



From A Bishop's Journal (776)

The Spirit of God at the Heart of the Sacrament of Forgiveness

Who does not remember the wonderful gift that the Lord gave his disciples, at Easter? “Jesus came and stood before them. ‘Peace be with you, he said... As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ Then he breathed on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men’s sins, they are forgiven them. If you hold them bound, they are held bound’ .”

Bonds of Love and Life

It was only gradually that we became aware of the irreplaceable role of the Holy Spirit. However, from the very first pages of the Bible we are told that the Spirit was there at the beginning of the world and was part of every covenant concluded between humankind and God. The prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones receiving flesh, spirit, and life confirms the necessary action of the Holy Spirit in the relationship established by God with the chosen people. In his celebrated Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul declares: “You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out ‘Abba,’ that is, ‘Father.’ The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Just as the Holy Spirit was present at our baptism, so is he present at the moment of forgiveness: Christ himself gives him to us not only as our advocate and defender but also as our most intimate and committed life there is. The liturgy itself boldly petitions the Holy Spirit to flood the hearts of the faithful with his light divine, and to grant us his sevenfold gift. “What is stained by sin, renew; what is dry, with grace bedew; strength to wounded souls restore; coldness with thine ardour burn; willfulness to wisdom turn; crooked ways make straight once more!” Without the Spirit’s divine presence there is nothing in man that is not perverted. In labour he is rest, in fever, refreshment, and in sorrow, comfort. May he come to us, this father of the poor, and may he give his precious gifts, and be light to our hearts.

The One Spirit

In his Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul goes even further: “No one can say ‘Jesus is the Lord!’ except in the Holy Spirit.” When we are reconciled with one another and with God, we acknowledge the Lordship of God who presides over all these acts of life and love. We would be incapable of such reconciliation with God and neighbour, without the aid of the Holy Spirit. “It was in one Spirit that all of us were baptised into one Body. All of us have been given the drink of the one Spirit.” God alone is the origin of all reconciliation: the priest who acts in the name of God is but the living instrument to make visible the forgiveness that is granted, and that reconciliation is achieved. If we

can come to such life-giving 'moments,' we must admit that the spirit always goes before us on the road of forgiveness and reconciliation. He is the one who disposes our hearts to welcome such divine gifts, he is the one who makes us aware of our sinful condition and shows us our sins, because left to our own resources we, like King David, might not recognise them. It was thanks to the inspired words of Nathan that David recognised himself a sinner. And in the touching story of the prodigal father and his youngest son, we see how the Spirit really transformed the young man's heart. "Coming to his senses at last, he said, 'I will break away and return to my father, and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son'."

Reconciliation and Penance

Twenty-five years ago, December 2, 1984, an extraordinary Synod of Bishops was held in Rome, and Pope John Paul II published a post-synodal exhortation entitled *Reconciliation and Penance*. Even though some may have differences of opinion regarding this document, it appears to me that this exhortation can still be of use to us, to better understand the penitential process of reconciliation. In a broken world, the Pope first writes of conversion and penance as a task and commitment of the Church: in the light of Christ the Reconciler, the Church is both "reconcilee" and "reconciler." Reconciliation is from God, and the Church is the great sacrament of reconciliation. "The Church is the sign of that universal charity which Jesus Christ left as an inheritance to his followers, as a proof of belonging to his kingdom. It must be translated into ever new manifestations of conversion and reconciliation both within the Church and outside her, by the overcoming of tensions, by mutual forgiveness, by growth in the spirit of brotherhood and peace which is to be spread throughout the world." Convinced as he is that love is greater than sin, Pope John Paul brings up the pastoral ministry of penance and reconciliation by showing the importance of dialogue, catechesis, and the sacraments. He repeats his basic conviction and shows three forms of penitential celebration: the ordinary form, known for centuries as individual confession; the second form is similar to the first but it includes a community preparation followed by individual confession. The third form, called the extraordinary form, is employed in situations of grave necessity (which we have already seen): the passing presence of a priest, or a lack of same.

Conviction

Pope John Paul points out that "The word of God which is read, recalled and explained, when this is possible and suitable, to the faithful and with them, will help to give fresh life to the practice of the sacrament and prevent it from declining into a mere formality and routine." Let us continue coming to this sacrament, and let us discover even further the richness of the mercy of God. I am convinced the Holy Spirit will be there to help us in this. And joy, which is a gift of the Spirit, will be in our hearts as it was in the hearts of the disciples on the first Easter evening. "In your great love, almighty and ever-living God, you give to those who call on you more than they deserve and desire, grant us your mercy by delivering our conscience from its concerns and by giving more than we dare ask."

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