

August 31, 2014
Cyprian of Carthage

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings
The Church and the Holy Spirit

Christ's greatest gift to the Church is the gift of the Holy Spirit; this gift is, moreover, original, unique, and exclusive.

Now if anyone finds this assertion unsurprising, I suspect he may not have given it the critical reflection it calls for. There should be at least a few faithful Bible-readers, I think, who are disposed to wonder if it is true.

Consider, for instance: Does not our hymnography proclaim that the Holy Spirit is "everywhere present and filling all things"? Since the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep in the first instance of Creation, doesn't He already fill the length and breadth of the Universe? And, moreover, doesn't the Creed assert the Holy Spirit's activity all through Salvation History, speaking through the prophets? So, if this is the case, how can the Spirit's presence in the Church be described as special and exclusive—indeed, as Christ's greatest gift to the Church? Shouldn't we think of this matter in quantitative terms, rather, saying that the Holy Spirit is "more" present—more dynamic—than formerly He was?

No, frankly, this quantitative approach to the question won't do; the Spirit's presence in the Church is not just "more"; it is also "different." In a real—not simply notional—sense there was a time when "there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (*oupo gar en Pneuvma, hoti Iesous oudepo edoxsasthe*—John 7:39).

Perhaps we may approach the question by comparing it to a similar "case" regarding Christ our Lord. As God's eternal Wisdom, upholding all things by the word of his power, Christ has never been absent from the Universe or from history, because in him all things subsist. Yet, we readily recognize—we confess—his special, unique, and exclusive presence to us in the Incarnation. The latter is a completely new and unparalleled way for God to "be with men."

Something similar must be said about the Holy Spirit's presence in the Church. This new presence is formally—qualitatively (*qualis*, not *quantum*)—different from the Spirit's activity in Creation and in the

earlier phases of Salvation History. Like the Incarnation, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the Church is unparalleled. It is not communicable or available outside of the Church. Like the Holy Eucharist, the Pentecostal presence of the Spirit is new and unique to the Church.

Indeed, this special presence of the Spirit is what distinguishes the Church from everything else in this world. "And I will pray the Father," declared Jesus, "and He will give you another Advocate, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you" (John 14:17).

Something further must be said about my comparison between the Incarnation and the Spirit's presence in the Church, because there is far more than an analogy here. These two new modes of presence are not simply "comparable" or "alike." They are intrinsically and necessarily related, because the Incarnation itself is the work of the Holy Spirit: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you," Gabriel said to the Theotokos, "and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; also, therefore, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

The Church receives, as Christ's special gift, what only Christ has and can give. The Incarnate Word is the unique bearer of the Spirit. He is the One on whom the Spirit descended and remained. Consequently, only the Son of God can baptize in the Spirit (Cf. John 1:32-34).

I push this point from a sense of danger inherent in certain modern approaches to the Holy Spirit. Even some Christians lose sight of the Spirit's unique and exclusive presence in the Body of Christ. There is a discernible disposition to search for signs of the Spirit's activity in the world around us—in political developments, for example, in philosophical movements, in social trends, and in novel religious theories. One is forever hearing, these days, that the Holy Spirit is teaching us new things, guiding us along fresh paths, rendering "ancient good uncouth," and making sure we "keep abreast of truth." (James Russell Lowell was better at rhyme than theology.)

Even though our Lord warned us that the world does not—cannot—recognize or receive the Holy Spirit, it is not difficult to detect a tendency, even among Christians, to regard current trends and preferences as new

messages from the Holy Spirit. Whatever else the Holy Spirit may be, He is always, we are led to believe, up-to-date.

This drift is not only dangerous for where it may lead; it is, likewise, unsound in its impulse, for it unhinges the Holy Spirit from Christ. It fails to grasp that the mission of the Holy Spirit is inseparable from the mission of God's Son. The Holy Spirit is, after all, the allos Parakletos, the "other Advocate" (John 14:16). It was of the Holy Spirit that the original Parakletos (cf. 1 John 2:1) declared, "He shall glorify me, because He shall receive of mine and show it to you" (John 16:14). It is impossible, then, for the Holy Spirit to tell us something distinct from the Gospel proclaimed by Christ and professed throughout the history of the Church. All other gifts in the Church are derivative of the Holy Spirit.

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