

A HOMILY CONCERNING THE COMING DOWN OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE MANIFOLD GIFTS OF THE SAME FOR WHITSUNDAY

Before we declare the great and manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit with which the Church of God has been forever replenished, it is first necessary to discuss the origin of the feast of Pentecost or Whitsuntide. The feast of Pentecost¹ was always kept the fiftieth day after Passover,² a great and solemn feast among the Jews, in which they celebrated the memorial of their deliverance out of Egypt, and also the memorial of the publishing of the Law, which was given unto them on mount Sinai upon that day. This feast was first ordained and commanded to be kept holy, not by any mortal man, but by the mouth of the Lord himself; as we read in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16. The place appointed for observing it was Jerusalem, where many people came from all parts of the world; as is evidenced in the second chapter of Acts, where mention is made of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, and various other places. By this we may also partly gather what great and royal solemnity was customary in that feast.

This observance which was commanded of the Jews in the Old Testament was confirmed by our Savior Christ in the time of the Gospel. He ordained a new Pentecost for His disciples when he sent down the Holy Spirit visibly in form of cloven tongues like fire, and gave them power to speak so that everyone who heard would understand them in his own language.³ So that this miracle might be kept in perpetual remembrance, the Church has thought it good to solemnize and keep holy this day, commonly called Whitsunday. Just as the Law was given to the Jews on Mount Sinai the fiftieth day after Passover,⁴ so was the preaching of the Gospel through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit given to the Apostles on Mount Zion the fiftieth day after Easter. The number of days is how the feast came to be called “Pentecost,” for as St. Luke writes in the Acts of the Apostles, when fifty days were come to an end, the disciples being all together with one accord in one place, the Holy Spirit came suddenly among them, and sat upon each of them, like cloven tongues of fire. No doubt, this event occurred to teach the Apostles and all other men that it is He who gives eloquence and utterance in preaching the Gospel; that it is He who opens the mouth to declare the mighty works of God; that it is He who engenders a burning zeal toward God’s Word, and gives all men not just a tongue but a fiery tongue so that they may boldly and cheerfully profess the truth in the face of the whole world. Isaiah was endued with this same Spirit: “The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary.”⁵ The Prophet David cries out to have this gift, saying, “Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise.”⁶ Similarly, our Savior Christ says to His disciples, “It is

¹ Editor’s note: The Old Testament Feast of Weeks

² Editor’s note: The original text used the term “Easter.”

³ Acts 2:1–11

⁴ Editor’s note: The original text used the term “Easter.”

⁵ Isaiah 50:4

⁶ Psalm 51:15

not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.”⁷ All of these testimonies of Holy Scripture sufficiently declare that the mystery of the tongues is a sign of the preaching of the Gospel and the open confession of the Christian faith in all who are in the control of the Holy Spirit. So that if any man remains silent and does not profess his faith openly, but cloaks and disguises himself for fear of danger in time to come, he gives others just cause to doubt that he has the grace of the Holy Spirit within him, because he is tongue tied and does not speak.

Having established that the Feast of Pentecost or Whitsuntide had its origin in the Old Testament and was continued in the New, let us consider what the Holy Spirit is and how He accomplishes His miraculous works towards mankind. The Holy Spirit is a spiritual and divine substance, the third Person in the Deity, distinct from the Father and the Son, and yet proceeding from them both. This truth is not only proclaimed in the Creed of Athanasius but may be also easily proved by God’s Holy Word. When Christ was baptized by John in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and the Father thundered from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”⁸ In this passage, note three separate and distinct Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; who nevertheless are not three Gods, but one God. Likewise, when Christ first instituted and ordained the Sacrament of Baptism, He sent His disciples into the whole world, commanding them to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁹ He also says, “I will pray unto my Father, and he shall give you another Comforter.”¹⁰ Again, “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceeds from the Father, he shall testify of me.”¹¹ These and such other places in the New Testament so plainly and evidently confirm the distinction of the Holy Spirit from the other Persons in the Trinity that no man can possibly doubt it without blaspheming the everlasting truth of God’s Word. As for His proper nature and substance, it is altogether one with God the Father and God the Son, that is to say, spiritual, eternal, uncreated, incomprehensible, almighty; in sum, He is even God and Lord everlasting. Therefore, He is called the Spirit of the Father; therefore He is said to proceed from the Father and the Son; and therefore He was equally joined with them in the commission that the Apostles had to baptize all nations.

But as proof of these truths, it is necessary to mention the wonderful and heavenly works of the Holy Spirit, which plainly declare to the world His mighty and divine power. First, it is evident that He wonderfully governed and directed the hearts of the Patriarchs and Prophets in old time, illuminating their minds with the knowledge of the true Messiah, and giving them utterance to prophesy of things that should come to pass a long time after. For according to St. Peter, the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but the men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.¹² And of Zacharias the high priest it is said in the Gospel that he, being full of the Holy Spirit, prophesied and

⁷ Matthew 10:20

⁸ Matthew 3:16–17

⁹ Matthew 28:19–20

¹⁰ John 14:16

¹¹ John 15:26

¹² 2 Peter 1:21

praised God.¹³ So did also Simeon, Anna, Mary, and various others, to the great wonder and admiration of all men.

Moreover, was not the Holy Spirit a mighty worker in the conception and birth of Christ our Savior? St. Matthew says that the blessed Virgin was found with child of the Holy Spirit, before Joseph and she came together.¹⁴ And the angel Gabriel expressly told her that all of this would happen, saying, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you.” This is a marvelous matter: that a woman should conceive and bear a child without intimate knowledge of a man! But where the Holy Spirit works, nothing is impossible, as may further also appear by the inward regeneration and sanctification of mankind.

When Christ said to Nicodemus, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,”¹⁵ he was greatly amazed and began to reason with Christ, demanding how a man might be born when he is old. “Can he enter,” he asks, “into his mother’s womb again, and so be born anew?”¹⁶ Nicodemus is a living example of a fleshly, carnal man. He had little or no intelligence of the Holy Spirit, and therefore he bluntly asks how this thing could possibly be true. Yet if he had known the great power of the Holy Spirit, in that He inwardly works the regeneration and new birth of mankind, he would never have marveled at Christ’s words, but would have rather taken this occasion to praise and glorify God. Just as there are three separate and distinct Persons in the Deity, there are three separate and distinct offices among them: the Father to create, the Son to redeem, the Holy Spirit to sanctify and regenerate. Regarding these latter works, the more their operation is hid from our understanding, the more all men ought to be moved to wonder at the secret and mighty working of God’s Holy Spirit, which is within us. For it is the Holy Spirit and nothing else that kindles the minds of men, stirring up in their hearts good and godly actions that are in harmony with the will and commandment of God; otherwise, their own crooked and perverse nature would never have such inclinations. That which is born of the flesh, says Christ, is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.¹⁷

Man of his own nature is fleshly and carnal, corrupt and wicked, sinful and disobedient to God, without any spark of goodness in him, without any virtuous or godly inclinations, only given to evil thoughts and wicked deeds: as for the works of the Spirit, the fruits of faith, charitable and godly inclinations, if anyone has these, they proceed only from the Holy Spirit, who is the only worker of our sanctification, and makes us new men in Christ Jesus. Did God’s Holy Spirit not miraculously work in the child David,¹⁸ when from a poor shepherd he became a royal prophet? Did God’s Holy Spirit not miraculously work in Matthew,¹⁹ sitting at the tax tables, when from a proud tax collector he became a humble and lowly Evangelist? And who would not be amazed to consider that Peter

¹³ Luke 1:64, 67

¹⁴ Matthew 1:18

¹⁵ John 3:3

¹⁶ John 3:3–5

¹⁷ John 3:6

¹⁸ 1 Samuel 17:33–37

¹⁹ Matthew 9:9

should become from a simple fisherman a chief and mighty Apostle, and Paul from a cruel and bloody persecutor, a faithful disciple of Christ to teach the Gentiles?

Such is the power of the Holy Spirit to regenerate men, and to bring them forth anew, so that they shall be nothing like the men that they were before. For Him, it is not enough to work the spiritual and new birth of man inwardly, unless He also dwells with him and abide in him.

St. Paul says, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”²⁰ and “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?”²¹ Again he says, “You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.”²² In agreement with all of this is the doctrine of St. John, who similarly writes, “The anointing which you have received from Him abides in you.”²³ And the doctrine of Peter says the same: “The spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”²⁴ O what a comfort is this to the heart of a true Christian, to think that the Holy Spirit dwells within him! If God be with us, as the Apostle says, who can be against us?²⁵

But some may ask, How shall I know that the Holy Spirit is within me? Indeed, as the tree is known by its fruit, so is also the Holy Spirit.²⁶ The fruit of the Holy Spirit, according to St. Paul, is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance, and so forth.²⁷ By contrast, the deeds of the flesh are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissention, heresies, envy, murder, drunkenness, gluttony, and the like.²⁸ Here is the mirror in which you must behold yourself to discern whether you have the Holy Spirit within you, or the spirit of the flesh. If you see that your works are virtuous and good, consistent with the decree of God’s Word, savoring and tasting not of the flesh but of the Spirit, then assure yourself that you are endued with the Holy Spirit: otherwise in thinking well of yourself you only deceive yourself.

The Holy Spirit always declares Himself by His fruitful and gracious gifts, namely by the word of wisdom; by the word of knowledge, which is the understanding of the Scriptures; by faith, in doing of miracles; by healing those who are diseased; by prophecy, which is the declaration of God’s mysteries; by discerning of spirits, diversity of tongues, interpretation of tongues, and so forth.²⁹ All of these gifts, proceeding from one Spirit and given to man according to the measurable distribution of the Holy Spirit, rightfully cause

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:16

²¹ 1 Corinthians 6:19

²² Romans 8:9

²³ 1 John 2:27

²⁴ 1 Peter 4:14

²⁵ Romans 8:31

²⁶ Matthew 12:33

²⁷ Galatians 5:22–23

²⁸ Galatians 5:20–21

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:7–11

men to appreciate God's divine power. Who will not marvel at what is written in the Acts of the Apostles, to hear their bold confession before the council at Jerusalem, and to consider that they went away with joy and gladness, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer rebukes and reproaches for the Name and faith of Christ Jesus?³⁰ This was the mighty work of the Holy Spirit; who, because He gives patience and joyfulness of heart in temptation and affliction, has worthily obtained the name Comforter.³¹ Who will not also be astonished to read the learned and heavenly sermons of Peter and the other disciples, considering that they never received a formal education, but were called straight from their fishing nets to fulfill the office of Apostle? This transformation was the mighty work of the Holy Spirit; who, because He instructs the hearts of the simple in the true knowledge of God and His Holy Word, is accurately called the Spirit of truth.

Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* tells a strange story of an educated and intelligent philosopher, who, being an extreme adversary to Christ and His doctrine, could by no means of persuasion be converted to the faith, but was easily able to withstand all the arguments that could be brought against him. Eventually a poor simple man of small wit and less knowledge, reputed among the learned as a dullard, came forward in God's Name to dispute with this proud philosopher. The bishops and other educated men standing by were amazed at his attempt, thinking that he would fail and put them to open shame. Nevertheless, he began in the Name of the Lord Jesus and quite opposite of expectations, he brought the philosopher to the point that he could not choose but acknowledge the power of God in his words, and to give place to the truth. Was it not miraculous that one feeble, uneducated soul could accomplish what many bishops of great knowledge and understanding were not able to do? So true is Bede's observation that "where the Holy Spirit doth instruct and teach, there is no delay at all in learning." Much more could be told of the manifold gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit, which are most excellent and wonderful in our eyes, but there is not time to recount them all. Seeing you have heard the main points, you may easily deduce the rest.

The question that remains is whether all who boast and brag that they have the Holy Spirit truly prove that they have these gifts and graces. This will be the topic of the next part of this Homily. In the meantime let us, as we are obligated to do, give hearty thanks to God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ for sending down this Comforter into the world; humbly beseeching him so to work in our hearts by the power of this Holy Spirit that we, being regenerate and newly born again in all goodness, righteousness, sobriety, and truth, may in the end be made partakers of everlasting life in his heavenly kingdom through Jesus Christ our only Lord and Savior. Amen.

³⁰ Acts 5:29–32, 41

³¹ John 14:16