

6th Sunday in Easter

In our readings today we are offered some glimpses of the Holy Spirit in anticipation of the great feast of Pentecost that approaches in two weeks. There is palpable excitement in the Church's choice of these readings as we await the arrival of the Holy Spirit and catch some glimpses of the work and role of the Spirit in the life of the Church. And so we find in each of our readings today a tantalizing peek at the being and action of the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity.

In the first reading taken from the Acts of the Apostles we hear about the mission of Philip the Apostle to the town of Samaria. His proclamation of the gospel there was accompanied by some pretty spectacular things: unclean spirits coming out of possessed people, many paralyzed and crippled people being cured, and so on. When the chief apostles in Jerusalem heard about these events, they sent Peter and John, two apostolic heavyweights, to pray with the people of Samaria and to encourage them.

Here is where the Holy Spirit comes in explicitly. They prayed that the newly baptized, those who had heard the gospel from Philip, and had been baptized in the name of Jesus, might receive the Holy Spirit. They laid hands upon them, and then we are told the Spirit fell upon them. A curious expression; the falling of the Holy Spirit heard elsewhere in the Acts of the Apostles—some power coming down upon them from on high.

Something for us to note is that water baptism in the name of Jesus and the baptism in the Holy Spirit are recognized as separate events in the earliest experience in the life of the Church. They are seen as separate moments in the same process of bringing someone into Christ. The Church, to the present day, mimics this in making Baptism and Confirmation separate sacraments.

Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, you will find that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is associated with special gifts conducive toward mission. These gifts or *charismata* Paul calls them, charisms; are given for the sake and the purpose of mission. No one in the bible, Old Testament or New, is ever given an experience of God without being given, at the very same time, a mission. It is the Holy Spirit who equips someone for mission. It is the Holy Spirit that gives the powers needed to announce Christ and bring Him to others.

The question that arises from this first understanding of the Holy Spirit is: What gift has the Spirit given to you? As baptized and some of you, confirmed Christian Catholic, what is your charism? What is your gift for the mission of the Church?

Paul identifies preaching, teaching, organizing, administrating, healing, speaking in tongues, and prophesying—all these are charismata, gifts of the Holy Spirit equipping the Church for its mission.

What is yours? My dear brothers and sisters, there is no question more important than this one. There are questions about family, career, success, and the needs of everyday life to be addressed. But none surpass in importance this question that we must all ask ourselves. What is the Holy Spirit empowering me to do better? What has the Spirit already empowered me to do?

In baptism and confirmation we have been given these gifts—what are they and how do we use them? There are no greater questions more important to ponder in this life than these.

Now in the second reading from the first letter of St. Peter, we find him focusing on the Holy Spirit. He is writing to a Christian community in the midst of a critical and sometimes outright violent society. He is clearly writing to a church that is being persecuted. As we well know, it happened a lot in the early days of the developing Church. He is telling them how to engage those who stand outside the Christian faith, even those who are meeting it with criticism, disdain, or at the extreme, with violence. Well, Peter famously says: ***“always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.”***

Suppose someone knows you are a Catholic Christian; maybe they are just intrigued, maybe indifferent, or maybe even hostile. But they want to know what it is that is giving you hope. It is important to note that St. Peter identifies hope as central to the Christian theme. We are meant to be a people of hope borne from our faith in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

He is also assuming that Christian faith is not an irrational superstition. It is not opposed to reason. It can be explained **and** should be. It is from these notions of Peter that the seeds are sown that will later blossom into what the Church will later teach as: ***Fides quaerens intellectum*** (Faith seeking understanding). We do not have an irrational faith but one that can be brought to reason—and should be. And so therefore, those who hold the Christian faith should be equipped to speak about it reasonably to anyone and everyone who asks.

We **cannot** and **must not** retreat into privacy saying our faith is a personal matter, a merely private conviction of our own. This is **NOT** good enough—and never has been!

St. Peter goes on to recommend that we offer our explanations of hope ***“with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame.”*** It is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

The society that Peter is talking about is not entirely unlike our own. We are living in a time where there is a good deal of hostility toward religion, especially toward Christianity.

- Did you know that worldwide Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world?
- Did you know that the 20th century produced more Christian martyrs than all previous 19 centuries combined?

How does a Christian engage this kind of world? With reason—be ready to give a reason for the hope that lives in you; but ALSO with gentleness and reverence toward the objector—even when this is extremely difficult to muster. This is Peter’s advice to us today. When you engage someone who is hostile to the faith, even to the point of persecution—you must still do it with gentleness and deep reverence. Christians must respond, in short, in the spirit of the crucified Jesus who forgave—yes—even those who were putting him to death.

THIS is the attitude born of the Holy Spirit, who is the love between the Father and the Son. That is why now we are speaking of the Holy Spirit here. When you respond to criticism, to objection, and even to persecution with an attitude of gentleness and reverence, you are living in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit lives in you.

Whether we are arguing with an opponent of religion at a cocktail party or whether we are facing our own martyrdom—this must be our spirit.

Lastly, let us look at today's gospel reading. Our Lord speaking to his disciples the night before he died, He tells them that He and His Father will send them an Advocate. The word in Greek is **Parakletos**. A word meaning summoned or called to one's side, esp. called to one's aid. This Advocate will be one who pleads to the Father on our behalf; someone who supports us, inspires us and encourages us.

Jesus is our first advocate, but He will soon physically depart from the scene of the early Church. Yet, the Father and He will send the Holy Spirit as friend, supporter, advocate, pleader, inspirer and guide for all Christians up and down the ages. And this should give us great hope.

- When the martyrs went to their deaths, it was with the help of this Paraclete.
- When the missionaries went to proclaim the faith in hostile lands, it was the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit who pleaded on their behalf.
- When Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, it was the Holy Spirit who sustained and inspired him.
- When Thomas Aquinas wrote his theological masterpieces, it was at the prompting of the Holy Spirit.
- When Edith Stein went with her Gestapo captors to Auschwitz, she went with and in the Holy Spirit, the Advocate.

Friends, the final question as we approach Pentecost, The Great Feast of the Holy Spirit: What is this Parakletos, this Advocate prompting you to do as your part in the mission of the Church?

- Fr. David M. Chiantella