

Greene is offering a portrait of the life of the man who wrote the novels. Without that particular sense of failure there wouldn't have been this particular fiction. *A Sort of Life* is the autobiography of the man who has written those *particular* eighteen novels, plays and short stories. For such a man, childhood, boredom, and a recurrent sense of failure, are the things that have to be set down, because these are the elements that precipitated his imagined world. His public career, the career that finds an emblem in its passport, may have provided material for that world, but was not the condition for its existence—and so Greene excludes it from his autobiography. Similarly, his conversion to Catholicism, his marriage, did not affect that world—and so they, too, are rigidly excluded. And what we are left with is not the life of a man, but with the life of a particular novelist, the only life Greene feels justified in portraying. Stripped of the fiction to which it gave rise, it seems bleak and inconsequential. But that is the honesty of the book, a refusal to go beyond its brief—to show a life which could find its sharpest motive in the creation of an imagined world.

What are the motives which lie behind the writing of such an autobiography? For Greene the answer is paradoxical, indeed—it is by the writing of such an account to convey the negative truth that his life is not to be found there. It is in his art. But in its turn such an art could only exist by courtesy of such a life. It is, indeed, 'a sort of life'—but it is a sort of fiction also.

## **Life in Fire**

### **by Geoffrey Preston, O.P.**

Jesus of Nazareth is said to be the sacrament of the saving grace of God and of man's response to God in that grace. In himself Jesus is the encounter between God and mankind, the Immediator of man and God, the Word of God made world and history, man in his concrete dimensions and the total nexus of his relationships taken up into God. According to the apostolic preaching, in him alone, in his 'name' alone, is there the means of passing from a lethal situation into the possibility of survival. If men are going to pass from the world that is doomed to death, that can only be by entering into him, into his name, by in some way becoming him, by living out the biography of the one who, alone, no longer belongs to the dead past. Living it out, amongst other ways, sacramentally. Sacramentally we put on Christ, we are conformed to Christ, we are made one body, one spirit, with him.

*An old problem reconsidered*

Sacramentally we enter upon the life of Christ by the rites of initiation, or rather by the single but modulated initiation-rite of baptism-confirmation. In those Churches where Christian initiation (rightly or unfortunately) has come to be divided into two rites separated by a more or less lengthy interval of time, there has always been a serious problem about how to speak of confirmation, a problem that has compromised attempts at an effective catechesis of the sacrament and, incidentally, often created something of an embarrassment in speaking of the place of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. Only a very few theologians have felt able to deny that a baptized, unconfirmed person is a Christian. A Christian without the Holy Spirit is no Christian. But confirmation claims to have to do with the sending of the Holy Spirit on a baptized person: the prayer in the celebration of the sacrament obstinately asks God to send (*emitte, immitte*) the Holy Spirit in his seven-fold power on those who have been born again from water and from Holy Spirit and have been freed from all their sin. The normal way of dealing with this problem has been to speak of the sending in confirmation in terms of the strengthening ('confirmation') of a Gift already received; but there are obvious difficulties in giving an adequate account of a once-and-for-all strengthening. If the question is posed in terms of the relative efficacy of the two rites in imparting the gift of the Holy Spirit, then the problem may be insoluble.

The 'name' of Jesus now is the name of the man who died and was raised (in the Holy Spirit) and who was filled with Holy Spirit (to impart to others). 'Being exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear.' Entering into the name of Jesus involves entering into that part of his biography which has to do with his being filled with Holy Spirit in his risen life and made free to pour it out on others. The full life-story of Jesus includes the chapter about Pentecost as well as the Good Friday-Easter chapter. The relationship of baptism to confirmation is congruent with the relationship of Good Friday and Easter to Pentecost. The appropriate language for talking of the baptismal aspect of Christian initiation is the language of the death and resurrection of Jesus; the confirmation aspect of the rite is properly talked about in the language of Pentecost. To make this sort of separation of Good Friday and Easter from Pentecost is not a necessary way of telling the story of Jesus: the fourth gospel tells that story properly and canonically without positing a distinct Pentecost. But what happened to Jesus in being raised is of such a quality that it can make a new chapter as appropriate as Luke found it to be and as the tradition of the liturgical year (which either followed him or influenced him) has also found it to be. Either way of telling the story belongs as of right in the Church; both ways of telling the story are embedded in

the founding documentary experience of the Church. Within this frame of reference, it makes sense to celebrate Christian initiation as a single rite or as two rites. But a discussion of confirmation as a distinct rite can best be pursued by drawing out all that is implied by the possibility of treating Pentecost as a distinct chapter in the life-story of Jesus.

### *Seen and heard*

The Jesus of Pentecost is the Jesus who sends the Holy Spirit, the one who has himself received the Promise of the Father and who pours it out on others. Jesus risen, the Jesus of Good Friday and Easter, need not be a Saviour. To say that God raised Jesus from the dead (even 'in the Holy Spirit') need imply no more than a personal vindication, even a vindication of Jesus against the rest of men. Jesus raised need not be Jesus-for-us. It is in the imparting of the Holy Spirit that the risen Jesus shows himself as Jesus-for-us. And he does that by becoming Jesus-with-us in giving his Spirit to be our Spirit, to become our new heart and new soul, our new centre of gravity. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus and given to be ours. But being conformed to the Jesus of Pentecost does not mean simply receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit from him, or from the Father through him. That Gift is received by him and by us in the event of Easter and in the Easter of our baptism as we are made one with him in being raised in the Spirit. Being conformed to the Jesus of Pentecost to the Jesus in whose life-story Pentecost can feature as a new chapter, means being made one with the Sender of the Spirit; it means that we who have received Holy Spirit become one with the Jesus through whom Holy Spirit is poured out on others. A confirmed Christian is one who can and who should pour out the Holy Spirit on others in such a way that they, too, are changed, that there will occur amongst them and around them that which can be 'seen and heard', be noteworthy. Here is the ambiguous significance of that crux text in the fourth gospel: 'He who believes in me, as the scripture has said: Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water'. The waters flow from the heart of the whole Christ; the Christian (though he never ceases to stand over against Jesus as Lord) becomes not only a recipient but also a giver of that Spirit whose personal name is Gift. And so in the ritual of the Church it is altogether appropriate that the words of the 'pentecostal' Jesus of the fourth gospel can be said by a Christian: Receive Holy Spirit.

It is here that the classical description of confirmation as the sacrament of the fullness of grace or of Christian maturity comes into its own. The mature Christian is one who sends and not only receives the Holy Spirit. The mature Christian is one through whose agency God pours out the Holy Spirit on other people, one that is who shares in the Messianic work of Jesus. In the fourth gospel that Messianic work is summed up as the remission of sins, though this

expression must be understood as much more than a negative removal of guilt: the risen Jesus breathes Holy Spirit on the apostles so that they can forgive sins. A later euchological tradition in the Church has seen the Holy Spirit as being personally such forgiveness. To forgive sins is to give the Holy Spirit; and so it is appropriate that the ritual gesture which expresses both absolution and the imparting of the Holy Spirit should be one and the same: the laying on of hands. Without the Holy Spirit there is no forgiveness; and there is no forgiveness which does not bring the Holy Spirit. And forgiveness of sin, the gift of the Holy Spirit, is also fellowship with all other believers. From at least the time of Leo the Great, those baptized by people outside the visible Church have been welcomed into full communion with the Church by this same gesture of laying on of hands for the gift of the Spirit, a rite which cannot properly be distinguished from confirmation. Reconciled with God in the fellowship of God's people, the confirmed Christian shares in the Messianic work of Christ, being made himself an agent of reconciliation. 'As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' The mission of the apostles and of the Church that shares their apostolic task is the mission of Christ.

And so all the pentecostal gifts, the gifts of confirmation, the gifts of the Holy Spirit whose personal name is Gift, are intended for the building up of the whole body of the redeemed, for 'edification'. They are all offered as styles of preaching, of bringing people into a situation in which they can respond to the invitation to 'receive Holy Spirit', to 'take Holy Spirit'. The 'character' of confirmation, its *res et sacramentum*, is said by St Thomas (ST IIIa, q72, a5, ad 2) to be the power and authority given to a person publicly to profess the faith of Christ in words *quasi ex officio*. Preaching, the typical form of such public profession in words, is an action of Christ, a Messianic activity, a mode of his presence, a form in which he himself offers the Holy Spirit to those who hear the word. A Christian who does not preach in some form (and St Thomas does not insist on the 'in words') is an immature Christian, a latent Christian, like the apostles in the Lucan time-scheme between Easter and Pentecost, still afraid and behind locked doors, waiting to be activated in their faith. Confirmation is the consummation of the sacrament of baptism; to talk about confirmation is to talk about the pentecostal activation of the latent faith of Easter, an activation which in the case of an adult will normally come (Johannine-fashion) with the faith itself. To share the destiny of Jesus of Nazareth is to share his mission too.

*More heard than seen*

*Quasi ex officio*: the confirmation perspective in Christian initiation, its spirit-rite, is the ordination side of becoming a Christian, the commitment to the mission as well as to the destiny of Christ, to

activity as well as to passivity. The Christian in being confirmed is ordained to the ministry of reconciliation and equipped for that ministry. The New Testament is clear enough that the gifts which matter are those which are for ministry, for service, those which can be useful. Gifts which are of no possible use to anybody would be questionably gifts which conform the recipient to the Christ who gave himself entirely for others. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Pre-eminent amongst these gifts are those which belong to the person of the Messiah in the Isaianic prophecy which underlies the traditional prayer in the celebration of confirmation: wisdom and knowledge. Other gifts which contribute to the picture of the Messianic age in Isaiah form part of the life of the New Testament Church too: miracles and healing, for instance. The point of St Thomas about words, though, is closer to the New Testament than is sometimes allowed for. In I Corinthians 12, for example, most of the charisms are verbal ones: the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, tongues and interpretation of tongues. The work of apostles, prophets and teachers and the discernment of spirits primarily involved the verbal articulation of the faith of Christ and its demands on the Church. At Pentecost the first remark of the crowds is their observation that the disciples are speaking the mighty works of God. *Sermone ditans guttura*: the Holy Spirit opens the mouths of the dumb. Facility in speaking is a gift of the Messianic era, facility in speaking *cum Deo aut de Deo*, with God or about God. Confirmation commits a person to proclaiming the mighty works of God to other people and back to God, to others in preaching and back to God by making the memorial before him of what he has done in Christ for us men and for our salvation. By the one who presides at the anamnesis, such a memorial is made *in persona Christi*, in the person of the Messiah, who gives thanks to his Father for what God has done on his behalf, who acknowledges his own existence (as Church and in his own person) as a gift, as unmerited. To pray before God in the Holy Spirit is to stand in his presence to serve him as a son in the Son with that most evangelical quality of boldness, parrhesia, freedom to say anything, the 'confidence' with which we pray to the Father in the words our Saviour gave us. To pray faithfully before God in the Holy Spirit is to open the way to discovering more of what it can mean to be one through whom God wishes to pour out the Holy Spirit on others. On the basis of the steadfast love of God, of his reliability, of his constancy as incarnate in Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today and for ever, on that basis a person who prays faithfully can fairly expect to discover that constant newness in God's dealing with men which is expressed in the various charisms he is given for praying and preaching. Such charisms, continually new ways in which the Holy Spirit embodies himself, will always be calling into question his assumptions about himself and God. They will force on him a

constantly recurring post-baptismal identity crises, but at the same time offer ways of again and again rekindling the gift of God which is in the man through the laying on of hands.

### *Total witness*

The reality of baptism by water is baptism in blood, martyrdom.<sup>1</sup> Amongst all the charisms that are given to a Christian to make him a vehicle of the Holy Spirit by his witness to others is that charism which is simply called 'witness'—the gift of martyrdom. All the ways of witnessing to Christ by the gifts of Pentecost (including the gifts of Church order) are brought to their most appropriate fulfilment in that gift which enables a man for the sake of the faith to die literally to this world and to live to God as one who wills to offer no resistance to God's intention of pouring out the Holy Spirit through him on others. Blood and Spirit are at one, and both are life, living and life-giving. The blood of the martyr is the seed of the Church because it speaks for Christ and witnesses to what God has done in him. The martyr's death is a preaching to men and a speaking to God, a eucharist of the mighty works of God which includes a plea for the completion of those works by the coming of Christ's kingdom with power. Like the souls of the martyrs under the heavenly altar, so the dry bones of the martyrs under the earthly altars plead for that coming of God's kingdom which the offering of the eucharist insistently requests. The martyrs plead for the number of their brethren to be made up; that is, they plead for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all flesh. Their prayer is part of the continuing prayer of Christ for us, and through them in Christ God pours out the Holy Spirit; and according to the experience of the Church he pours him out in forms that are seen and heard, by the gifts of healing in particular, which are associated with the memorials of the martyrs. Martyrdom is faith itself in its supreme manifestation, that faith which is manifested in the baptismal aspect of Christian initiation. Martyrdom is also the supreme form of witness to the faith. When a man who is burdened in a particular way with the task of preaching the faith and making the memorial of God's mighty works back to God, when such a man (that is, a bishop) witnesses before men and thanks God with all that is in him, with his very life, then the Christian people have always recognized an altogether special grace of God. The martyred bishop is the confirmed man whose life is the most consistent; in the martyred bishop the grace of confirmation is enfleshed.

<sup>1</sup>See 'Death by Water' in *New Blackfriars*, December 1971, pp. 567-568.