

THIRD SERMON FOR PENTECOST

BY

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*Repleti sunt omnes Spiritu Sancto et coeperunt loqui variis linguis
magnalia Dei.*

And they were all filled with Holy Ghost: and they began to speak with divers tongues—the wonderful works of God.—Acts 2, 4-11.



THIS is the day, my dear friends, when the Holy Spirit, so long promised, was sent from heaven to the holy Apostles and to all who were living in the love of God. Again this is the day when, by the divine mercy was restored to us the precious and priceless treasure that we had lost of old in the earthly paradise, by the devil's instigation and human weakness.

Doubtless the manner of the Holy Ghost's visible descent upon the disciples was marvellous, but what happened interiorly was of another and different beauty: beyond the understanding of reason, intelligence or feeling.

In fact the Holy Spirit is so incomprehensible a good, so great, so full of delights, so immense, that all immensity, all greatness that our intelligence can conceive is nothing in comparison. How shall I express it? A mere point would be nothing in comparison with the entire universe. Well! heaven and earth and all things imaginable are less than a mere point in comparison with the Holy Spirit. It belongs, then, to him to prepare his place in whomsoever is to receive him; it is for him, I say, to make a receptacle and to receive himself in us. There is not, in any creature, any other receptacle, any other place for the divinity but in the unutterable abyss of the divinity itself. That is why we read in today's Epistle that the house in which the apostles and disciples were gathered together was completely filled. Such indeed is God's liberality, that wherever he goes he fills to the utmost capacity every corner and recess of the soul susceptible of his presence.

'They were all', it is said, 'filled with the Holy Ghost.' Here let us study how the apostles and the rest of the faithful were prepared when they were filled with the Holy Spirit and how all those who desire to receive him should themselves prepare.

It is written then, 'They were all together in one place' (Acts 2, 1) recollected and quiet, when they received the Holy Ghost. Now, it is in the same way even today that the very gentle Spirit

communicates himself to each faithful soul every time that soul turns away from creatures to apply itself to God with all its strength. On the instant of its doing so the Holy Ghost comes down with all his graces and fulfils all its desires, filling its substance to the brim, and takes entire possession of the heart. On the contrary, as soon as the soul, with deliberate intent, turns away from God back to unstable creatures of whatever kind, whether towards self or to anything outside of God or apart from God, in any self-seeking, immediately the Holy Spirit withdraws with all his gifts and benefits.

To return to what we were just saying, it is said, in the Acts of the Apostles, that the house in which the disciples were sitting was entirely filled. And first of all, let us see what this house signifies figuratively. In one sense we can take this to mean the Holy Catholic Church which is the house of God; but in another sense we can see it in every faithful soul who is truly the temple and dwelling where the Holy Spirit takes his delight, for there is nothing he so much desires to occupy as our heart. Now, as in every house there are many apartments, several rooms, there are also in man many senses, various powers, divers operations, and the Holy Ghost comes down, with his gifts and graces, into each of these dwellings, exciting it and exhorting it to all virtues by the very fact of his arrival and interiorly enlightening the soul with the brilliance of divine grace.

Doubtless the Holy Spirit abides in every virtuous soul, but all do not experience equally his presence and his action. If you wish to feel his holy working in a special way, it is necessary above all to enter into yourself, to recollect yourself, to draw away from all exterior things so as to offer yourself completely to the Holy Spirit in a silent calm and a quiet repose. Then alone can he act in you. Then little by little you will experience his action, and this action will be more manifest the more you apply yourself to receive it; from hour to hour it will become more apparent to you although it had been yours already, even before you were aware of it.

We read in St John a word that fits the case well. It is said that the disciples were gathered together shut up in the house for fear of the Jews, '*Ob metum Judaeorum*' (John 20). What lesson can we draw from that? In our unhappy times is it not true, all dwellings and places are overrun with Jews? I mean treacherous people. These must be avoided, we must run away from them and to that end shut ourselves up in our interior. Yes, my beloved children, I ask you, I beseech you, by the bowels of Christ, to beware of these evil Jews, of these baneful men who not only do not themselves

taste the sweetness of this divine familiarity and this delightful presence of the Holy Spirit, but strive, by all possible means, to turn others away from it. This fear of the Jews is infinitely more necessary for you than it was of old for the disciples of Christ. For, in fact, these had nothing more to fear from the hatred of the Jews than the loss of their bodies; but you, my dear children, you have to fear from men the loss of God, the ruin of your soul and eternal death. Flee then, I beg of you, this Jewish race; flee from the world and all worldly things. Shut yourself up in your sanctuary; avoid all those dangerous courses, all excursions, all occasions of sin: as far as possible keep yourself withdrawn from society, from those noisy recreations where so many words are said and deeds perpetrated that are not to the honour and glory of God. Unless you do this, believe me, you will very quickly lose the Holy Spirit with all his gifts and all his grace.

But alas! I have no sooner said this than some will reply without hesitation that they have their confessor's permission, that all that does them no harm, as long as they have no bad intention: they add, even further, that recreations are indispensable to them. But then, I ask you, how is it that they have no taste, no pleasure in the Supreme Good, the pure and sweet Good, the eternal, divine Good, infinitely lovable, which is the all-powerful and good God, whilst these same people find so much happiness, peace, pleasure and recreation of mind in the most vain, perishable and dangerous creatures? Isn't it evident that it is these things that rob us of true peace and fundamental joy? Is it not the inordinate love one has for them that expells and banishes from the heart the surpassing and purest good which is God their own Creator, that is to say, the infinitely sweet Holy Spirit who is called and is truly the Paraclete, the sole Comforter? How then can they say that it is harmless? No one with any sense will believe them. But what blindness! and how deplorable!

However, perfect souls, those who are wise enough to desire nothing but God, who have no object at heart but for him, remain always interiorly recollected, the mind's eye ever turned within, whatever exterior works they may be engaged in. It matters not that they are very busy, they keep ever alive in their hearts peace and the friend of peace, the Holy Ghost

The Acts of the Apostles adds that all the disciples were all together in one place, '*erant pariter in eodem loco*'. This sufficiently explains that we must gather together all our inner and exterior powers, so as to make room for the Holy Spirit to act. And indeed he works great wonders when he finds the place prepared for him.

We read again that the Apostles were seated, '*sedentes*', when the Holy Ghost came down upon them. And so, even today, whoever desires to receive the Holy Ghost must be seated, that is to say, he must abandon all other things and himself to God's good pleasure, whether in adversity or in good fortune. This is particularly needful for religious. They are called religious because they should have one same will with God's, should conform themselves fully and simply to him, united to him in everything. But all the faithful without exception, if they desire to be saved, must also conform themselves to the divine will, in such a way as to consent to nothing that is contrary to that will.

On this head, one might ask if all religious are bound to be perfect. I reply, in one word, that they are obliged always to tend to perfection. If you want more ample explanations, consult St Thomas.

But to return to the most gentle and generous Holy Spirit whose feast we are celebrating today, remember he diffuses over us seven gifts and he accomplishes in each soul into which he descends seven corresponding operations.

Three of these gifts dispose the soul to a true and high perfection. The other four consummate this perfection within and without, enabling it to attain to the highest, purest and noblest state.

The first gift of the Holy Ghost is *the fear of the Lord*; that is the sure and well-tried beginning, the way marked out for attaining to supreme perfection. Fear in fact is the solid and immovable wall that protects the soul from all vices and all obstacles, and makes it avoid rocks and precipices. So that birds and wild animals can escape the enemy that tracks them down the all-powerful Creator has given them wings to fly and nimble legs to run away. The Holy Spirit has done likewise: he grants to his own this gift of fear which protects them against everything that could exclude his grace or obstruct his work. The high quality, in fact, of this fear is to keep, preserve and protect man against the world, the devil and himself; it is to shield him against vice and any action that could in any way make him lose the interior peace of spirit and repose of soul, that repose which according to the Psalmist has become God's dwelling place, '*His place is in peace*' (Ps. 75, 2).

Such is the weakness of our nature nowadays that we cannot, as we could formerly, remain long in suspense over difficulties. That is why it is supremely necessary for all who desire to be saved to avoid human weakness and live detached lives. We have reached such a pitch of weakness that it must be one of two things; either we shall adhere wholly to God or there is every reason to fear that,

willingly or unwillingly, we shall fall into all sorts of mortal sins. The *fear of the Lord* makes us avoid all these faults as so many works of darkness. It is, as the prophet says, 'the beginning of wisdom' (Ps. 110, 10).

After this the Holy Spirit deals out the second gift, which is *piety* and this gift raises the soul to a much higher level. This gift completely wipes out inordinate sadness of soul, that excessive anxiety produced by fear which can throw us into discouragement. Piety sets up again what fear had cast down; it gives us courage, inwardly and outwardly, to accept all afflictions. It takes away all disgust, all hardness and obstinacy of heart, all bitterness; and towards our neighbour it makes us benevolent and kind in everything, words and deeds; all our exterior contacts are stamped with sweetness, compassion, peace, because any transport of passion or violence drives away the Holy Spirit.

Then comes the third gift, *knowledge*, which leads the soul higher still. Thus the Holy Spirit urges from one step to the next towards an ever greater perfection. Now, by this gift of knowledge he fashions the soul interiorly so as to make it capable of noticing the warnings and exhortations that he gives it, according to the very words of our Lord, 'When he, the Spirit of Truth, is come, he will teach you all truth' (John 16, 13); that is to say, all that is necessary for your salvation. This is how, ordinarily, the Holy Ghost reproves us: 'Take care of yourself in that place: such and such a thing may happen to you. Avoid saying or doing that, do not go there'. And now how he exhorts us: 'Behave this way: in these circumstances act, in others refrain; this is the time to deny yourself, now is the opportunity to suffer patiently'. Such are the touching pleadings of the Holy Spirit; for he desires to draw the purest heights of your soul above bodily things, above all that is visible, up to that bright splendour, to that immensely fruitful fountain which is himself. He wants the body to remain below in its place, in its lower operation, habituating itself to depression, abjection, work, to the endurance of contempt. In this way both soul and body will have each its own office and proper function. And when the world comes to an end, God will re-unite flesh and spirit in a hundredfold greater dignity: there will be no more fear of decay, nothing more to suffer.

All those who bring their conduct into line with this gift of the Holy Spirit and obey him unresistingly arrive at the fourth gift, *fortitude*. Who can describe the excellent and glorious rôle that that has to play? By this gift, the Holy Ghost transports us above all human weakness and behaviour. This was the gift with which

the martyrs were so abundantly endowed when they met death with joy and a smile on their lips. Thanks to this gift the soul can acquire such magnanimity that it feels capable of alone performing all the works of others and of bearing all misfortunes, according to the words of the Apostle, 'I can do all things in him who strengtheneth me'. (Phil. 4, 13.) With this gift one comes to fear neither fire, nor water nor death. One says with St Paul: 'I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor any other creature shall be able to separate me from the love of God'. (Rom. 8, 39.) This is not all: this gift brings such energy and such constancy that not only is all mortal sin unthinkable, but one would rather suffer death than offend God deliberately by the least venial sin. The holy Doctors also tell us that it is better to accept death than to commit a venial sin. As to mortal sins, it is quite evident that one ought to prefer to die than to be guilty of even one knowingly and voluntarily. Remember, my dear children, that the Holy Spirit, when he takes possession of a soul, most often brings with him an abundance of light, peace and consolation. Is he not called the Paraclete, that is to say the Comforter?

The pity is that when imperfect souls experience these consolations, they yield to them and get stupidly attached to them to enjoy them with affection: they love these gifts which bring them delight and joy far more than they love God who is the giver of them. And so they stray miserably from their centre. Very different is the conduct of the wise and perfect: they are always careful to pass over these gifts and graces so as to penetrate or reach up to the Source from which they flow, without stopping at this or that, without letting themselves be carried away by these divine streams of whatever kind: all the strength of their soul's gaze is fixed solely on God.

The fifth gift of the Holy Spirit which follows immediately is *counsel*. It is absolutely necessary to the soul that has reached this stage. And indeed, the Holy Ghost will now withdraw all consolation, all joy, all the sensible sweetness which had come at first from the gifts and from grace, and this so as to bring the soul to an intimate knowledge of itself and make it realise what it is by nature and what it is capable of left to its own strength. From now on the soul is abandoned on all sides, in such a way that it no longer feels anything of God, nor of divine grace, nor of spiritual consolation. All that it had experienced before, as a result of the gifts, has now become alien to it. All these graces are hidden or taken away, so much so that the soul knows not which way to turn, what to do or where to go. In this forlorn state one has great need

of the gift of counsel so as to learn how to conduct oneself according to God's good pleasure. And in fact, through this gift one learns to be resigned, to be mortified, how to endure the mysterious and terrible judgments of God, and finally to accept joyfully the immense sorrow that results from the loss and privation of these good things of which the enjoyment was so sweet and precious. And it is in this way that, with perfect submission, the soul divests itself of all self-seeking, so as to plunge into the abyss of the good pleasure and the will of God, so that, if God pleases, it declares itself ready to remain in this poverty and destitution not only for a week or a month but for thousands of years and even for all eternity. It will go further. If God willed it to suffer the pains of hell and to shut it up there for ever, it would still be completely resigned to the judgment and good pleasure of God. That is perfect resignation. All else is nothing, even if one had given up a thousand worlds, compared to this act of abandonment. The very martyrs, in the act of shedding their blood for God, were less heroic. They were, in fact, overflowing interiorly with divine consolations, and all their sufferings were mere sport; they went to death full of joy. But to be deprived of God, to be utterly without him in one's interior soul, that is the suffering that immeasurably surpasses all others. Add to that all kinds of troubles, temptations, faults that we thought we had conquered for ever and which present themselves more strongly and more violently than before to the soul thus forsaken, delivering it up to much more terrible assaults than those it had undergone formerly as a docile victim. And this is what it is supremely necessary to endure humbly. In all this we must submit ourselves to God's good pleasure and offer him a heart resigned and ready to suffer as long as he pleases. However, in this desert of the soul, abandonment is such that one can never stand still for one hour: now one trouble comes, now another; one passes successively through every torture. And it is that that we have to endure to the end, without losing courage and always resigned.

Why, do you think, did our Lord tell St Peter he must forgive his brother seventy times seven? It was with the sole aim of showing us that he knew perfectly the weakness of man left to himself. He knew that he could not only fall seventy times, but actually he falls more frequently still. But however frequent his falls, each time from the moment that he acknowledges his sin he raises himself up again and turns to God. Oh! it is a great thing and an immense happiness to recognise that one has fallen and turned away from God and to return to him. However, as I have said, in the midst of all these miseries, we must be resigned, following the

counsel of God, to leave all things and transcend them, so as to return to the first source in the depths of the soul, in the divine will.

The first three gifts, as we have seen, make the soul good and pure, the others render it altogether divine and heavenly. By this firm resignation indeed, of which we have just spoken, man puts one foot into heaven. And when he has generously borne this torment of total abandonment, he will have no other pain to suffer in the future: even hell is no longer to be feared. It is impossible, is it not, that God should abandon himself? Well then, it is also quite impossible that he should abandon the soul that it so resigned and trusting in him. This soul has offered him everything, has left everything, it has attached itself entirely to the Unique One, to its principle, to its origin. And so all the pains, torments and sufferings of this life have been stored up in this one Being, in such a way that it counts them all as nothing any more, they can no longer affect it. It glories in its afflictions. Not only is it not saddened by misfortune, but is filled with overflowing joy. In the midst of all its trials, indeed, it is enjoying heaven: there is its conversation, there does it abide. There only remains for it to withdraw its other foot from this world so as to dwell entirely in eternal life, the life that one enters directly after the troubles of this one. But already here below, the life of heaven has begun. The first fruits of it are tasted whilst waiting for the full and lasting enjoyment of the future world.

Finally, as sixth and seventh gift, the Holy Spirit grants an infusion of *understanding* and *wisdom*. These two gifts enable the just man, supernaturally, to enter into the depths and abyss of the divinity; there where God knows himself, there where he understands supremely his own wisdom and his Essence. The soul is so deeply plunged into this unfathomable abyss, it is so absorbed, that it no longer knows anything of itself, it no longer notices its way of life, its words, its deeds, its tastes, nor its knowledge, nor its love. As long as this lasts the mind distinguishes nothing of all these things in itself; but it is entirely absorbed in God, there where there is nothing but the divinity, one, pure and simple, an unutterable abyss, an essential unity. There God gives to the soul by grace what he is himself by nature: that is to say, he gives it his own essence, his unspeakable essence, which has no mode, no form, yet we must not forget that the soul remains ever a creature. And thus it is that Almighty God works in this soul all the operations that the soul itself has to fulfil: he praises, knows, loves, delights, in it and by it, in such sort that the soul has nothing to do but 'to suffer God' (*souffrir Dieu*). It is as difficult to describe this state

as it is to speak of the divine essence: we can only suggest a little of what takes place. Not only is human intelligence confounded, but even angelic intelligence. Not only does not surpass natural comprehension, but also that which is given by grace.

Even so it is up to this point that the Holy Ghost visits, draws and exalts all those who offer him a well-prepared place that he alone can fill; all those who give him in their innermost being the office of Father of the family, by obeying him with all their hearts.

With what docility, willingness, with what love, should we therefore leave all things and ourselves to follow this very sweet and generous Spirit, who gave himself of old, as we have said, to the holy Apostles and to all the disciples, and who gives himself every day still and at every hour, to all those who are capable of receiving him!

May the all-powerful God, blessed for ever, grant us to be worthy to receive him as perfectly as possible. Amen.



THE DAUGHTERS OF THE CHURCH

BY

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AMONG the new forms of religious life which now seem to be a characteristic of this present age is that lived by the Daughters of the Church in their monastery at Bruges. Their ideal is both contemplative and active. To a casual visitor to the Béguinage—for the 'Monastère de la Vigne' occupies the 700 years old Béguinage, which was dying out for want of subjects, with a new monastic cloister, refectory and cells built out at the back of one of the old Béguinte's cottages—the life may seem almost wholly contemplative. What is most apparent as one crosses the quadrangle, whether by day or, if one is privileged to be a guest in the house, under a clear, bright winter's moon as one makes one's way to the church for Matins, is the almost palpable sense of the presence of God, of the nearness of the supernatural, of silence, of recollection, of a life lived on another plane or in another dimension caught up in God. This impression will be deepened if one assists at the morning Mass, dialogued, or, if it be a feast-day, sung, with its Offertory procession at which each nun gravely places her host upon the paten, and its *Benedicite* of thanksgiving, the verses