to smoke. I still have not smoked my first cigarette. A lot of people have a different story to tell. They did smoke, do smoke, wish they could stop, but can't. Kids are under tremendous pressure to light up, even though they have learned it's not a good idea. But kids will not ever make a good choice if they don't hear what is best from an authority they trust. They still may not choose well, but people in authority need to say what other people need to hear.

In today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles we hear about a turning point in the history of Christianity and the key role that authorities played when they said what people needed to hear. Saint Paul had become a magnetic evangelist. Because of him, throngs were believing in Christ – not just Jews but Gentiles as well. While Paul and Barnabas were preaching in Antioch, some other Christian preachers appeared and told the same people that Paul and Barnabas were wrong about one point. Gentiles could not become Christians until they had first become Jews, which for the men included circumcision. You can imagine this raised a few eyebrows. Paul and Barnabas realized this was a question about authority, so both sides went back to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders there. They had a difficult discussion, but after much prayer, Paul's position prevailed. The apostles and elders put the decision down in writing, and they appointed two representatives to take this letter back to Antioch together with Paul and Barnabas so that the people there would know the position of the authorities in Jerusalem. The letter criticized these other preachers, saying they had no mandate from Jerusalem and upset people with their teachings. The written decision tips the authority even higher. It opens with this statement: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities." They asked the Gentiles to refrain from a few practices that might be disturbing for Jewish converts to Christianity, but that was it – no circumcision involved. They had prayed about it, talked it over, worked out some compromises, put it all in writing, and they sent delegates to the place where the controversy began. After that, Christianity spread with new force, thanks to the Holy Spirit.

On Mothers' Day, we typically thank moms for the gift of life, the sacrifices they have made, and the love they have shared. But we also need to challenge mothers – and fathers – to exercise their authority. Often their position is unpopular because it goes against what their children hear from other sources. But when parents pray about it, make a decision together, and communicate it clearly to the people who need to hear it, it can stop a lot of trouble before it ever gets too far, and it can spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.