

August 19, 2012

Sunday After the Dormition

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When I sit down to write---that is, nearly everyday---I begin by praying a few stanzas of the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, a hymn composed by Rhabanus Maurus in the 9th century. I have in mind, in this prayer, to receive a bit of that *superna gratia* and *spiritalis unctio* ascribed to the Holy Spirit. After all, if I hope to write anything instructive and profitable for the People of God, it is certainly important that the *Creator Spiritus* drive away the Enemy from my heart and mind---*Hostem repellas longius*---and guide me on a proper path---*ductore sic Te praevio*.

This hymn is typical of most prayers to the Holy Spirit, I think; they tend to reflect the biblical lists of the Holy Spirit's gifts (wisdom, counsel, understanding, etc.) and fruits (charity, joy, peace, etc.). That is to say, the invocation of the Holy Spirit usually emphasizes blessed serenity and the enlightened heart, in the absence of which it is difficult to see how a Christian witness has much to offer.

Although I don't doubt this is true, I wonder if it represents the whole truth. Indeed, Holy Scripture furnishes evidence that the words "Come, Holy Spirit" should be counted among the most dangerous and disconcerting things a man can say.

I rather doubt, for example, that Amos ever prayed, "Come, Holy Spirit." On the contrary, when Amos was busy taking care of his cattle and sycamore trees, the Holy Spirit---unsolicited---came upon him, and this contented laborer had to leave his regular job and head north to challenge the religious establishment at Samaria. It was, to say the least, a bit of a bother. The Holy Spirit seldom consults a man's convenience.

Thus, when the Holy Spirit spoke to Moses in the Burning Bush, this hitherto satisfied shepherd sensed at once that the encounter was going to make havoc with what he had planned for the rest of his life. In Exodus, it takes the Lord most of two chapters to talk Moses into the new plan.

When---again, uninvited---the Holy Spirit encountered Jeremiah, the latter tried, like Moses, to pretend he had a speech impediment. Poor Jeremiah was to remember that hour as the beginning of all his troubles. He would never know another day of peace. Come, Holy Spirit? Think twice!

In Holy Scripture, moreover, the Holy Spirit is not harmless. When he does pay a visit, it is often the case that somebody gets smashed up. On those seven occasions when the Book of Judges says, "The Holy Spirit came upon him," a battle broke out and a bunch of people got hurt. When the Holy Spirit descended on Gideon, for instance, it was a really rotten day for the Amalekites. When "the Spirit of the Lord came down on Jephthah," the unlucky Amorites bit the dust. And when He descended on Samson, it was "Goodbye, Philistines."

All right, tell me this is all from the Old Testament. We Christians---the argument goes---live in a gentler, more enlightened age. We kinder folk, we of the *veram pacem cordium*, we have nothing in common with that primitive Othniel, who, when "the Spirit of the Lord came upon him," headed east to mop up on Cushan-Rishathaim. That is to say, are we Christians not agreed that the Holy Spirit has calmed down a bit since the time of Barak and Deborah? When we pray, "Come, Holy Spirit," do we really want so much violence and disruption? What happened to all that balm of Gilead we heard about?

Well, hold on a minute. I know next to nothing about the spiritual life, but I wonder if we are well advised to try to be more Christian than Christ. And what happened when the Holy Spirit came down on the Savior? According to an early source, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1). That is to say, the Holy Spirit, who anointed Jesus in his baptism, "drove him into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12) for a season of combat.

When that season was over, the Gospels tell us, the demons had a much better idea who they were dealing with. In the desert Jesus had demonstrated that he was truly "stronger" than they---*ischyroteros* (Luke 11:22). After encountering this Spirit-filled warrior within their own stronghold, these defeated demons began to show an appropriate respect: "Leave be! What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Did you come to destroy us? I know who you are---the Holy One of God!"(4:34). Cushan-Rishathaim couldn't have said it better.

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