

“TRACES OF THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE”

3. The Gift of the Spirit

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THE EXPERIENCE OF THE DIVINE

“You cannot understand now. When the Spirit of Truth comes He will lead you to the complete truth.”³⁰ The apostles had happened upon an exceptional, fascinating, and profoundly persuasive reality and accepted it, but they were not completely aware of what it was. They retained the words and respected them, but they measured them according to their own conception of things, without envisioning their hidden content. They reiterated definitions He gave of Himself without exactly understanding the mystery.

Saint Paul made a lucid analogy. An animal is aware of the presence of man and reacts to his behaviour and actions. And yet it does not grasp the reality that those actions convey. It remains at the margins of the reality that man represents: it “does not understand.” An animal lacks the means to fathom the depths of thought and love and the tools to understand the message of another world because it lacks a human spirit. That is why it is a stranger even as it curls up at a man’s feet or rubs against his legs or licks his hand: it does not share in human nature. And in the same way, concludes Saint Paul, “the depths of God can only be known by the Spirit of God.”³¹ Only one who possesses the Spirit has truly encountered Christ. As Saint Paul writes, “unless you possessed the Spirit of God you would not belong to Him,”³² that is, you would be a stranger to Him, incapable of capturing His intimate makeup, His secret nature, of becoming familiar with His mystery.

Without the event of His Spirit, Christ can come across as a great man, an exceptional figure, unclassifiable by any standard; perhaps a strange figure who can persuade simple people irresistibly of their expectations, stimulate those with a passion for justice, threaten the structures that perpetuate the status quo: Christ was all these to His contemporaries. Or else He may appear so great as to become a moving or dramatic mythical figure, and this is perhaps the perception that characterizes our world’s skeptical despair. Without the event of His Spirit, however, a person—whether an apostle or ourselves—remains in the dark, on the threshold of these perspectives.

Without the event of the Spirit, Christ remains an enigmatic mysterious face for the human person; simply another voice that stands out in the chorus of voices, to remind us of our painful human expectancy. However, the interpretative key is still harboured within the ambiguous limits of the heart and the melancholic boundaries of human thought.

Thus Christ would be a new object to confront, a fresh risk to run blindly, and *not* a new criterion, *another* light, finally, a *new* answer. All life that is conscious, aware, cries out to us that our life’s meaning here on earth is beyond our horizons. And so the encounter with »

³⁰ See John 16:12-13.

³¹ 1 Corinthians 2:11.

³² Romans 8:9.

* Source: *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2006, pp. 69-77.

» Christ would be confined to the narrow bounds of the purely human experience and vision of reality—our culture—and condemned to oblivion, lost in the enigma of being and destiny, unfreed from its powerless, “unredeemed” state.

One day, however, “they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the entire house in which they were sitting ... and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”³³ And so suddenly they understood who the man that they had followed was. The experience of their encounter with Him and the long, fervent, anxious, and uncertain period that they had shared with Him suddenly became another absolutely unforeseen and disconcerting experience: divine reality, the encounter, the sharing of life with God—luminous, sure, and strong.

Christ, so very present and concrete to us—one of us—is at the same time the One Beyond who resolves the enigma of existence. Christ is the meaning of history and the Lord of the universe, the viewpoint that explains everything. The experience of Pentecost constitutes the advent of a *Christian culture*, the definitive discovery of the “true light that enlightens all who come into this world.”

The first gesture recorded in the Acts of the Apostles is the first great affirmation of this new culture, this new and definitive vision of reality “not revealed by flesh and blood, but by the Father who generates all things.”³⁴ Immediately, and before peoples from all corners of the known earth, Peter announces the discovery of Christ as the cornerstone of God’s plan. This is the unremitting cry of this awareness, the powerful testimony that spreads throughout the world and throughout history from the very first Christian sermon.

The entire human experience is illuminated by God’s perspective. It is the tidings of truth’s definitive criterion, the advent of the definitive culture.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE GIFT

In the Liturgy, the communication of God’s Spirit is called “Donum Dei Altissimi” (Gift of the Highest God). This is not a human construct, conquest, or even foresight, and even less a human right. It is a pure gift.

And so the Spirit of God is a pure event within us, a total surprise, an absolute gift that has only one analogy: the total gratuitousness of our being, our very existence. However, a bestowal whose meaning has not been revealed to us cannot be considered a gift. We could not recognize life and the universe as gifts if we did not await the revelation of their meaning.

Thus the Spirit of Pentecost is *the gift par excellence*, because it is through the Spirit that we are drawn into the mystery of Christ and understand the experiences of that person who fully explains and resolves our reality. “Faith is the light of the world.” Human solitude dissolves with the advent of this gift. Human experience is no longer a lonely, disconsolate powerlessness but awareness and vitality, as the flame indicates the sign of the coming of the Spirit, “forcefully and gently.”

The fearful darkness that the apostles experience is transformed into a courageous lucidity (note their confrontation with civil and religious authorities).

Existence becomes an immense certainty: “This is the victory over the world—our faith.”³⁵ They are no longer alone; they experience the promise of Christ: “I shall not leave you orphans.”³⁶ »

³³ See Acts 2:2.4.

³⁴ Matthew 16:17.

³⁵ 1 John 5:4.

³⁶ John 14:18.

» Truly man is no longer alone, because by now the most authentic cry of the battle of existence is Saint Paul's: "There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength."³⁷ We cannot strip ourselves of our weakness and of that which confines us. Rather, an Other accompanies us, "like a giant on the path." A new existence is realized. The irresistible impetus of God's presence mysteriously enters the fragile human makeup, at the source of this "new creature."³⁸ Our strength is an Other. Our certainty is an Other. Existence is a profound dialogue. Thus solitude is abolished at its very roots in every moment of life.

To exist is to be loved definitively ("He is faithful to his love")³⁹ and to abandon oneself definitively to this love ("Life to me, of course, is Christ").⁴⁰ Human existence is an inexhaustible, supremely powerful friendship.

THE NEW COMMUNITY

Solitude, as we have described it, draws us closer to others and allows us to share with them the experience of universal need. The resulting community offers the only experience of shelter, temporary relief, and fixed certainty for those who are lost and confused.

Our attempts to make up for all we feel we lack constitute a worrisome and anxious undertaking. The results are ambiguous and fragile, and each generation feels painfully pressed to denounce and alter them, when, as often happens, "the wrath of searching in vain"⁴¹ compels us to reckless impatience and intolerance, bitter violence, and tragic presumptions. Human civilization thus creates communities with such precarious and deceptive patterns that they smack of snares rather than of steps on the true path.

Overcoming solitude in the experience of the Spirit of Christ not only draws us near to others but also opens us to others to the very depths of their being.

Our true life is Christ. Christ is the meaning of the existence of each one of us. Our life, the meaning of our existence, is summed up in, indeed *is*, one sole reality: "I am the vine and you are the branches."⁴² The community becomes essential to each of us, to our lives. Human solidarity becomes the Church. "We" becomes the fullness of "I," the law of the I's fulfillment. "We have passed out of death and into life, and of this we can be sure because we love our brothers," writes Saint John to the early Christians.⁴³

Such a unity, as absolutely unforeseen as it is indissoluble, makes the Church the redemption of the human community, the ideal of the community. "May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me."⁴⁴

The certainty of the journey and the power of the Spirit of Life generate an untiring awareness in a given community ("For every unfounded word men will answer on Judgement Day")⁴⁵ and a ceaseless activity (meditate once again on the parable of the talents), with dedication to the death (the good shepherd gives his life for his flock). From the depths, a richness and intensity of works and a deep urgency impels the life of the community, which is born of the coming of the Spirit: "Before God and before Christ Jesus who is to be the »

³⁷ Philippians 4:13.

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:1; Galatians 6:15.

³⁹ 2 Chronicles 5:13.

⁴⁰ Philippians 1:21.

⁴¹ Giovanni Pascoli, "Il libro", in *Primi poemetti*, in *Poesie*. Milan: Garzanti 1944, p. 329.

⁴² John 15:5.

⁴³ 1 John 3:14.

⁴⁴ John 17:21.

⁴⁵ Matthew 12:36.

» judge of the living and the dead, I put this duty to you, in the name of His Appearing and His Kingdom: proclaim the message, and welcome or unwelcome, insist on it. Refute falsehood, correct error, call to obedience—but do all with patience and with the intention of teaching.⁴⁶ This vigilant passion for time, things, and people leads to a life shared (*convivenza*) among people and with the world around them. *The Christian community inevitably creates a new civilization.*

The more unerring the faithfulness to the Spirit of Christ, the more the paths of this civilization are experienced as ideal, definitive paths.

The encounter with any Christian community that seeks to live resolutely in the name of Christ inevitably attains a way to share life totally, an atmosphere, and such an unusual human rhythm that it cannot but strike the observer as something new, strange, and remarkable—a totally human ideal.

SOLE AUTHORITY

The supreme authority is the one in which we find the meaning of all our experience. Jesus Christ is this supreme authority, and it is His Spirit who makes us understand this, opens us up to faith in Him and His person.

“Just as the Father has sent me so do I send you.”⁴⁷ The apostles and their successors (the Pope and the bishops) constitute, in history, the living continuation of the authority who is Christ. In their dynamic succession in history and their multiplication throughout the world, Christ’s mystery is proposed ceaselessly, clarified without errors, defended without compromise. Therefore, they constitute the place, like a reliable and effervescent spring, where humanity can draw on the true meaning of its own existence, probing ever deeper.

What genius is to the cry of human need, what prophecy is to our cry of expectancy, so the apostles and their successors are to announcing the response. But just as the true answer is always perfectly specific and concrete with respect to the expectancy—which is inevitably vague and subject to illusions—so are they, like an absolute and reliable rock, infallible: “You are Peter and on this rock I shall build my Church.”⁴⁸ Their authority not only constitutes the sure criterion for that vision of the universe and history that alone explains their (i.e., the universe’s and history’s) meaning; it is also vital—it steadfastly stimulates a true culture and persistently points to a total vision. It inexorably condemns any exaltation of the particular and idealization of the contingent; that is, it condemns all error and idolatry. The authority of the Pope and bishops, therefore, is the ultimate guide on the pilgrimage towards a genuine sharing of our lives (*convivenza*), towards a *true civilization*.

Where that authority is not vital and vigilant, or where it is under attack, the human pathway becomes complicated, ambiguous, and unstable; it veers towards disaster, even when on the exterior it seems powerful, flourishing, and astute, as is the case today. Where that authority is active and respected, the historic pilgrimage is confidently renewed with serenity; it is deep, genuinely human, even when the expressive methods and dynamics of sharing lives are roughshod and difficult. We must emphasize one important point: the gift of the Spirit manifested to the apostles conveys Christ’s value as “The Way, the Truth, the Life.” It gave the apostles a conscious and enlightened abandonment as the origin of their irresistible courage and vehement confidence in affirming their Master before the culture and civilization of their times. »

⁴⁶ 2 Timothy 4:1–2.

⁴⁷ See John 20:21.

⁴⁸ Matthew 16:17ff.

» Still today it is the gift of the Spirit that allows us to discover the profound meaning of Ecclesiastical Authority as a supreme directive on the human path. Here is the origin of that ultimate abandonment and of that conscious obedience to it—this is why it is not the locus of the Law but of Love. One cannot understand the experience of that definitive devotion that binds the “faithful” to Authority without taking into consideration the influence of the Spirit, and that devotion often affirms itself on the Cross of a mortification of the drive of our own genius or our plans for life.

From our brief meditation we can also say that without the gift of the Spirit we do not know how to recognize the teachers of the true civilization, and humanity does not find the strength and wisdom to build a common, balanced, and enlightened unitary path.

OUR FATHER

The unexpected gift of the Spirit renews us, and the supreme fruit of this renewal is our capacity for a new word and a new gesture that express the way we feel, face, and engage ourselves with reality.

The urgency of human needs and the inexhaustible attempts to satisfy them, the inevitable and intolerable final perplexity—all of this inspires, shapes, and continually stirs up a human cry for a committed human gesture, which our nature demands. Such a cry and commitment may be expressed uncertainly and vaguely but, if guided by violence, may also take on the morbid incomprehension of madness. The human person knows not what he or she reaches out to and awaits. The gift of the Spirit and the discovery and acceptance of Christ as the center of all things finally give definitive terms to man’s commitment to word and action, endow him with an awareness that fulfills reason’s thrust and a promise of complete freedom, which is a specific, unambiguous goal.

The new cry, “the redeemed word,” is *Christian prayer*. “For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit Himself expresses our plea ... and makes us cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’”⁴⁹

Saint Paul’s observation recalls the wonderful human and Christian document that is the first part of the eleventh chapter of Saint Luke:

Now once He was in a certain place praying, and when He had finished one of His disciples said, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” He said this to them, “Say this when you pray:

Father, may thy name be held holy,
 Thy kingdom come;
 give us each day our daily bread,
 and forgive us our sins,
 for we ourselves forgive each one who is in debt to us.
 And do not put us to the test.”

He also said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend and goes to him in the middle of the night to say, ‘My friend, lend me three loaves, because a friend of mine on his travels has just arrived at my house and I have nothing to offer him’; and the man answers from inside the house, ‘Do not bother me. The door is bolted now, and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up to give it to you.’ I tell »

⁴⁹ Romans, 8:26, 15.

» you, if the man does not get up and give it him for friendship's sake, persistence will be enough to make him get up and give his friend all he wants.

"So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks will always have the door opened to him. What father among you would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? Or hand him a snake instead of a fish? Or hand him a scorpion if he asked for an egg? If you then, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"⁵⁰

Our aspirations are translated into a deeply personal "you," as particular and familiar as a mother, and into a very clear, exhaustive plea, an awareness of the relationship between the two participants in the dialogue: "Our Father ... thy Kingdom come ... forgive us our sins ... free us from evil ... No one can say: Lord Jesus, if not in the Spirit."⁵¹ And the redemption of the gesture is the *Sacrament*. With the Sacrament the existential commitment no longer runs the great danger of losing control, of veering from the path to true reality by falling prey to the appearance of things. In the act of the Sacrament, the visible sign that engages the human person leads him or her to touch divine reality with an indescribable confidence. Thus no human action meets so serenely and comprehensively that expectancy that calls man to action.

There is a marvelous consequence of this redemption of the human word and act: the communal dimension emerges from the very heart of the new word and gesture of prayer and the Sacrament. There can no longer be a true pleading with God or a commitment to Him that is not, at least implicitly, open to the entire community of His Kingdom. The openness to the community determines the truth of the word and the rightness of the act. "When you will pray, you will pray like this: Our Father, thy kingdom come ... We form a single body because we all have a share in this one loaf."⁵²

On our common path our inability to be happy is the most powerful motive to share our lives; but, much more profoundly, it leads us to discover that each individual's happiness is a Reality common to all; one thing: "one Spirit, one Lord ... one God."⁵³

The Liturgy is the greatest expression of the freshness of prayer and action with which the Spirit imbues us. Liturgy generates the supreme form of the earthly community, where the individual is enhanced in all his aspects by accepting the universal communion of the children of God. Here, even the material world—time and things—is assumed in a sole gesture that truly represents the beginning of the redemption of that same physical nature to which Saint Paul refers: "From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth."⁵⁴

Because of its completeness the Liturgy becomes the unique locus of a genuine, complete education in receiving the Spirit and following His transforming power.

We remind you that it is possible to send questions and witnesses to the website <http://eventi.comunioneliberazione.org/gscontributi/>

⁵⁰ Luke 11:1-13.

⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 12:3.

⁵² 1 Corinthians 10:17.

⁵³ Ephesians 4:5, 6.

⁵⁴ Romans 8:22.