

The Seventh Sunday of Easter – 24th May – The Acts of the Apostles 1 v 12-14

Our First Reading today (Acts 1 v12-14) recalls the first novena of prayer in the history of the Church as the Apostles, with Mary the Mother of Jesus, gather together in the Upper Room - (the same Upper Room of the Last Supper) - and pray for the promised Gift of the Holy Spirit, for they were, “not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait (“in lockdown” !) for the Promise of the Father - for John baptised with water but, before many days, you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1 v 4 & 5).

Whereas, in the Old Testament, we read that the Holy Spirit came “upon” individuals or is working “in” them, we do not read of any individual or group being “baptised” in the Holy Spirit. It would seem therefore that this “baptism” indicates a new relationship, and that this new relationship was precisely dependent upon the Death and Resurrection of Jesus and His Ascension into Heaven. The outward sign (of this invisible and interior grace) in the New Testament is the laying on of hands (Acts 8 v 17; 9 v 6) which continues in the life of the Church through the Sacrament of Confirmation.

However, just as it is possible to experience conversion/new birth prior to the Sacrament of Baptism (so that one then seeks to be baptised), so also the coming down of the Holy Spirit can be experienced before the laying on of hands – and even before Baptism (Acts 10 v 44 – 48), but new birth/conversion and Baptism in the Holy Spirit are orientated toward, and “sealed” by, their respective sacramental expressions in Baptism and Confirmation.

Sadly, it is also true that, in the life of an adult who, perhaps, pretends to faith, or simply lacks the faith, then the interior grace (the inner reality) of the Sacrament of Baptism and of Confirmation may not “accompany” its outward and visible sign until the Sacrament is “completed” by a later commitment to Christ, or a greater hunger for the Spirit-filled life. We may have **received** the Gift of the Holy Spirit at our Confirmation but have we **opened** that Gift? We may have received the divine life of grace in the Sacrament of Baptism but are we – right now – walking in, and growing in, the life of grace?

It should be our constant prayer to be filled with the Holy Spirit – after all, this is precisely the precious Gift obtained for us through the Death and Resurrection of Jesus and His Ascension into Heaven. “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and He gave gifts to men” (Ephesians 4 v 8). “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured out that which you see and hear” (Acts 2 v 33).

Our constant prayer should be, “Lord, make real to me the gift of the Holy Spirit” – and not to grieve the Holy Spirit. “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God in Whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4 v 30). “Return! O Holy Dove return! Sweet Messenger of rest. I hate the sins that made Thee mourn, And drove Thee from my breast”. It is possible to grieve and offend the Holy Spirit so that He withdraws from us. “Take not Thy Holy Spirit from us!”. I trust that many of us, during this time between Ascension Day and Pentecost Sunday, are offering our parish Novena of Prayer to the Holy Spirit and also the prayer of Pope Saint John XXXIII, “Renew Your wonders in our day, as by a New Pentecost”. In offering these prayers we are acknowledging that only the Holy Spirit can effect those supernatural influences upon our souls for which we all long – “Come down, O Love Divine! Seek Thou this soul of mine, And visit it with Thine own ardour glowing! O Comforter draw near, Within my heart appear, And kindle it, Thy Holy Flame bestowing!”

After this long extended “Good Friday” of the Church, may God grant to us a glorious Resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a New Pentecost – “Come Holy Spirit! And renew the face of the earth!” Come Lord Jesus! Amen.