

Pastor's Pen: Lord, Send Forth Your Spirit

This last week we had our confirmation Mass for the 10 juniors who got confirmed this year. In his homily, Bishop Shawn McKnight reminded those being confirmed that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were not being given to them for their own good, but for the good of all. This certainly is in line with the teaching of Jesus Christ. When sending out the disciples to prepare the way for Him, He tells them, "Freely you have received, freely give." (Matthew 10:8) It is easy to have a merit badge mentality about the sacraments. We go through preparation and classes and at the end receive the sacrament almost as a graduation certificate. This accounts for why so many bail on the practice of the faith upon receiving whatever sacrament it be until it is time to receive the next sacrament. If we go to that first outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we can plainly see that the gifts of grace given through the sacraments are not ordered merely for the good of the person receiving them.

Out Into the Streets

In the Acts of the Apostles 2:1-40, we hear of that first outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the immediate effects that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit had on the apostles and those gathered in the Upper Room. At the Ascension, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would be sent to the Apostles and disciples as they were to continue the mission He started. For 10 days they waited in the Upper Room, the location of the Last Supper, in watchful prayer waiting for that gift of the Holy Spirit.

Upon the reception of the Holy Spirit, the apostles and disciples immediately leave the Upper Room to head into the streets of Jerusalem and boldly proclaim the Gospel. St. Peter, who only 53 days earlier had thrice denied knowing Jesus, now boldly proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He urges those hearing him to be stirred to belief in Christ. The gift given to St. Peter and those gathered in the Upper Room was given because they had a mission to do. From Pentecost on, the Apostles and disciples would fan out through the known world to proclaim the Gospel. For nearly two millennia, Catholics had gone to the four corners of the world, to almost every tribe and nation, to proclaim the Gospel. Many would give their lives in this proclamation. Some still do to this day.

A Public and not Private Faith

As with those in the Upper Room, so with us. In every sacrament we are given something of the Holy Spirit. Certainly in confirmation we are given this Holy Spirit in very explicit way. However, all sacraments are made present to us through the working of the Holy Spirit. No more than the gifts of the Holy Spirit were treated as a private devotion or merit badge by those first Christians can it be treated so by us. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, we are to be every bit the agent for radical change to this culture that St. Peter and those in the Upper Room were to the city of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. No more than the Apostles could remain in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost can we stay in the shadows in our own day.

The Catholic faith is meant by its very nature to be sign to the world. We are to stick out as different to the cultures in which we live. We are to be champions for those in need, for the defenseless, for the searching, and for the poor. Our morals are not to be shaped by worldly morals. In the Great High Priest Prayer of John 17: 1-26, Jesus prays on the night of the Last Supper that the Church He is about to found through His own Flesh and Blood would recognize the uniqueness of what is to happen. He reminds us that we are not of this world. We live in the world and cultures in which we find ourselves, but we are to be bold witnesses in each and every one of those cultures. When we don't, we fall into the sin of Laodicea: lukewarmness. The natural byproduct of lukewarmness is a Catholic whose life is indistinguishable from the culture in which we live. It is this blandness of faith, this wasting of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus finds so repugnant that He vomits it from His mouth (Rev 3:16).

Because so many Catholics have turned a public faith to a private hobby, we have lost ground in our culture. From the breakdown of the family, to the disrespect for human life in all stages, to the approval of the gross misuse of human sexuality, to the falling practice of the faith, to the dropping of priestly and religious vocation, Catholicism has ceded ground in the name of getting along in our society. Our mission, as Catholics, is to infuse the gifts of the Holy Spirit into the culture around us.

Where there is ignorance, we use the gift of wisdom. Where there is bias and prejudice, we use the gift of understanding. Where there is doubt, we use the gift of counsel. Where there are lies and propaganda, we use the gift of knowledge. Where there compromise, we use the gift of piety. Where there is rebellion, we use the gift of the fear of the Lord. Where there is fear, we use the gift of fortitude. None of these gifts are given us to be stored as trophies to gather dust. They are given to us to effect positive change in the culture around us. Our faith is not a trophy nor a pious hobby, but an active agent for true and lasting change in our world.

Forging Ahead

These gifts of the Holy Spirit are given for the purpose of the Mission of Jesus Christ to make known the Gospel, and this is to greatly inform the direction, institutions, and mission of this parish. It is my job as pastor to commandeer all of these and order them to the mission of Jesus Christ. Our ability to do this can be concretely measured in visible criteria. All of our educational apparatuses are to be changed so as to be unapologetically orthodox in teaching. Along with this honing of our educational systems, we will be teaching the necessary wisdom and charity to apply these teachings so as to provoke conversion. Alongside of this, I wish to see our parish profile be more public in the community in which we live. I will also be provoking people to make our faith public in how they set their priorities. This is especially true with how priorities are set for their children!

The gifts of the Holy Spirit bear fruit. Abandoning lukewarmness for the fervor of the Gospel bears fruit. Measurable criteria include Mass attendance, participation in various educational programs and social outreach, and most strongly in being a parish that produces priestly and religious vocations. I end with this: In Luke 12:49, Jesus says, "I came to set the world afire, how I wish it were already kindled." To live as Christ seeks demands we leave the lukewarmness of Laodicea behind and embrace the fire of that first Pentecost! Pentecost is considered the birth of the Church, it becomes the template by we are measured.