

Rev. Joseph Keating
Pentecost (A)
Homily

Brothers and sisters, tomorrow/today is Pentecost, the day on which we recall the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. Just as Jesus promised before he ascended into Heaven, he has sent us the Paraclete, the Advocate, the Comforter, the Gift of the Father. On this day, the Holy Spirit descended upon Our Lady and the Apostles, manifesting himself by a driving wind and tongues of fire.

What is, or *who* is the Holy Spirit? Of course, He is the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, our God. He is not one-third of God, nor is he a creature, rather He is fully God. And because he is pure spirit, and not a material creation, we cannot see him.

The word “spirit” literally means breath or wind, and we hear this word embedded in terms like “respirate” and “expire.” One could say, then, that the Holy Spirit is the very Breath of God. St. Thomas Aquinas notes that when we normally use the word “spirit,” we mean impulse or motion.¹ A spirited person, then, is one who is prone to action. Most of us can think of a time when we felt “inspired” to take initiative on some project.

The Holy Spirit, then, is who prompts the Church to action. The Spirit impels us to pray, to worship, to do acts of charity, to teach the truth, to evangelize. If the Church did nothing, she would be lifeless, and being a member of the Church would be like being a card-carrying member of Blockbuster Video in 2020. You still might be a member, but it means nothing. The Holy Spirit is the very soul, the very life of the Church.

We also consider the Holy Spirit as gift. Sure, we normally talk about the Holy Spirit giving gifts, and I’ll get there in a moment, but have you ever considered the Holy Spirit himself as a gift? This gift is received at our baptism, and symbolized in the flame that descends from the Christ candle and flickers on the baptismal candle. He is also invoked upon the waters of the font, and is symbolized by those waters, just as Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as Living Water.

¹ *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q.36 a.1

The gift of the Holy Spirit that we receive at baptism is, in fact, God dwelling in our souls. This is such a big deal that St. Thomas Aquinas says that the name of “Gift” is the proper name of the Holy Spirit.² He is the first gift, the gift of love, and because he loves, he brings even more gifts with him. St. Augustine says that, “By the gift, which is the Holy Spirit, many particular gifts are portioned out to the members of Christ.”³

We have all heard of the sevenfold gifts: Piety, Understanding, Fear of the Lord, Fortitude, Wisdom, Counsel, Knowledge. These are the traditional sevenfold gifts, which come to us from the Book of Isaiah (11:2-3). But St. Paul seems to say that the Holy Spirit gives an innumerable variety of gifts:

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit;
there are different forms of service but the same Lord;
there are different workings but the same God
who produces all of them in everyone.
To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit
is given for some benefit.⁴

That means that every member of the Church has these gifts, and part of the joy of life is to discover them and use them, like opening up a new toy on your birthday and going out to play.

One such gift, and I think perhaps the most important spiritual gift in the Christian life is the gift of forgiveness. Just think for a moment what a powerful and precious gift this is. We all go thru life on an adventure, open-ended and unscripted. It is much more like driving a Jeep in the wilderness than it is like riding a train. We go off-road, get out in the sticks. And sometimes we get stuck in the mud, get a flat tire, or even flip the Jeep. These times when we get ourselves in an accident, intentionally or unintentionally, we call sin. And our conscience, if it is well-formed, will tell us when we have committed a sin.

² *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q.38 a.2

³ *De Trinitate*, XV, 24

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:4-7

Our conscience, God's very voice speaking to our hearts, lets us know when something is not right in our relationship. It is the "check engine" indicator light of the soul. When it turns on, we need to deal with the problem, or we will find ourselves on the side of the road.

Jesus knows this, and so he hands his chosen mechanics the proper wrench. In John's gospel, the Risen Lord appears to the Apostles in that upper room. And Jesus' first priority is to give his Apostles the Holy Spirit and the authority to forgive sins:

As the Father has sent me, so I send you."
And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
"Receive the Holy Spirit.
Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them,
and whose sins you retain are retained."⁵

This gift of forgiveness of sins, we might as well call the "First gift of the Holy Spirit." It is the answer to the cry of every human heart, that longs to feel loved, to know that everything is alright between me and my Father. This cry of the heart is so beautifully expressed by King David in Psalm 51, which he wrote after he was caught in the sin of adultery:

"A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, nor deprive me of your Holy Spirit."⁶

Even in the Old Testament, the Psalm foreshadows the existence of a Holy Spirit within the hearts of believers. Now that Holy Spirit has been manifested to the Church, and is invoked in every confession as the priest absolves the sinner:

"God, the Father of mercies, thru the death and resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us *for the forgiveness of sins...*"

⁵ John 20:21-23

⁶ Psalm 51:12-13

When we hear those words, we hear the three persons of the Holy Trinity invoked, and we are reminded of the God who forgives us. These words are spoken by the minister of the Church, to whom God has given authority to forgive sins in his name. Not only does God forgive, but the priest also forgives on behalf of the Church of whom he is a member.

The forgiveness of sins is the first reason Jesus came to earth, and the first reason that he sent the Holy Spirit.

What a wonderful gift this is, to be forgiven. And I can say, as a priest now for four years, what an even more wonderful gift it is to forgive others. To be able to release people from their sins and restore their relationship with God is the reason I am a priest. It's why I, personally, treasure the gift of forgiveness.

We say these words in the Creed every Sunday at Mass: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life..." How is the Holy Spirit the giver of life? I believe it's because when we are forgiven, we receive new life. When a prisoner is pardoned, he goes free, and may live a new life with honor restored to his name. When Christ pardons the thief on the cross, he promised the thief new life in his Kingdom. When we receive pardon from one another, a new sort of relationship is formed, a relationship of mutual understanding and grace, rather than the fear of punishment. This is the new life that the Holy Spirit makes possible.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit that every Christian possesses. The Spirit is the soul of the Body, the Church. If the soul of the Church is the Holy Spirit, then the charism of the Church is forgiveness.

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."⁷

The Holy Spirit is within you. Perhaps he is inspiring you to set someone free today. Exercise forgiveness, and you manifest the gift of the Holy Spirit within you.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 3:17