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FIRST ADVENT SERMON

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

1. The Innovation after the Council

With the celebration of the 50th year of the end of the Second Vatican Council, the first “post-conciliar” period comes to a close and a new one begins. If the first period was categorized by problems relating to the “reception” of the Council, this new period will be characterized, I believe, by the completion and integration of the Council—in other words, by re-reading the Council in the light of the fruit it produced while also highlighting what was lacking in it or only present in a seminal phase.

The major innovation in theology and in the life of the Church after the Council has a specific name: the Holy Spirit. The Council had certainly not ignored the Holy Spirit’s action in the Church, but it had spoken of it almost always “in passing,” often mentioning him but without emphasizing his central role, not even in *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. In one conversation during the time that we were together on the International Theological Commission, I remember that Father Yves Congar used a striking image in this regard: he spoke of a Holy Spirit who is sprinkled here and there throughout the texts like sugar sprinkled on top of pastries without, however, being part of the recipe itself.

Nevertheless, the thaw had begun. We can say that the intuition of St. John XXIII about the Council as “a new Pentecost for the Church” found its actualization only later after the conclusion of the Council, as has so often happened in the history of the Councils.

In the coming year, the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church will occur. It is one of the many signs—the most noticeable because of the magnitude of the phenomenon—of an awakening to the Holy Spirit and charisms in the Church. The Council had paved the way for this reception, speaking in *Lumen gentium* of the charismatic dimension of the Church alongside the institutional and hierarchical dimension and insisting on the importance of charisms.¹ In his homily for the Chrism Mass of Holy Thursday in 2012, Benedict XVI affirmed,

Anyone who considers the history of the post-conciliar era can recognize the process of true renewal, which often took unexpected forms in living movements and made almost tangible the inexhaustible vitality of holy Church, the presence and effectiveness of the Holy Spirit.

¹ *Lumen gentium* (*The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*), no. 12.

Contemporaneously the renewed experience of the Holy Spirit stimulated theological reflection.² Soon after the Council, treatises on the Holy Spirit multiplied: among Catholics, that of Yves Congar,³ of Karl Rahner,⁴ of Heribert Mühlen,⁵ and of Hans Urs von Balthasar⁶; among Lutherans, that of Jürgen Moltmann,⁷ of Michael Welker,⁸ and many others. On the part of the magisterium there was the encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem (On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World)* by St. John Paul II. In 1982 on the occasion of Sixteenth Centenary of the First Council of Constantinople in 381, that same Supreme Pontiff sponsored the International Congress of Pneumatology at the Vatican, and its proceedings were published in two large volumes called *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum*.⁹

In recent years we have witnessed a decisive step forward in this direction. Toward the end of his career Karl Barth made a provocative statement that was in part a self-criticism. He said that in the future a new theology would be developed, the “theology of the third article.”¹⁰ By “third article” he of course meant the article in the creed about the Holy Spirit. His suggestion did not fall on deaf ears. It has given rise to the present theological current that is precisely named the “Theology of the Third Article.”

I do not think that such a current aims to substitute itself for traditional theology (and it would be mistake if it did); rather it is meant to come alongside of it and reinvigorate it. It proposes to make the Holy Spirit not only the object of one treatise, pneumatology, but also the atmosphere, so to speak, in which the whole life of the Church and all theological research unfolds—for the Holy Spirit is the “light of dogmas,” as an ancient Church Father described him.

² See Klaus Heitmann and Heribert Mühlen, eds., *Erfahrung und Theologie des Heiligen Geistes* (Munich: Kösel, 1974).

³ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. Geoffrey Chapman (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 73ff; original, 1979-1980 in French.

⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Spirit in the Church*, trans. J. G. Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1985); original, 1977 in German.

⁵ Heribert Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist als Person: Ich—Du—Wir* [The Holy Spirit as a Person: I-You-We] (Munich: Aschendorf, 1963).

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Creator Spirit*, vol. 3, *Explorations in Theology*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993); original, 1967 in German.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 180-197; original, 1991 in German.

⁸ Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1994), pp. 40-44; original, 1992 in German.

⁹ Jose Saraiva Martins, ed., *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum*, 2 vols. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983).

¹⁰ See Karl Barth, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,” in *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 278, and *Karl Barth’s Table Talk*, trans. John D. Godsey (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), p. 28.

The most complete treatment of this recent theological current is a volume by scholars that appeared in English this last September called *Third Article Theology*.¹¹ Beginning with the great tradition of the trinitarian doctrine, theologians from various Christian Churches offer their contributions to this book as an introduction to a systematic theology that is more open to the Spirit and more responsive to current needs. As a Catholic, I too was invited to contribute to the book with an essay on “Christology and Pneumatology in the Early Centuries of the Church.”

2. The Creed Read from Below

The reasons that warrant this new theological orientation are not only dogmatic but also historical. In other words, we can understand what the theology of the third article is and what it aims for if we keep in mind how the actual Nicene-Constantinopolitan symbol came about. That history clearly points to the usefulness of examining that symbol “in reverse” at some point, that is, starting from the end instead of from the beginning.

Let me explain what I mean. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan symbol reflects the Christian faith in its ultimate phase after all the council clarifications and definitions were completed in the 5th century. It reflects the order reached at the end of the process of formulating the dogma, but it does not, however, reflect the process itself, faith in the making. In other words, it does not correspond to the process by which the faith of the Church was actually formed historically, nor does it correspond to the process by which someone arrives at faith today, understood as a living faith in a living God.

In today’s creed one begins with God the Father and Creator and moves on from him to the Son and his redemptive work, and finally to the Holy Spirit operating in the Church. In reality, the faith followed a reverse path. It was the Pentecostal experience of the Spirit that brought the Church to discover who Jesus was and what his teaching was. With Paul and above all with John we reach the point of ascending from Jesus to the Father. It is the Paraclete who, according to Jesus’ promise (see Jn 16:13), leads the disciples into “all the truth” about himself and the Father.

Basil of Caesarea summarizes the development of revelation and of salvation history this way:

The way of the knowledge of God lies from One Spirit through the One Son to the One Father, and conversely the natural Goodness and the inherent Holiness and the royal Dignity extend from the Father through the Only-begotten to the Spirit.¹²

¹¹ Myk Habets, ed., *Third Article Theology: A Pneumatological Dogmatics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016).

¹² Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, XVIII, 47, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, p. 29; see *De Spiritu Sancto*, XVIII, 47 (PG 32, 153).

In other words, on the level of creation and being, everything comes from the Father, goes through the Son, and reaches us through the Spirit. However, in the order of redemption and conscious awareness, everything begins with the Holy Spirit, goes through the Son Jesus Christ, and returns to the Father. We could say that St. Basil is the real initiator of Third Article Theology! In the Western tradition this is expressed concisely in the final stanza of the hymn “Veni creator.” Addressing the Holy Spirit, the Church prays,

*Per te sciamus da Patrem
noscamus atque Filium,
Te utriusque Spiritum
credamus omni tempore.*

Oh, may Thy grace on us bestow
the Father and the Son to know;
and Thee, through endless times confessed,
of both the eternal Spirit blest.

This does not in the least mean that the Church’s creed is imperfect or that it needs to be reformulated. It cannot be other than what it is. However, what is sometimes useful is to change our approach to reading it so as to retrace the path by which it was formulated. There is the same contrast between the two ways of approaching the creed—as a finished product or in its process of formulation—as there is, on the one hand, between leaving St. Catherine’s Monastery early in the morning and personally climbing Mount Sinai and, on the other hand, reading the account of someone who climbed it before we did.

3. A Commentary on the “Third Article”

With this in view, I would like to offer reflections on some aspects of the Holy Spirit’s action in the three meditations for Advent, beginning precisely with the third article of the creed that pertains to him. The article includes three great affirmations. Let us start with the first one that says,

a) *“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.”*

The creed does not say that the Holy Spirit is “the” Lord (just above in the creed we proclaim, “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ”). “Lord” (in the original text, *to kyrion*, neuter!) indicates here the nature, not the person; it says *what* the Holy Spirit *is* but not *who* he *is*. “Lord” means that the Holy Spirit shares in the lordship of God, that he is in the category of Creator, and not the category of a creature. In other words, he has a divine nature.

The Church reached this certainty based not only on Scripture, but also on her own experience of salvation. The Spirit, wrote St. Athanasius, cannot be a creature because when we are touched by

him (in the sacraments, in the word, in prayer), we experience entering into contact with God in person and not with his intermediary. If the Spirit divinizes us, it means that he is God himself.¹³

Could we not say the same thing in the symbol of faith in a more explicit way, defining the Holy Spirit purely and simply as “God and consubstantial with the Father” as was done for the Son? Certainly, and this was the criticism of the definition quickly leveled by some bishops, including Gregory Nazianzus. However, for reasons of expediency and peace, saying the same the thing with equivalent expressions was preferred, attributing to the Spirit, in addition to the title of “Lord,” the *isotimia*, that is, equality with the Father and the Son in being adored and glorified by the Church.

The description of the Spirit as “*the giver of life*” is drawn from various passages in the New Testament: “It is the Spirit that gives life” (Jn 6:63); “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:2); “the last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45); “the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life” (1 Cor 3:6).

Let us ask three questions here. First, what kind of life does the Holy Spirit *give*? The answer: divine life, the life of Christ. A supernatural life, not a natural super-life. He creates the new man, not Nietzsche’s superman with his “pride of life.” Second, *where does he give us this life*? The answer: in baptism, which is in fact represented as a “rebirth in the Spirit” (see Jn 3:5), in the sacraments, in the word of God, in prayer, in faith, and in suffering that is accepted in union with Christ. Third, *how does the Spirit give us life*? The answer: by making the works of the flesh die! He gives us that life through a death. “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live,” St. Paul says in Romans 8:13.

b) ... Who Proceeds from the Father (and the Son), Who with the Father and the Son Is Adored and Glorified”

Let us now move on to the second great affirmation of the creed about the Holy Spirit. Up to this point the creed has told us about the *nature* of the Spirit but not yet about the *person* of the Spirit. It has spoken of *what he is* but not *who* he is. It has also spoken to us about what the Spirit and the Father and the Son have in common—the fact of being God and giving life. With this present affirmation, however, we move on to what distinguishes the Holy Spirit from the Father and Son. What distinguishes him from the Father is that he *proceeds* from him. (The one who proceeds is other than the one from whom he proceeds!) What distinguishes the Spirit from the Son is that he proceeds from the Father not by generation but by *spiration*, a breathing forth. To express this in symbolic terms, he is not like a concept (*logos*) that proceeds from the mind but like a breath that proceeds from the mouth.

¹³ See St. Athanasius, “First Epistle to Serapion,” in *The Letters of St. Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 1, 24, trans. C. R. B. Shapland (London: Epworth Press, 1951), p. 61ff; see also *PG* 26, p. 585.

This is the pivotal part of the article in the creed because it is intended to define the position that the Paraclete occupies in the Trinity. This part of the creed is known primarily for the problem of the *Filioque* that for a millennium was the main point of disagreement between the East and the West. I will not spend time on this problem because it has been discussed more than enough and also because I spoke about it myself in this setting during Lent last year in treating the points of agreement on faith between the East and the West.¹⁴

I will limit myself to highlighting what we can retain from this part of the symbol that enriches our common faith, setting aside theological disputes. It tells us that the Holy Spirit is not simply a “poor relative,” so to speak, in the Trinity. He is not “a way that God acts,” an energy or a fluid that permeates the universe like the Stoics thought. He is a “subsistent relation” and therefore a person.

He is not so much “a third person singular” as he is “a first person plural.” He is the “We” of the Father and Son.¹⁵ To express this in a human way, when the Father and the Son speak of the Holy Spirit they do not say “he”; instead they say “we” because he is the unity between the Father and the Son. Here we can see the extraordinary fecundity of St. Augustine’s insight in which the Father is the one who loves, the Son is the one loved, and the Spirit is the love that unites them, the reciprocal gift.¹⁶ The belief of the Western Church that the Holy Spirit proceeds “from the Father and the Son” is based on this.

The Holy Spirit, nevertheless, will always remain the hidden God, even if we can know him by his effects. He is like the wind: no one knows where it comes from and where it will blow, but we can see the effects of its passing. He is like the light that illuminates everything around it but remains invisible.

This is why the Spirit is the least known and least beloved of the three Persons, despite the fact that he is Love in person. It is easier to think of the Father and Son as “persons,” but that is more difficult for us to do with the Spirit. There are no human categories that can help us understand this mystery. To speak of the Father, we have the assistance of philosophy that deals with the First Cause (the God of the philosophers); to speak about the Son, we have the human analogy of a father-son relationship, and we also have the history of the Word becoming flesh. However, to speak of the Holy Spirit we have nothing but revelation and experience. Scripture itself speaks of him almost always by using symbols from nature: light, fire, wind, water, perfume, the dove.

¹⁴ See Raniero Cantalamessa, *Due polmoni, un solo respiro. Oriente e occidente di fronte ai grandi misteri della fede* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2016), pp. 51-66 (French trans. *Deux poumons, une seule respiration: Vers une pleine communion de foi entre Orient et Occident* [Nouan le Fuzelier, France: Editions des Béatitudes, 2016], pp. 49-64).

¹⁵ See Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist als Person: Ich—Du—Wir*. The first person to describe the Holy Spirit as the “divine we” was Søren Kierkegaard, *Diary*, 2A 731, April 23, 1838.

¹⁶ See St. Augustine, “On the Trinity,” *Basic Writings of St. Augustine*, vol. 2, ed. Whitney J. Oates (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), p. 790.

We will fully understand who the Holy Spirit is only in Paradise. There we will live a life that will have no end, in a deepened understanding of him that will give us immense joy. He will be like a very gentle fire that will inundate our souls and fill us with bliss, like when love fills a person's heart and that person is happy.

c) “... *Who Has Spoken through the Prophets*”

We have now come to the third and last affirmation about the Holy Spirit. After we have professed our faith in the life-giving and sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit in the first part of the article (the Spirit is the Lord and the giver of life), now his charismatic action is also mentioned. Regarding this action, there is one charism that is mentioned, the one that Paul holds to be the most important, namely, prophecy (see 1 Cor 14).

In regard to the prophetic charism, the article mentions only one of its manifestations by the Holy Spirit: he “has spoken through the prophets,” that is, in the Old Testament. This affirmation is based on various texts in Scripture but in particular 2 Peter 1:21: “no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

4. An Article to Complete

The Letter to the Hebrews says, “God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb1:1). The Spirit has not, therefore, ceased speaking by means of the prophets; he did so through Jesus and still speaks today in the Church. This point and other gaps in the symbol were gradually filled in by the practice of the Church without the need to change the text of the creed because of it (as unfortunately happened in the Latin world with the addition of the *Filioque*). We have an example of this in the epiclesis of the Orthodox liturgy attributed to St. James that prays as follows:

Send . . . your most *Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who is seated with you, God and Father, and with your only-begotten Son*; he rules with you consubstantially and coeternally. He *spoke through the Law, the Prophets, and the New Testament*; he descended in the form of a dove upon our Lord Jesus Christ in the Jordan River, resting upon him, and descended on his holy apostles . . . on the day of holy Pentecost.¹⁷

Anyone who tries to find everything in the article about the Holy Spirit, is going to be disappointed. This fact demonstrates the nature and the limit of every dogmatic definition. Its purpose is not to say everything about a tenet of faith but to draw a perimeter within which every affirmation about that doctrine must be placed and that no affirmation can contradict. In this case, there are the additional factors that the article was formulated at a time when the reflection

¹⁷ For the “Anaphora of St. James,” see Anton Hännggi and Irmgard Pahl, *Prex Eucharistica: Textus e variis liturgiis antiquioribus selecti* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1968), p. 250.

on the Paraclete was just beginning and, as I said above, contingent historical circumstances (the emperor's desire for peace) led to a compromise between the parties.

We are not, however, left with only the words in the creed about the Paraclete. Theology, liturgy, and Christian piety, both in the East and the West, have clothed in "flesh and blood" the succinct affirmations of the symbol of faith. In the sequence of Pentecost of our Latin liturgy, the intimate personal relationship of the Holy Spirit with every individual soul, which is not mentioned in the symbol, is expressed by titles like "father of the poor," "the light of the heart," "sweet guest of the soul," and "greatest comforter." The same sequence addresses a series of prayers to the Holy Spirit that are particularly beautiful and responsive to our needs. Let us conclude by proclaiming them together, hopefully seeking to identify among them the one that we feel we need the most.

*Lava quod est sordidum,
riga quod est aridum,
sana quod est saucium.*

*Flecte quod est rigidum,
fove quod est frigidum,
rege quod est devium.*

Wash that which is sordid
water that which is dry,
heal that which is wounded.

Make flexible that which is rigid,
warm that which is cold,
rule that which is deviant.

SECOND ADVENT SERMON

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE CHARISM OF DISCERNMENT

Let us continue our reflections on the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian. Saint Paul mentions a specific charism called “discernment of spirits” (see 1 Cor 12:10). This phrase originally had a very specific meaning: it indicated the gift that made it possible to distinguish from among the inspired or prophetic messages given during an assembly those that came from the Spirit of Christ and those that came from other spirits, such as the spirit of man, or a demonic spirit, or the spirit of the world.

For Saint John this is its fundamental meaning as well. Discernment consists in testing “the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 Jn 4:1). For Paul the fundamental criterion for discernment is confessing Christ as “Lord” (1 Cor 12:3); for John, it is confessing that Jesus “has come in the flesh” (1 Jn 4:2), meaning, the Incarnation. In John, discernment already begins to take on a theological function as the criterion by which to discern true doctrines from false ones, orthodoxy from heresy, which would become pivotal later.

1. Discernment in ecclesial life

There are two areas in which this gift of discerning the voice of the Holy Spirit needs to be exercised: the ecclesial and the personal. In the ecclesial area, discernment of spirits is carried out by the authority of the magisterium, which, however, must take into account, along with other criteria, the “sense of the faithful.”

But I would like to dwell on one point in particular which may be helpful in the discussion taking place today on certain moral problems: the discernment of the signs of the time. The Second Vatican Council declared,

In every age the church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, it should be able to answer the ever-recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other.¹⁸

It is clear that if Church has to discern the signs of the times in the light of the gospel, it does not do so by applying long-standing measures and rules to the “times,” that is, the problems and situations that emerge in society, but rather by giving new responses, “intelligible to every generation” starting each time from the gospel. The difficulty that is encountered on this path—

¹⁸*Gaudium et spes* [*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*], n. 4, in *The Documents of Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello, 1995), p. 165.

and which must be taken seriously—is the fear of compromising the authority of the magisterium by admitting changes in its pronouncements.

There is a consideration, I believe, that can help overcome this difficulty in the spirit of communion. The infallibility that the Church and the pope claim is certainly not of a higher level than that which is attributed to revealed Scripture. Biblical inerrancy ensures that the Scripture writer expresses truth in the way and to the degree in which it could be expressed and understood at the time he wrote it. We see that many truths are articulated slowly and gradually, like the truth about the after-life and eternal life. In the moral sphere as well, many prior customs and laws are abandoned later to make way for laws and criteria that are more in accordance with the spirit of the Covenant. One example from among many: Exodus affirms that God will punish the children for the iniquities of the fathers (see Ex 34:7), but Jeremiah and Ezekiel say the opposite, that God will not punish the children for the sins of the fathers but that each person will be held responsible for his or her own actions (see Jer 31:29-30; Ez 18:1ff).

In the Old Testament the criterion by which people move beyond earlier proscriptions is a better understanding of the spirit of the Covenant and of the Torah. In the Church the criterion is a continuous re-reading of the Gospels in the light of new questions that are put to it. “*Scriptura cum legentibus crescit*,” said St. Gregory the Great: “Scripture grows with those who read it.”¹⁹

We know that the constant rule for Jesus’ actions in the Gospels, in moral questions, can be summarized in seven words: “No to sin, yes to the sinner.” No one is more severe than he is in condemning unjustly acquired wealth, but he invites himself to Zacchaeus’ house, and simply by going there to meet him he brings a change. He condemns adultery, even that of the heart, but he forgives the adulteress and gives hope back to her; he reaffirms the indissolubility of marriage, but he engages in conversation with the Samaritan woman who has already had five husbands, and he reveals to her the secret he had told no one else in such an explicit way: “I who speak to you am he [the Messiah]” (Jn 4:26).

If we ask ourselves how to justify theologically such a clear-cut distinction between the sinner and sin, the answer is very simple: sinners are God’s creatures, created by him and made in his image, and they maintain their dignity despite all their aberrations; sin is not the work of God: it does not come from him but from the enemy. It is the same reason why the Son of God became everything human beings are, “except sin” (see Heb. 4:15).

One important factor in accomplishing this task is the collegiality of the bishops, which the Council itself emphasized. Collegiality allows the bishops “to reach agreement on questions of major importance, a balanced decision being made possible thanks to the number of those giving

¹⁹ Gregory the Great, *Homilies on Ezekiel* 1.7, 8 (CCC 94).

counsel.”²⁰ The effective exercise of collegiality brings to bear on discernment and the solution to problems the diversity of local situations, points of view, insights and different gifts, which are present in every church and with every bishop.

We have a moving example of this in the first “council” of the Church, the Council of Jerusalem. That meeting allowed ample opportunity to both of the opposing points of view, those of the Judaizers and those who favored an openness to the pagans. There was “much debate,” but in the end they all agreed to announce their decision with this extraordinary formula: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .” (Acts 15: 28; see Acts 15:6ff).

We can see from this how the Spirit guides the Church in two different ways: sometimes in a direct, charismatic way through revelations and prophetic inspirations, and at other times in a collegial way, through the painstaking and difficult confrontation, and even compromise, between the different parties and points of view. Peter’s discourse on the day of Pentecost and at Cornelius’s house is very different from the one he later gave to justify his decision in front of the elders (see Acts 11:4-18; 15:14).

We need, therefore, to have confidence in the ability of the Spirit to achieve that accord in the end, even if at times it can seem as if the whole process is getting out of hand. Whenever pastors of the Christian churches gather together at the local or international level to discern or to make important decisions, each one should have a heartfelt, confident certainty of what the *Veni Creator* sums up in two verses: *Ductore sic te praeviso / vitemus omne noxium*, “So shall we not, with Thee for guide, / turn from the path of life aside.”

2. Discernment in our own lives

Let us move on to discernment in our own lives. As a charism applied to individuals, the discernment of spirits underwent a significant evolution over the centuries. Originally, as we have seen, the gift functioned to discern the inspirations of others, of those who had spoken or prophesied in an assembly. Later, it functioned mainly to discern *one’s own* inspirations.

This was not an arbitrary evolution of the gift: it was in fact the same gift even though it was used for different purposes. A large part of what spiritual authors have written concerning the “gift of counsel” also applies to the *charism* of discernment. Through the gift, or charism, of counsel, the Holy Spirit helps us to evaluate situations and to orient our choices based not only on human wisdom and prudence but also in the light of the supernatural principles of faith.

The primary and fundamental discernment of spirits is the one that allows us to distinguish the “the Spirit of God” from “the spirit of the world” (1 Cor 2:12). St. Paul offers an objective

²⁰*Lumen Gentium* [*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*], n. 22, p. 29.

criterion for discernment that is the same Jesus gave: the fruit. The “works of the flesh” demonstrate that a given desire has come from the old sinful nature, while “the fruits of the Spirit” reveal that a desire has come from the Spirit (see Gal 5:19-22). “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh.” (Gal 5:17)

At times, however, this objective criterion is inadequate because the choice is not between good and bad but between one good and another good, and the question is to discern what God wants in a specific circumstance. It was precisely in response to this need that Saint Ignatius of Loyola developed his teaching on discernment. He invites us to consider one thing above all: our own interior dispositions, the intentions (the “spirits”) that lie behind a choice. In so doing, he was aligning himself with an already established tradition. One medieval author had written,

No one can test the spirits to see if they are from God unless God has given him discernment of spirits to enable him to investigate spiritual thoughts, inclinations and intentions with honest and true judgment. Discernment is the mother of all virtues; everyone needs it either to guide the lives of others or to direct and reform his own life. . . . This then is true discernment, a combination of right thinking and good intention.²¹

St. Ignatius proposed practical ways to apply these criteria.²² For example, when you have two possible choices before you, it is good to select one of them as though you were about to follow it, and to remain in that stance for a day or more. You then evaluate your inner reaction to that choice to see if it brings peace, if it is in harmony with other choices you have made, if there is something within you that encourages you in that direction, or, on the contrary, if it leaves you with a cloud of uneasiness. Then you repeat that process with your other potential choice.

At the root of Saint Ignatius’s teaching on discernment is his doctrine of “holy indifference.”²³ It consists in placing oneself in a state of total willingness to accept the will of God, giving up all personal preference, like a scale ready to tip to the side where the greatest weight is. The experience of interior peace thus becomes the main criterion in all discernment. After long consideration and prayer, the choice that is accompanied by the greatest peace of heart must be the one retained.

It is essentially a question of putting into practice the ancient advice that Moses’ father-in-law gave him: “present the questions to God” and wait in prayer for his response (Ex 18:19). A deep-seated habitual disposition to do God’s will in every situation puts a person in the most favorable

²¹ Baldwin of Canterbury, “Treatise 6,” Second Reading for Friday of the Ninth Week of Ordinary Time in *The Office of Readings*, pp. 334-335; see also *PL* 204, p. 466.

²² See *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, Fourth Week, trans. Anthony Mottola (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 101-128.

²³ Cf. G. Bottereau, “Indifference,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 7, coll. 1688 ff.

position for good discernment. Jesus said, “My judgment is just because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 5:30).

The danger in some modern approaches to understanding and practising discernment is an emphasis on its psychological aspects to the point of forgetting the primary agent in each discernment, the Holy Spirit. Saint John sees the decisive factor in discernment in being “anointed by the Holy One” (1 Jn 2:20). Saint Ignatius also mentions that in certain cases only the anointing of the Holy Spirit allows us to discern what we should do.²⁴ There is a profound theological reason for this. The Holy Spirit is himself “the substantial will of God,” so when he enters into a soul, this “Will of God . . . makes himself known to the person into whom he pours himself.”²⁵

Discernment, in its essence, is not an art or a technique but a charism, a gift of the Spirit! Its psychological aspects are of great importance, but they always come second. One of the ancient Fathers wrote,

Only the Holy Spirit can purify the mind. . . . So by every means, but especially by peace of soul, we must try to provide the Holy Spirit with a resting place. Then we shall have the light of knowledge shining within us at all times, and it will show up for what they are all the dark and hateful temptations that come from demons, and not only will it show them up: exposure to this holy and glorious light will also greatly diminish their power. That is why the Apostle says: *Do not stifle the Spirit*. [1 Thess 5:19].²⁶

The Holy Spirit does not normally shed his light in our soul in an extraordinary or miraculous way but very simply through the words of Scripture. The most important examples of discernment in the history of the Church have come about this way. It was in hearing the saying from the Gospel, “If you want to be perfect . . . ,” that the Desert Father Anthony understood what he needed to do, and he founded monasticism.

This was also the way that Saint Francis of Assisi received the inspiration to initiate his movement of a return to the Gospel. He writes in his *Testament*, “After the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I

²⁴ Saint Ignatius Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 141, 414, trans. and comm. George E. Ganss (St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1969), p. 126, 204.

²⁵ See William of St. Thierry, *The Mirror of Faith*, 61, trans. Thomas X. Davis (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979), p. 49; see also *SCh* 301, p. 128.

²⁶ Diadochus of Photice, *On Spiritual Perfection*, 28, Second Reading for Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Ordinary Time, in *The Office of Readings*, p. 227, italics original; see also *SCh* 5, p. 87 ff.

should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel.”²⁷ It was revealed to him during Mass after listening to the passage from the Gospel in which Jesus tells the disciples to go into the world and “take nothing for your journey: no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics” (Lk 9:3).²⁸

I myself remember a small example of this same sort of thing. A man came to me during a mission and shared his problem with me. He had an eleven-year-old son who had not been baptized. He said, “If I baptize him, there will be trouble at home because my wife has become a Jehovah’s Witness. If I do not baptize him, my conscience will be uneasy because when we were married, we were both Catholic and promised to raise our children in the Church.” I told him to come back the next day because I needed time to pray and reflect. The next day he came to me radiant and told me, “I found the solution, Father. I was reading in the Bible about Abraham, and I saw that when he took his son Isaac to be offered in sacrifice, he didn’t mention anything to his wife!” The Word of God enlightened him better than any human advice could have. I baptized the boy myself, and it was a great joy for everyone.

Alongside listening to the Word, the most common practice for exercising discernment on a personal level is the examination of conscience. This practice should not be limited, however, only to preparation for confession but should become a continuous exercise of placing ourselves under God’s light to let him “search” our innermost being. If an examination of conscience is not done or not done well, even the grace of confession becomes problematic: either we do not know what to confess or we are too full of psychological or voluntaristic efforts, that is, we are aiming only at self-improvement. An examination of conscience limited to preparing for confession identifies some sins, but it does not lead to an authentic one-on-one relationship with Christ. It easily becomes just a list of imperfections that we confess so that we can feel better without the attitude of real repentance that makes us experience the joy of having “so great a Redeemer” in Jesus.

3. “Led by the Spirit”

The concrete fruit of this meditation should be a renewed decision to entrust ourselves completely and for everything to the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit as a kind of “spiritual direction.” It is written that “whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the sons of Israel would go onward; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not go onward” (Ex 40:36-37). Neither should we undertake anything unless the Holy Spirit moves us (according to

²⁷ Francis of Assisi, “Testament of Saint Francis,” in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1: *The Saint*, eds. Regis J. Armstrong et al. (New York: New City Press, 1999), p. 124. See also *Fontes Franciscanas*, p. 356.

²⁸ See Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, 22, trans. Christopher Stace (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2000), p. 24; see also *ED*, I, p. 201.

the Fathers, the cloud was a figure for him²⁹) and unless we have consulted him before every action.

We have the most vivid example of this in Jesus' life itself. He never undertook anything without the Holy Spirit. He went into the desert with the Holy Spirit; he returned in the power of the Spirit and began his preaching; he chose his apostles "through the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:2); he prayed and offered himself to the Father "through the eternal Spirit" (Heb 9:14).

We need to guard against a certain temptation, the temptation of wanting to give advice to the Holy Spirit instead of receiving it. "Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, / or as his counsellor has instructed him?" (Is 40:13). The Holy Spirit directs everyone and is himself directed by no one; he guides and is not guided. There is a subtle way of suggesting to the Holy Spirit what he should do with us and how he should guide us. We even make our own decisions at times and then attribute them flippantly to the Holy Spirit.

Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks about this inner leading of the Holy Spirit as a kind of "instinct of the righteous": "As in bodily life the body is not moved save by the soul, by which it has life, so in the spiritual life all of our movements should be through the Holy Spirit."³⁰ This is how the "law of the Spirit" works; this is what the Apostle calls being "led by the Spirit" (Gal 5:18).

We need to abandon ourselves totally to the Holy Spirit, like the strings of a harp to the fingers that pluck them. Like good actors, we need to listen attentively to the voice of the hidden prompter, so that we may recite our part faithfully on the stage of life. This is easier than some might think because our prompter speaks within us, teaches us everything, and instructs us about everything. At times we need only a simple glance inward, a movement of the heart, a prayer. We read this beautiful eulogy about a saintly bishop who lived in the second century, Melito of Sardis, that we would hope could be said of each of us after we die: he "lived entirely in the Holy Spirit."³¹

²⁹ See St. Ambrose *On the Holy Spirit*, III, 4, 21 (N.p.: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2014), p. 177; and *On the Sacraments*, I, 6, 22, in "On the Sacraments" and "On the mysteries," trans. Tom Thompson (London: S.P.C.K., 1950), p. 56.

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter to the Galatians*, V, 5, n. 318, in *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, eds. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Fabian R. Larcher and Matthew Lamb (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2011), p. 150; see also V, 7, n. 340, and *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, VI, 5, 3.

³¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History of the Church*, V, 24, 5, ed. Andrew Louth, trans. G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 172.

Let us ask the Paraclete to direct our minds and our whole lives with the words from a prayer recited in the Office for Pentecost in the Syrian Rite:

Spirit, dispenser of charisms to everyone;
Spirit of wisdom and knowledge, who so loves us all,
you fill the prophets, perfect the apostles,
strengthen the martyrs, inspire the teachers with teaching!
To you, our Paraclete God,
we send up our supplication along with this fragrant incense.
We ask you to renew us with your holy gifts,
to come down upon us as you came down on the Apostles in the upper room.
Pour out your charisms upon us,
fill us with knowledge of your teaching;
make us temples of your glory,
let us be overcome by the wine of your grace.
Grant that we may live for you, be of one mind with you, and adore you,
you the pure, you the holy, God Spirit Paraclete.³²

³²*Pontificale Syrorum*, in Emmanuel-Pataq Siman, *L'expérience de l'Esprit par l'Église d'après la tradition syrienne d'Antioche* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971), p. 309.

THIRD SERMON FOR ADVENT 2016 THE SOBER INTOXICATION OF THE SPIRIT

1. Two Kinds of Intoxication

On the Monday after Pentecost in 1975 at the closing of the First World Congress of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Blessed Paul VI delivered an address to the ten thousand participants gathered in the St. Peter's Basilica in which he defined the charismatic renewal as "a chance for the Church." When he ended reading his official discourse, the pope added these words extemporaneously:

In the fourth-century hymn by St. Ambrose that we read this morning in the breviary, there is a simple phrase that is difficult to translate: *Laeti*, which means "with joy," *bibamus*, which means, "let us drink," *sobriam*, which means "sober" or "temperate," *profusionem Spiritus*, which means "the outpouring of the Spirit." *Laeti bibamus sobriam profusionem Spiritus*. This could be the motto for your movement: its plan as well as a description of the movement itself.³³

The important thing to note immediately is that the words from Ambrose's hymn were of course not written for the charismatic renewal. They have always been part of the Liturgy of the Hours of the universal Church. This is therefore a joyful exhortation addressed to all Christians. As such I would like to present it in this meditation, also as my humble greeting to the Holy Father for his 80th birthday.

To be more accurate, in St. Ambrose's original text, instead of "*profusionem Spiritus*," "the outpouring of the Spirit," we find "*ebrietatem Spiritus*," that is, "the intoxication of the Spirit."³⁴ Tradition subsequently considered his original expression to be too audacious and substituted it with a milder and more acceptable word. In doing so, however, the meaning of a metaphor as ancient as Christianity itself was lost. In the Italian translation of the Breviary, the original text of the verse by St. Ambrose has been restored correctly. A stanza of the hymn at Lauds for the Fourth Week of the Breviary says,

And may Christ be food to us,
and faith be our drink,

³³ See "Pope Paul Addresses the Charismatic Renewal," *New Covenant*, July 1975, p. 25.

³⁴ *Sancti Ambrosii, Opera 22: Hymni, Inscriptiones, Fragmenta* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1994), p. 38. The Latin stanza: "*Christusque nobis sit cibus, / potusque noster sit fides; / laeti bibamus sobriam / ebrietatem Spiritus.*"

and let us joyfully taste
the sober intoxication of the Spirit.³⁵

What led the Fathers to take up the theme of “sober intoxication,” already developed by Philo of Alexandria,³⁶ was the text in which the Apostle exhorts the Christians in Ephesus that says,

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts. (Eph 5:18-19)

Starting with Origen, there are countless texts from the Fathers that illustrate this theme, alternating between the analogy and the contrast of physical intoxication and spiritual intoxication. The likeness lies in the fact that both types of intoxication infuse joy; they make us forget our troubles and make us escape ourselves. The contrast lies in the fact that while physical intoxication (from alcohol, drugs, sex, success) makes people shaky and unsteady, spiritual intoxication makes people steady at doing good. The first intoxication makes people come out of themselves to live below the level of reason; the second makes people come out of themselves to live above the level of their reason. Both use the word “ecstasy” (the name recently given to a deadly drug!), but one is an ecstasy downward and the other is an ecstasy upward.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem writes that those who thought the apostles were drunk at Pentecost were correct; they were mistaken only in attributing that drunkenness to ordinary wine, whereas it was “new wine” pressed from the “true vine,” who is Christ. The apostles were intoxicated, yes, but with that sober intoxication that puts to death sin and brings life to the soul.³⁷

Drawing on the episode of water flowing from the rock in the desert (see Ex 17:1-7) and on Paul’s comment about it in the First Letter to the Corinthians (“All drank the same supernatural drink . . . and all were made to drink of one Spirit” [1 Cor 10:4; 12:13]), Saint Ambrose wrote,

The Lord Jesus poured out water from the rock and all drank from it. Those who drank it only symbolically were satisfied; those who drank it in very truth were inebriated. Inebriation of this sort is good and fills the heart without causing the feet to totter. Yes, it is a good inebriation. It steadies the footsteps and makes sober the mind. . . . Drink Christ, for he is the vine; drink Christ, for he is the rock from which the water gushes forth. . . . Drink Christ, that you may drink His words. . . . Divine scripture is imbibed,

³⁵ St. Ambrose’s hymn “Splendor paternae gloriae” [“O Splendor of the Father’s Glory”], in Brian P. Dunkle, *Enchantment and Creed in the Hymns of Ambrose of Milan* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 222.

³⁶ See, among many examples, *On the Creation of the World in Philo: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Hans Lewy (Oxford: East and West Library 1946), p. 55. See *Legum allegoriae* 1, 84, “*methe nefalios*.”

³⁷ See St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *The Catechetical Letters of St. Cyril of Jerusalem*, 17, 18-19, reprint of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 7 (N.p.: Veritatis Splendor, 2014), p. 592; see PG 33, p. 989.

divine scripture is eaten when the juice of the eternal word runs through the veins of the mind and enters into the vital parts of the soul.³⁸

2. From Intoxication to Sobriety

How do we appropriate this ideal of sober intoxication and incarnate it in our current historical and ecclesial situation? Where, in fact, is it written that such a strong way of experiencing the Spirit was the exclusive prerogative of the Fathers and of the early days of the Church, but that it is no longer for us? The gift of Christ is not limited to a particular era but is offered to every era. There is enough for everybody in the treasure of his redemption. It is precisely the role of the Spirit to render the redemption of Christ universal, available to every person at every point of time and space.

In the past the order in which this dynamic was generally taught was that which went from sobriety to intoxication. In other words, the way to attain spiritual intoxication, or fervor, was sobriety, that is, abstinence from things of the flesh, fasting from the world and from one's desires—in a word, mortification. This understanding of the concept of sobriety was deepened in particular by Orthodox monastic spirituality and linked to the so-called "Jesus Prayer." According to this path sobriety means "a spiritual method" consisting of "vigilant attention" to free oneself from passions and evil speech, removing and leaving behind all carnal satisfactions, and having the only activity be repentance for sin and prayer.³⁹

Under different names—detachment, purification, mortification—this is the same ascetic doctrine found in the Latin saints and Doctors of the Church. Saint John of the Cross speaks about the soul's need to "detach and strip itself for God's sake of all that is not God."⁴⁰ These stages of spiritual life are called purgative and illuminative. Here the soul painstakingly frees itself of its natural habits to prepare for union with God and for His impartations of grace. These things constitute the third stage, the "unitive path," which the Greek authors call "divinization."

We are heirs of a spirituality that conceived of the road to perfection in this sequence: First we need to remain in the purgative stage for a long time before entering into the unitive stage; it is necessary for a person to practice sobriety for an extensive period before being able to experience intoxication. Every expression of fervor that manifests itself before that time is regarded as suspect. Spiritual intoxication, with all that it signifies, thus comes at the end and is reserved for the "perfect." The others, called "proficients," should especially engage in

³⁸ St. Ambrose, *Commentary on Twelve Psalms*, 1, 33, trans. Íde M. NíRian (Dublin: Halcyon Press, 2000), p. 21; see also *PL* 14, pp. 939-940.

³⁹ See Hesychius, "On Watchfulness and Holiness: Written for Theodolus," in *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber 1979), pp. 162-198.

⁴⁰ Saint John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel II*, 5, 7, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1958), p. 96.

mortification, without making claim to a strong and direct experience of God and of his Spirit while they are still struggling with their weaknesses.

There is great wisdom and experience underlying all this, and it would be wrong to consider these things outdated. It must be said, however, that such a rigid plan also marks a slow, gradual shift from a focus on grace to a focus on human effort, a shift from faith to works, sometimes verging on Pelagianism. According to the New Testament, there is a circularity and simultaneity between the two things: sobriety is necessary to achieve intoxication of the Spirit, and intoxication of the Spirit is needed to attain the practice of sobriety.

An ascetic path, undertaken without a strong initial impulse of the Spirit, would be a deadly labor and would produce nothing except “boasting in the flesh.” According to Saint Paul, it is “by the Spirit” that we must “put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom 8:13). The Holy Spirit is given to us so that we are able to mortify ourselves rather than being given as a reward for having mortified ourselves.

According to an early Church Father, a Christian life full of ascetic efforts and mortification but without the life-giving touch of the Spirit would be like a Mass in which there were many readings, many rites performed, and many offerings brought forward, but in which there was no consecration of the elements by the priest. Everything would remain as it was before. That Church Father concluded,

One must look on the life of the Christian in a similar way. He may have fasted, kept vigils, chanted the psalms, carried out every ascetic practice and acquired every virtue; but if the mystic working of the Spirit has not been consummated by grace with full consciousness and spiritual peace on the altar of his heart, all his ascetic practice is ineffectual and virtually fruitless, for the joy of the Spirit is not mystically active in his heart.⁴¹

This second path—from intoxication to sobriety—was the path that Jesus led his apostles to follow. Even though they had Jesus as their teacher and spiritual master, they were not in a position before Pentecost to put into practice hardly any of the gospel precepts. But when they were baptized with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, then we see them transformed and capable of enduring all kinds of hardships for Christ, even martyrdom. The Holy Spirit was the cause of their fervor rather than its effect.

There is another reason that impels us to rediscover this path from intoxication to sobriety. The Christian life is not only a matter of growing in personal holiness, it is also ministry, service, and proclamation. To accomplish these tasks we need “power from on high,” the charisms or, in a word, a profound Pentecostal experience of the Holy Spirit.

⁴¹ Macarius of Egypt, “Love,” 113, in *Philokalia*, vol. 3, trans. and ed. G. E. Palmer et al. (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 334-335.

We need the sober intoxication of the Spirit even more than the Fathers did. The world has become so averse to the gospel, so sure of itself, that only the “strong wine” of the Spirit can overcome its unbelief and draw it out of its entirely human and rationalistic sobriety, which passes itself off as “scientific objectivity.” Only spiritual weapons, says the Apostle, “have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:4-5).

3. The Penetrating Rain of the Spirit

Where are the “places” in which the Spirit acts today in this Pentecostal way? Let us listen once again to the voice of Saint Ambrose who was the cantor par excellence, among the Latin Fathers, of the sober intoxication of the Spirit. After discussing the two classic “places” in which one could receive the Spirit—the Eucharist and Scripture—he hints at a third possibility, saying,

There is, too, the inebriation that follows on the penetrating rain of the Holy Spirit. We read in the Acts of the Apostles . . . of those who spoke in foreign tongues and appeared, to those who heard them, to be drunk on new wine.⁴²

After noting the “ordinary” ways of being intoxicated by the Spirit, Saint Ambrose adds a different way with these words, an “extraordinary” way (extraordinary in the sense that it is not predetermined or instituted), that consists in re-living the experience the apostles had on the Day of Pentecost. He obviously did not add this third possibility to tell his audience that it was closed to them and had been reserved only for the apostles and the first generation of Christians. On the contrary, he intended to inspire the faithful to desire the experience of this “penetrating rain of the Spirit” that occurred at Pentecost. Also for St. Ambrose Pentecost was not a close event, but a possibility always open in the Church.

The possibility is therefore open also for us to draw upon the Spirit in this new way that depends solely on God’s sovereign and free initiative. We should not fall into the error of the Pharisees and scribes who said to Jesus, “There are six days for us to work, so why heal and do miracles on the Sabbath?” (see Luke 13:14). We could be tempted to say to God or to think, “There are seven sacraments that sanctify and confer the Spirit, so why go beyond them into new and unfamiliar ways?”

One of the ways in which the Holy Spirit is acting today, outside the institutional channels of grace, is the Charismatic Renewal. The theologian Yves Congar, in his address to the International Congress of Pneumatology at the Vatican in 1981 on the sixteenth centenary of the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople, said,

⁴² See Saint Ambrose, *Commentary on Twelve Psalms*, 35, 19, p. 47.

How can we avoid situating the so-called charismatic stream, better known as the Renewal in the Spirit, here with us? It has spread like a brushfire. It is far more than a fad. . . . In one primary aspect, it resembles revival movements from the past: the public and verifiable character of spiritual action which changes people's lives. . . . It brings youth, a freshness and new possibilities into the bosom of the old Church, our mother. In fact, except for very rare occasions, the Renewal has remained *within* the Church and, far from challenging long-standing institutions, it reanimates them.⁴³

The principal instrument by which the Renewal in the Spirit “changes people’s lives” is the baptism in the Spirit. I mention it in this place without of course any intention of proselytism, but because I think it is important that a reality which touches millions of Catholics around the world be known at the center of the Church.

The expression itself comes directly from Jesus who before ascending into heaven, referring to the future Pentecost, said to his apostles: “John baptized with water but you, not many days from now, will be baptized in the Holy Spirit” (Ac 1:5). This is a rite that has nothing esoteric about it but rather occurs with gestures of great simplicity, peace, and joy and is accompanied by attitudes of humility, repentance, and willingness to become like children so as to enter the kingdom.

It is a renewal and an actualization not only of baptism and confirmation, but also of the whole of Christian life: for spouses, a renewal of the sacrament of marriage; for priests, a renewal of their ordination; for consecrated people, a renewal of their religious profession. People prepare themselves for this, in addition to making a good confession, by participating in catechesis meetings by which they are put in vital and joyful contact with the principal truths and realities of the faith: love of God, sin, salvation, new life, transformation in Christ, the charisms, and the fruits of the Spirit. The most common and beautiful fruit is the discovery of what it really means to have a “personal relationship” with Jesus. In the Catholic understanding Baptism in the Spirit is not an arrival point, but a starting point toward Christian maturity and service to the Church.

A decade after the charismatic renewal appeared in the Catholic Church, Karl Rahner wrote,

Even an objective and rational theology does not have to reject all these enthusiastic experiences [of grace] out of hand. . . . Here we are certainly confronted with especially impressive, humanly affective, liberating experiences of grace which offer

⁴³ See Yves Congar, “Actualité de la pneumatologie,” in *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum*, ed. José Saraiva Martins, vol. 1 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983), p. 18, republished as “Pneumatology Today,” in *American Ecclesiastical Review* 167, no. 7 (1973): pp. 435-449.

wholly novel existential horizons. These mold the innermost attitude of a Christian for a long time and are quite fit . . . to be called “baptism in the Spirit.”⁴⁴

But is it right to expect that everyone should go through this experience? Is this the only possible way to experience the grace of Pentecost? If by the “baptism in the Spirit” we mean a certain rite in a certain context, we have to say no; it is not the only way to have a profound experience of the Spirit. There have been and are countless Christians who have had a similar experience without knowing anything about the baptism in the Spirit, receiving a spontaneous outpouring of the Spirit at the occasion of a retreat, a meeting, a reading, or, according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, when someone is called to a new and more demanding office in the Church.⁴⁵

Having said that, however, it must also be said that what is commonly called the “baptism in the Holy Spirit” or the “outpouring of the Spirit” has shown itself to be a simple and powerful way to renew the lives of millions of believers in almost all of the Christian churches. Even a normal course of spiritual exercises can be concluded very well with a special invocation of the Holy Spirit, if the person leading it has experienced it and the participants desire it. I had that very experience last year. The bishop of a diocese south of London took the initiative to convene a charismatic retreat that was open to the clergy of other dioceses as well. About one hundred priests and permanent deacons were present, and at the end they all asked for and received the outpouring of the Spirit, with the support of a group of laypeople from the Renewal who had come for that occasion. If the fruits of the Spirit are “love, joy, and peace” (Gal 5:22) by the end they were almost touchable with hands among those present.

This is not a question of adhering to one movement rather than to other movements in the Church. Nor is it even a question, properly speaking, of a “movement” but of a “current of grace” that is open to all and is destined to lose itself in the Church like an electric discharge that is dispersed within a mass and then disappears once it has accomplished its task.

Saint John XXIII spoke of “a new Pentecost”; the Blessed Paul VI went further, speaking of a “perennial Pentecost”. This is what he said during a general audience in 1972:

The Church needs her perennial Pentecost; she needs fire in her heart, words on her lips, prophecy in her outlook. [...] The Church needs to rediscover the eagerness, the taste and the certainty of the truth that is hers [...] And then the Church needs to feel flowing

⁴⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Spirit in the Church*, trans. John Griffiths (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 10-11.

⁴⁵ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *S.Th.* I,q.43,a.6 ad 2.

through all her human faculties a wave of love, of that love which is called forth and poured into our hearts ‘by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us’ (Romans 5.5)”⁴⁶.

Let us conclude therefore with the words of the liturgical hymn recalled at the beginning:

May Christ be food to us,
and faith be our drink,
and let us joyfully taste
the sober intoxication of the Spirit.

⁴⁶ *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, vol X, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, p. 1210 s. (Discourse of 29 Nov.1972); translation in E. O’Connor, *Pope Paul and the Spirit*, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 1978, p.183).

FOURTH ADVENT SERMON
“BY THE HOLY SPIRIT HE WAS INCARNATE
OF THE VIRGIN MARY”

1. Christmas, a Mystery “for Us”

In continuing our reflections on the Holy Spirit, and given the imminence of Christmas, let us meditate on the article in the creed that speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Incarnation. In the creed, we say, “For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.”

St. Augustine distinguished between two ways of celebrating an event in salvation history: as a mystery (in sacramento) or as a simple anniversary. In the celebration of an anniversary, he said, we only need to “indicate with a religious solemnity the day of the year in which the remembrance of the event itself occurs.” In the celebration of a mystery, however, “not only is the event commemorated, but we do so in a way that its significance for us is understood and received devoutly.”⁴⁷

Christmas is not a celebration in the category of an anniversary. (As we know, the choice of December 25 as the date was chosen for symbolic rather than historical reasons.) It is a celebration in the category of a mystery that needs to be understood in terms of its significance for us. St. Leo the Great had already highlighted the mystical significance of the “the sacrament of the Nativity of Christ” saying, “Just as we have been crucified with him in his passion, been raised with him in his resurrection, . . . so too have we been born along with him in his Nativity.”⁴⁸

At the basis of it all is the biblical event accomplished once and for all in Mary: the Virgin became the Mother of Jesus by the action of the Holy Spirit. This historical mystery, like all the events of salvation, is extended at a sacramental level in the Church and at a moral level in the life of the individual believer. Mary, as the Virgin Mother who generates Christ by the Holy Spirit, appears as the “type,” or the perfect exemplar, of the Church and of the believer. Let us listen to an author in the Middle Ages, Blessed Isaac of Stella, summarize the thinking of the Fathers in this regard:

Mary and the Church are one mother, yet more than one mother; one virgin, yet more than one virgin. Both are mothers, both are virgins. . . . In the inspired Scriptures, what is said in a universal sense of the Virgin Mother, the Church, is understood in an

⁴⁷ St. Augustine, “Letter 55,” 1, 2, in *Letters 1-99*, trans. Roland Teske, Part II, vol. 1, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2001), p. 216; see also *CSEL* 34, 1, p. 170.

⁴⁸ Leo the Great, “On the Feast of the Incarnation,” 6, 2, in *Leo the Great: Sermons*, trans. Jane P. Freeland and Agnes J. Conway (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 105; see also *PL* 54, p. 213.

individual sense of the Virgin Mary. . . In a way every Christian is also believed to be a bride of God's Word, a mother of Christ, his daughter and sister, at once virginal and fruitful.⁴⁹

This patristic vision was brought to light by the Second Vatican Council in the chapters of the constitution *Lumen gentium* dedicated to Mary. In three separate paragraphs in fact, the document speaks of the Virgin Mother Mary as the exemplar and model of the Church (no. 63), which is also called to be a virgin and mother in faith (no. 64), and of the believer who, imitating Mary's virtue, gives birth to and allows Jesus to increase in his or her heart and in the hearts of brothers and sisters (no. 65).

2. "By the Holy Spirit"

Let us meditate next on the role of each of the two protagonists, the Holy Spirit and Mary, to seek to draw inspiration for our own Christmas. St. Ambrose writes,

The birth from the Virgin is the work of the Spirit. . . . We cannot doubt that the Spirit is the Creator whom we know was the Author of the Lord's Incarnation. . . . If the Virgin conceived as of His operation and power of the Spirit, who will deny the Spirit as Creator?⁵⁰

In this text Ambrose perfectly interprets the role that the Gospel attributes to the Holy Spirit in the Incarnation, which calls him successively "the Holy Spirit" and "the power of the Most High" (Lk 1:35). He is the "Creator Spirit" who acts to bring beings into existence (as in Gen 1:2), to create a new and higher form of life. It is the Spirit who is "the Lord, the giver of life," as we proclaim in the same creed.

Here also, as at the beginning, the Spirit, creates "from nothing," that is, from the complete absence of human possibilities, without any need for assistance or support. And this "nothing," this void, this absence of explanations and natural causes, is called, in this case, the virginity of Mary. "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Lk 1:34-35). Her virginity here is a magnificent sign that cannot be eliminated or nullified without tearing the whole fabric of the Gospel account and its significance.

The Spirit that descended upon Mary is, then, the Creator Spirit who miraculously formed the flesh of Christ from the Virgin. But there is even more. In addition to being the "Creator Spirit" he is also for Mary "fons vivus, ignis, carita, / et spiritalis unctio," "fount of life and fire of love,

⁴⁹ Blessed Isaac of Stella, "Sermon 51," in the Roman Catholic *Office of Readings* for the Saturday of the Second Week of Advent; italics added. See also *PL* 194, pp. 1862-1863, 1865.

⁵⁰ St. Ambrose, "On the Holy Spirit," [*De Spiritu Sancto*], II, 38, 41, 43, in *Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), pp. 110-111.

and sweet anointing from above.”⁵¹ The mystery becomes enormously impoverished if it is reduced merely to its objective dimension, to its dogmatic implications (duality of nature, unity of person), while overlooking its subjective and existential aspects.

St. Paul speaks of “a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor 3:3). The Holy Spirit wrote this marvelous letter that is Christ above all in Mary’s heart so that, as Augustine says, Christ “was kept in Mary’s mind insofar as he is truth, he was carried in her womb insofar as he is man.”⁵² The famous saying, also by Augustine, that “Mary conceived Christ first in her heart and then in her body” (“*prius concepit mente quam corpore*”)⁵³ means that the Holy Spirit worked in Mary’s heart, illuminating it and inflaming it with Christ even before filling her womb with Christ.

Only the saints and mystics who have had a personal experience of God’s eruption in their lives can help us understand what Mary must have experienced at the moment of the Incarnation of the Word in her womb. One of them, St. Bonaventure, writes,

When she gave her consent to him, the Holy Spirit came upon her like a divine fire inflaming her soul and sanctifying her flesh in perfect purity. But the *power of the Most High overshadowed* her (Luke 1:35) so that she could endure such a fire. . . . Oh, if you could feel in some way the quality and intensity of that fire sent from heaven, the refreshing coolness that accompanied it, the consolation it imparted; if you could realize the great exaltation of the Virgin Mother, the ennobling of the human race, the condescension of the divine majesty, . . . then I am sure you would sing in sweet tones with the Blessed Virgin that sacred hymn: *My soul magnifies the Lord* .⁵⁴

The Incarnation was experienced by Mary as a charismatic event of the highest degree that made her the model of a soul who is “aglow with the Spirit” (Rom 12:11). It was her Pentecost. Many of Mary’s actions and words, especially in the account of her visit to St. Elizabeth, cannot be understood unless we see them in the light of a mystical experience that is beyond compare. Everything that we see operating visibly in someone who is visited by grace (love, joy, peace, light) we should recognize in unique measure in Mary at the Annunciation. Mary was the first to experience “the sober intoxication of the Spirit” that I spoke about last time, and her “*Magnificat*” is the best evidence of that.

⁵¹ Verses from the hymn “Veni, Creator Spiritus” (“Come, Holy Spirit, Creator blest”) in the Roman Breviary.

⁵² St. Augustine, “Sermon 25,” 7 (Denis), in *The Office of Readings* for November 21 (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1983), p. 1640; see also *PL* 46, p. 938.

⁵³ St. Augustine, “Sermon 215,” 4, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, Part 3, vol. 6, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John Rotelle (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), p. 160. See also *PL* 38, p. 1074.

⁵⁴ St. Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae* [*The Tree of Life*], 1, 3, in *Bonaventure*, trans. and intro. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 127-128; italics original.

It is, however, a “sober” intoxication, a humble one. Mary’s humility after the Incarnation seems to us like one of the greatest miracles of divine grace. How was Mary able to carry the weight of this thought: “You are the Mother of God! You are the highest of all creatures!”? Lucifer was not able to handle this tension righteously and, seized by headiness of his own lofty stature, was cast down. Not so Mary. She remains humble, modest, as if nothing had happened in her life for which she could make any claims. On one occasion the Gospel shows her to us in the act of begging others for even the chance to see her Son: “Your mother and your brethren,” they tell Jesus, “are standing outside, desiring to see you” (Lk 8:20).

3. “Of the Virgin Mary”

Let us now look more closely at Mary’s part in the Incarnation, her response to the action of the Holy Spirit. Objectively Mary’s part consisted in having given flesh and blood to the Word of God in her divine maternity. Let us quickly retrace the historical path through which the Church arrived at contemplating in its full light this unheard of truth: Mother of God! A creature, the

Mother of the Creator! In Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* St. Bernard salutes her as “Virgin Mother, daughter of your Son, / more humble yet more exalted than any other creature.”⁵⁵

At the beginning and for the entire period dominated by the struggle against the gnostic and docetist heresy, Mary’s motherhood comes to be seen almost only as a *physical motherhood*. These heretics denied that Christ had a real human body, or, if he did, they denied that his human body was born of a woman, or, if it was indeed born of woman, they denied that it was really taken from her flesh and blood. The truth needed to be asserted forcefully against them that Jesus was the son of Mary and “the fruit of her womb” (see Lk 1:42) and that Mary was the true and natural Mother of Jesus.

During this ancient period in which the real or natural motherhood of Mary was affirmed against the Gnostics and the Docetists, the use of the title *Theotokos*, Mother of God, appeared for the first time, probably with Origenes in the III century. From that point on, it would be the use of that title in particular that would lead the Church to a discovery of a more profound motherhood, one that we could call a *metaphysical motherhood*, insofar as it pertains to the person of the Word. At christological controversies when the central problem regarding Jesus was no longer his true humanity but the unity of his person. Mary’s motherhood no longer comes to be seen only in relation to Christ’s human nature but, more correctly, in relation to the unique person of the Word made man. And since this unique person that Mary generates according to the flesh is none other than the divine Person of the Son, she consequently appears as the true “Mother of God.”

⁵⁵ Dante, *Paradiso* 33:1, in *The Divine Comedy*: “Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio, / umile e alta più che creatura.”

There is no longer a relationship just on the physical level between Mary and Christ. There is also a relationship on the metaphysical level, and that places her at a dizzying height, creating a unique relationship between her and the Father. St. Ignatius of Antioch calls Jesus the son both “of Mary and of God,”⁵⁶ almost the way that we say that a **person** is the son of this man and this woman. With the Council of Ephesus the issue became forever a settled matter for the Church. One of the texts approved by the whole council says, “If anyone does not confess that the Emmanuel is truly God and for this reason the holy Virgin is the Mother of God [*Theotokos*] (since she begot, according to the flesh, the Word of God made flesh), let him be anathema.”⁵⁷

But even this conclusion was not the final one. There was another level to discover in the divine motherhood of Mary beyond the physical and metaphysical levels. During the christological controversies, the title of *Theotokos* was valued more in terms of the person of Christ than of the person of Mary, even though it was a Marian title. People had not yet drawn the logical consequences from that title regarding the person of Mary and in particular her unique holiness.

The title *Theotokos* risked becoming a weapon of war between opposing theological currents instead of being an expression of the Church’s faith and piety toward Mary. One particular regrettable event that should not be left unsaid demonstrates this. Cyril of Alexandria, who himself fought like a tiger for the title of *Theotokos*, is the man who represents among the Fathers of the Church a singularly false note concerning Mary’s holiness. He was among the few to say openly that there were weaknesses and defects in the life of Mary, primarily at the foot of the cross. Here, according to Cyril, the Mother of God vacillated in her faith: he writes that the Lord at that juncture “gave forethought to his mother” who was “not understanding the mystery,” and “since he knew her thoughts . . . he commended her to the disciple [John] . . . who could explain the depths of the mystery fully and adequately.”⁵⁸

Cyril could not accept that a woman, even if she were the Mother of Jesus, could have had greater faith than the apostles who, as human beings, vacillated at the time of the passion! His words reflect the general lack of esteem for women in the ancient world and demonstrate how little benefit there was to recognizing Mary’s physical and metaphysical motherhood in relation to Jesus if one did not also recognize a spiritual motherhood in her, one of the heart beyond that of the body.

Here lies the great contribution of the Latin authors, and in particular that of St. Augustine, to the development of Mariology. Mary’s motherhood is seen by them as a motherhood in faith.

⁵⁶ St. Ignatius, “Epistle to the Ephesians,” 7, 2, in *Saint Ignatius of Antioch: The Epistles*, ed. Paul A. Boer Sr. (N.p.: Veritatis Splendor, 2012), p. 59.

⁵⁷ St. Cyril of Alexandria, “Anathemas against Nestorius,” in *Denzinger #252*, English version, p. 97.

⁵⁸ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Joh*, XII, 19: 25-27, trans. David R. Maxell, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, vol. 1, *Ancient Christian Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2015), pp. 347-349; see also *PG* 74, pp. 661-665.

Commenting on Jesus' saying that "My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8:21), Augustine writes,

Did the Virgin Mary, who believed by faith and conceived by faith, who was the chosen one from whom our Savior was born among men, who was created by Christ before Christ was created in her—did she not do the will of the Father? Indeed the blessed Mary certainly did the Father's will, and so it was for her a greater thing to have been Christ's disciple than to have been his mother.⁵⁹

The physical and metaphysical maternity of Mary now comes to be crowned by the recognition of her spiritual motherhood, or of faith, which makes Mary the first and most docile disciple of Christ. The most beautiful fruit of this new perspective on the Virgin is the importance that the theme of Mary's "holiness" takes on now. Again, St. Augustine, when discussing human sinfulness, writes, "I make an exception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in whose case, out of respect for the Lord, I wish to raise no question at all when the discussion concerns sins."⁶⁰ The Latin Church will express this prerogative with the title "Immaculate," and the Greek Church will express it as "All-holy" (*Panhagia*).

4. The Third Birth of Jesus

Now let us try to see what the "mystery" of Jesus' birth by Mary through the Holy Spirit means "for us." There is a bold thought about Christmas that returns from age to age on the lips of the greatest Doctors and spiritual teachers in the Church: Origen, St. Augustine, St. Bernard, and many others. It says, "What good does it do me that Christ was born of Mary once in Bethlehem if he is not born by faith in my heart as well?"⁶¹ St. Ambrose asks, "But where is Christ born, in the most profound sense, if not in your heart and your soul?"⁶²

St. Thomas Aquinas sums up the enduring tradition of the Church when he explains the three Masses that are celebrated at Christmas in reference to the triple birth of the Word: his eternal generation by the Father, his historical birth by the Virgin, and his spiritual birth in the believer.⁶³ Echoing this very tradition, St. John XXIII, in his Christmas message of 1962, lifted

⁵⁹ Augustine, "Sermon 25" (Denis), in the Office of Readings for November 21 (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul 1983), p. 1640; see also "Sermon 72A" in *Miscellanea Agostiniana*, I, p. 162.

⁶⁰ St. Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, 36, 42, in *Saint Augustine: Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), pp. 53-54; see also *CSEL* 60, p. 263ff.

⁶¹ See, for example, Origen, "Sermon 22," 3, in *Origen: Homilies on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, vol. 94, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 93: "What profit is it to you if Christ once came in the flesh, unless he also comes into your soul?"; see also *SCh* 87, p. 302.

⁶² See Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel according to Luke*, II, 38, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2003), p. 59.

⁶³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, III, q. 83, 2.

up this fervent prayer: “O eternal Word of the Father, Son of God and Son of Mary, renew again today in the secret recesses of our hearts the wonderful marvel of your birth.”

Where does the bold idea that Jesus is not only born “for” us but also “in” us come from? St. Paul speaks of Christ who must “be formed” in us (Gal 4:19). He also says that in baptism Christians “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 13:14) and that Christ must come to “dwell in our hearts through faith” (see Eph 3:17). The concept of Christ’s birth in a soul is based primarily on the doctrine of the mystical body. According to that doctrine, Christ mystically repeats “in us” what he once did “for us” in history. This applies to the Paschal Mystery but also to the mystery of the Incarnation. St. Maximus the Confessor writes that the Word of God desires to repeat in all men the mystery of his Incarnation.⁶⁴

The Holy Spirit invites us, then, to “return to our hearts”⁶⁵ to celebrate in them a more intimate and true Christmas, one that makes “real” the Christmas we celebrate outwardly in rituals and traditions. The Father wants to generate his Word in us so that he can always proclaim anew this sweet word addressed both to Jesus and to us: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” (Heb 1:5). Jesus himself desires to be born in our hearts. And this is how we should think about it in faith: as if, in these last days of Advent, he is walking among us and is going door to door knocking, like that night in Bethlehem, in search of a heart in which he can be born spiritually.

St. Bonaventure wrote a booklet called “The Five Feasts of the Child Jesus.” In it he explains concretely what it means to have Jesus born in our hearts. He writes that the devout soul can spiritually conceive the Word of God as Mary did at the Annunciation, give birth to him as Mary did at Christmas, name him as was done at the circumcision, seek him and adore him with the Magi as they did at the Epiphany, and, finally, offer him to the Father as was done in the presentation in the Temple.⁶⁶

The soul conceives Jesus, he explains, when—dissatisfied with the life it leads and spurred on by holy inspirations, set aflame with holy fervor, and finally resolutely setting aside old habits and faults—it becomes spiritually fertile by the grace of the Holy Spirit and conceives the intention to live in a new way. The conception of Christ has taken place!

This plan for a new life, however, needs to be translated without delay into something concrete, a transformation, possibly even external and visible, of our lives and our habits. If the plan is not put into action, Jesus is conceived, but he is not “brought to birth.” The “second feast” of the

⁶⁴ See St. Maximus the Confessor, “Ambigua to John,” 7.22, in *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constans (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 107: “The Logos of God (who is God) wills always and in all things to accomplish the mystery of his embodiment.” See also PG 91, p. 1084.

⁶⁵ See this recommendation in St. Augustine, *Confessions* 4, 19.

⁶⁶ St. Bonaventure, “Bring Forth Christ: The Five Feasts of the Child Jesus,” trans. Eric Doyle (Oxford, SLG Press, 1984), pp. 1-16.

child Jesus, Christmas, is not celebrated! It is a spiritual abortion, one of the countless deferrals with which life is punctuated, and one of the main reasons so few people become saints.

If you decide to change your lifestyle, St. Bonaventure says, you will face two kinds of temptation. First, carnal people in your circle come and tell you, “What you are undertaking is too hard; you will never be able to do it, you won’t have the strength, and you will harm your health. These things do not add to your state in life and will compromise your good name and the dignity of your position.”

Once that obstacle is overcome, others will come who are eager to be, and perhaps actually are, pious people, but they do not truly believe in the power of God and of his Holy Spirit. They will tell you that if you begin to live this way—making so much room for prayer, avoiding useless chatter, doing works of charity—you will soon be regarded as a saint, a spiritual person, but since you know very well you are not yet a saint, you will end up deceiving people and being a hypocrite, drawing down on yourself the wrath of God who searches people’s hearts. Forget it; just be like everyone else.

To all these temptations it is necessary to respond in faith, “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save!” (Is 59:1). And almost as if we were angry with ourselves, we need to exclaim, as Augustine did on the eve of his conversion, “Are you incapable of doing what these men and women have done?”⁶⁷

Let us conclude by reciting together a prayer found on a Greek papyrus that according to some goes back to the 3rd century, in which the Virgin is invoked with the title “*Theotokos*,” *Dei genetrix*, Mother of God:

*Sub tuum praesidium confugimus,
Sancta Dei Genetrix.
Nostras deprecationes ne despicias in necessitatibus,
sed a periculis cunctis libera nos semper,
Virgo gloriosa et benedicta.*

We fly to Thy protection,
O Holy Mother of God;
Do not despise our petitions
in our necessities,
but deliver us always
from all dangers,
O Glorious and Blessed Virgin.

⁶⁷ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 8, 11, 27, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 151 (“*Si isti et istae, cur non ego?*”).

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