

The Holy Spirit in the Sacraments

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One of the questions I receive at The Catholic Answer with amazing frequency is this: **If the sacraments were indeed instituted by Christ, why don't the creeds of the Church ever mention them?** Now, having no doubt that all of you have studied the Catechism of the Catholic Church in great detail, I am sure it will come as no surprise when I remind you that immediately following the article of the Apostles' Creed dealing with the Holy Spirit, we meet the Church and, not long thereafter, mention of the *communio sanctorum* which not only means the communion of saints, but also communion "in holy things" (Catechism, no. 948).

The point is that the Holy Spirit gives us the Church and she, in turn, gives us the sacraments. St. Augustine taught us, "what the soul is to man's body, the Holy Spirit is to the Body of Christ, which is the Church. The Holy Spirit does in the whole Church what the soul does in the members of the one body." (1) This realization led Cardinal Newman to declare that "Holy Church in her sacraments . . . will remain, even to the end of the world, after all but a symbol of those heavenly facts which fill eternity." (2)

And what do these sacraments accomplish? Nothing less than the divine indwelling, which Newman describes thus: "Our Lord, by becoming man, has found a way whereby to sanctify that nature, of which His own manhood is the pattern specimen. He inhabits us personally, and this inhabitation is effected by the channel of the sacraments." (3)

How does this all come about? Through the imposition of hands which Tertullian refers to, in a most felicitous phrase, as "inviting and welcoming the Holy Spirit." (4) As Pope Leo XIII remarked in his encyclical *Divinum Illud Munus*, this awesome reality although certainly a work "of the whole Blessed Trinity 'We will come to Him and make our abode with Him,' (Jn. 14:23) nevertheless is attributed to the Holy Ghost" (no. 9).

To be sure, you and I have access to the Triune God in ways far greater than the apostles and disciples who walked and talked with Our Blessed Lord for three years. As St. Augustine put it, for "that giving or sending forth of the Holy Ghost after Christ's glorification was to be such as had never been before; not that there had been none before, but it had not been of the same kind." (5) This led Pope Leo to assert:

"[T]hat which now takes place in the Church is the most perfect possible, and will last until that day when the Church herself, having passed through her militant career, shall be taken up into the joy of the saints triumphing in heaven" (*Divinum Illud Munus*, no. 6).

This idea was not a novelty of either Newman or Leo XIII. We find Hilary of Poitiers already in the fourth century referring to the Spirit as the "donum in omnibus" (gift in everyone). (6) Newman does, however, say ever so graciously:

"The Spirit came to finish in us, what Christ had finished in Himself, but left unfinished as regards us. To [the Spirit] it is committed to apply to us severally all that Christ had done for us. As a light placed in a room pours out its rays on all sides, so the presence of the Holy Ghost imbues us with life, strength, holiness, love, acceptableness, righteousness." (7) And yet again, he says that Christ shines through His sacraments, "as through transparent bodies, without impediment, . . . effluences of His grace developing themselves in external forms. . . . Once for all He hung upon the cross, and blood and water issued from His pierced side, but by the Spirit's ministration, the blood and water are ever flowing." (8)

Wind, fire, thunder, and lightning. The Sacred Scriptures are replete with instances of divine Revelation accompanied by these awe-inspiring phenomena in nature. The Book of Genesis tells us that "a mighty wind swept over the waters" (Gen. 1:2) at the dawn of time; in the Book of Exodus, we learn how God gave the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai with thunder and lightning as the communicators of His will and Word (cf. Ex. 19).

But less fearsome signs have also been used by the Almighty as we recall how the gentle breath of God brought Adam to life (cf. Gen. 2:7) and how the breath of Jesus on the apostles gave them the ability to restore to life those who were spiritually dead through sin (cf. Jn. 20:22). All of these events are connected to God's self-manifestation or, even better, His self-communication to the human race and, most especially, to His chosen people.

A TOUR OF THE SACRAMENTS

Let's look at how the Holy Spirit acts in each of the sacraments.

BAPTISM

Pope John Paul II establishes the connection between the Holy Spirit and Baptism by asserting: "In the light of Pentecost we can also understand better the significance of Baptism as a first sacrament, insofar as it is a work of the Holy Spirit." He goes on: "This baptismal walk in newness of life began on Pentecost day at Jerusalem." (9) Cardinal Newman recalls that "not only [is] the Holy Ghost . . . in the Church, and that Baptism admits [us] into it, but that the Holy Ghost admits by means of Baptism, that the Holy Ghost baptizes." (10)

And what about the effects of Baptism? The great apologist notes that "we but slowly enter into the privileges of our Baptism; we but gradually gain it." (11) In fact, he says, "nothing shows, for some time, that the Spirit of God is come into, and dwells in" the soul of the baptized. (12) Novatian nicely summarizes this point when he writes:

"It is [the Holy Spirit] that effects with water a second birth. He is a kind of seed of divine generation and the consecrator of heavenly birth, the pledge of a promised inheritance, and, as it were, a kind of surety bond of eternal salvation. It is He that can make of us a temple of God, and can complete us as His house; He that can accost the divine ears for us with unutterable groaning, fulfilling the duties of advocate and performing the functions of defense; He, that is an inhabitant given to our bodies, and a worker of holiness." (13)

CONFIRMATION

Like patristic theologians and modern ones, too, Newman held that "Confirmation seals in their fullness, winds up and consigns, completes the entire round of those sanctifying gifts which are begun, which are given inchoately in Baptism." (14) Pope John Paul II spells out the "Spirit-dimension" of it in this way:

"Confirmation, the sacrament connected to Baptism, is presented in the Acts of the Apostles in the form of an imposition of hands through which the apostles communicated the gift of the Holy Spirit." (15)

PENANCE AND ANOINTING OF THE SICK

In the same general audience, the Pope teaches that "in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (or Penance), the connection with the Holy Spirit is established through the power of the word of Christ after His Resurrection." He likewise observes that these same post-resurrectional words "can also refer to the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick." (16)

By God's design, it is the priest's vocation to heal wounds, renew strength, and "wash the stains of guilt away." That almost incredible power was given to the apostles and their successors on Easter night, when Our Blessed Lord linked for all time the possession of genuine peace to the forgiveness of sins. Nevertheless we live in such a world that the psychiatrist Karl Menninger could entitle his book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* Modern man has lost his sense of sin which, of course, explains why he has also lost the key to full and lasting peace. We priests must remind the world that sin exists, not in the fashion of a dreary and depressing Cassandra, but with an attitude of joy and enthusiasm.

Cardinal Newman, in his poem, "Absolution," introduces us to a priest who, in admirable humility and with love for sinners, says to the fallen: "Look not to me no grace is mine; But I can lift the Mercy-sign. This wouldst thou? Let it be! Kneel down, and take the word divine, Absolvo te." (17)

The work of absolution is accomplished in Baptism, Penance, and the Anointing of the Sick. This paves the way for any other sacramental encounters which increase the divine life within. Once the roadblock of sin is removed, then the process of divinization can begin and only then.

MARRIAGE

Regarding Holy Matrimony, Pope John Paul observes:

"This sacrament is the human participation in that divine love which has been 'poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 5:5). According to St. Augustine, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity in God is the 'consubstantial communion' [communio consubstantialis] of the Father and the Son. Through the Sacrament of Matrimony, the Spirit forms 'communion of persons' between a man and woman." (18)

EUCCHARIST

The Pentecost observed by the apostolic community was a major feast of covenant renewal, harking back to that primal giving of the Law to Moses, that act of God which made Israel His chosen people. Each time the Church gathers to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice, she engages in a similar ceremony of covenant renewal, and the same Spirit which hovered over the waters of the abyss bringing creation from chaos, the same Spirit which hovered over the Blessed Virgin Mary making her the Mother of the Messiah that same Spirit hovers over the elements of bread and wine, transforming them into the Lord's Body and Blood which saved the world 2000 years ago and makes present that invitation to salvation day in and day out, until He "comes in glory."

Hence, it is possible to say that every time the sacrifice of Calvary is sacramentally renewed, a little Pentecost occurs. How fortunate I always regard myself that I had the great grace of celebrating my first Mass on Pentecost!

Not surprisingly, we hear Pope John Paul explicate what St. John Damascene enunciated 13 centuries ago in *De Fide Orthodoxa*, and so many other Fathers and doctors have affirmed:

"Christian Tradition is aware of this bond between the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit which was expressed, and still is today, during the Mass when, in the epiclesis the Church requests the sanctification of the gifts offered upon the altar. . . . The Church emphasizes the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit for the completion of the Eucharistic consecration, for the sacramental transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, and for the communication of grace to those who participate in it and to the entire Christian community." (19)

In *Dominum et Vivificantem*, Pope John II's encyclical on the Holy Spirit, we read:

"Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church from the beginning expressed and confirmed her identity through the Eucharist. . . . Through the Eucharist, individuals and communities, by the action of the Paraclete-Counselor, learn to discover the divine sense of human life" (no. 62).

HOLY ORDERS

By the plan of Providence, it is the priest who imparts, through Word and Sacrament, this "divine sense of human life." We priests, by the mysterious workings of grace, are called to "shed a ray of light divine." It is our particular privilege to be "the Father of the poor," not merely to those economically disadvantaged but even more to those who are spiritually malnourished and who cry out for the food of the truth of Christ.

By standing at the altar and saying the awesome words of Christ at the Last Supper, we give the Lord's people access to "sweet refreshment here below," which is a foretaste of the "rest most sweet; grateful coolness in the heat; solace in the midst of woe," all of which anticipates the glory of the liturgy of heaven. It is our responsibility to teach all who would listen that where God's Holy Spirit is not present, "man hath naught, nothing good in deed or thought, nothing free from taint of ill."

COME, DWELL IN US

As we gain a deeper appreciation of the Church's sacramental life, we discover in all these encounters the gentle but powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. Newman had it exactly right when he referred to the sacraments as "the embodied forms of the Spirit of Christ," which "persuade" by their "tenderness and mysteriousness." (20)

This is why Pope John Paul can urge what he calls "a sacramental practice which is ever more consciously docile and faithful to the Holy Spirit who, especially through the 'means of salvation instituted by Jesus Christ,' brings to fulfillment the mission entrusted to the Church to work for universal redemption." (21)

In Tertio Millennio Adveniente, Pope John Paul II expresses the hope that this preparatory year dedicated to the Holy Spirit would lead to "a renewed appreciation of the presence and activity of the Spirit, who acts within the Church both in the sacrament . . . and in the variety of charisms, roles and ministries which He inspires for the good of the Church" (no. 45).

St. Basil said it best when he wrote: "Creatures do not have any gift on their own; all good comes from the Holy Spirit." (22)

ENDNOTES

1. Sermo, no. 267.
2. Apologia pro Vita Sua, Martin J. Svaglic, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 36-37.
3. Select Treatises of St. Athanasius, II, 194.
4. On Baptism, no. 8.
5. De Trinitate, 1, 4, 20.
6. De Trinitate, 2, 1.
7. PPS V, Sermon 10.
8. PPS III, Sermon 19.
9. General Audience, September 6, 1989.
10. PPS III, Sermon 271.
11. PPS VI, Sermon 98.
12. PPS VIII, Sermon 57.
13. De Trinitate.
14. The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman, Charles Stephen Dessain et al., eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), vol. VI, 80.
15. General Audience, January 30, 1991.
16. Ibid.
17. Prayers, Verses and Devotions (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 516.
18. General Audience, January 30, 1991.
19. Ibid.
20. Letters and Diaries, V, 46-47.
21. General Audience, January 30, 1991.
22. De Spiritu Sancto.