

The Comfort of the Holy Spirit in the Church and Ministry of Christ

In the Name + of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Sunday is unique within the Church Year, coming as it does between the Ascension of Our Lord (this past Thursday) and the Feast of Pentecost Day (one week from now). The joy of the Resurrection remains and prevails on this Seventh Sunday of Easter, yet there is also the sense of sorrow in this world of tribulations under the shadow of the Cross.

In the history of the Church, this Sunday (*Exaudi*) was sometimes called the Sunday of Roses, due to the custom of strewing the pavement of the churches with roses in homage to the Lord Jesus Christ, whose Resurrection and Ascension coincide with the blooming of spring flowers. And to be sure, the Ascension of Our Lord is a feast of victory and a celebration of joy and gladness, as He has raised up our human nature in and with Himself to the Right Hand of His God and Father.

But every rose has its thorns, and this day is not without its pain and anguish. It belongs to a time of watching and waiting on the Lord in the midst of sin and death, not only in the world around you but in your own mortal flesh and blood. As it was for the disciples then, so it is for you now.

Thus, by the Cross, you are taught to pray, to call upon the Name of the Lord in the hope of His Resurrection: “O Lord, hear my voice,” let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication. As the Liturgy calls you to lift up your heart, your mind, and your spirit to dwell upon your risen and ascended Lord, so do you call upon Him to come and abide with you here and now on earth.

Above all, your desire is (or ought to be) to seek and to see His face. But for now, the truth is that you cannot see Him — not with your eyes — not yet. Lifted up in glory, He has vanished and is hidden from your sight. It is rather in the preaching and catechesis of the Holy Scriptures and in the Breaking of the Bread at His Table that you must learn to seek Him and to see Him by faith.

As it is by faith and not by sight that you seek His face, so it is not by your own wisdom, reason, or strength but by the Holy Spirit that your ears, your heart, and your mind are opened to hear and believe the Holy Scriptures and to recognize and receive the risen Lord Jesus in His Holy Supper. For it is only by the Holy Spirit that you behold and know the Lord, God the Father in His Son.

As we pray and confess in the Collect this morning, the Lord Jesus has promised to send the Holy Spirit as the Comforter and the Consolation of His Church on earth. And so He does. According to His Word and promise in this Holy Gospel from St. John, Christ Jesus sends the Spirit from the Father to the chosen Apostles — and so also to all of His Christian disciples within His Church.

The Holy Spirit is not some vague feeling of optimism, nor is He an impersonal divine power. He is the Spirit of Truth, the third Person of the Holy Trinity, who proceeds from the Father and rests upon the Son — who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified as the one true God.

The Spirit testifies concerning Christ Jesus, who is Himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life. That is what the Spirit does. So do the Apostles also testify to the one Lord, Jesus Christ, as they have been with Him from the beginning, from His Baptism in the Jordan River to His Ascension into heaven. They are the witnesses of His Life and Ministry, and of His Cross and Resurrection.

Indeed, it is through the preaching and the Scriptures of the Apostles that the Holy Spirit testifies to you and to all the people of God — even to the ends of the earth and to the close of the age.

And so it is that you also, in due season, by the Holy Spirit, testify of Christ within your own office and station in life, especially with love and forgiveness, charity, and compassion for your neighbor. For the forgiveness of sins is both the primary means and the premier fruit of the Spirit. As you receive the Spirit in the forgiveness of your sins, so do you forgive the sins of others against you.

It is the Word of Christ that bestows the Holy Spirit; and the Spirit, by the preaching of that Word, testifies concerning Christ. He lays Christ upon your heart through that preaching; and He thereby calls you and brings you to repentance, to faith in the forgiveness of sins, and to newness of life.

In the preaching and ministry of His Word, therefore, both Christ and His Spirit are with you. Though hidden from your eyes, they are actively present and at work to comfort and console you under the Cross, unto the Resurrection of your body to the Life everlasting of your body and soul.

Meanwhile, Christ Jesus has returned to His God and Father by the way of His Cross and Passion. And His departure causes grief and sorrow, anguish, and pain to fill your heart and mind, because it appears and feels as though He were gone away, and as though He has left you on your own.

What is more, His disciples on earth experience the Cross in their own bodies and lives. Indeed, to receive and share His Spirit is to bear and carry His Cross, to share in His suffering and death.

Throughout history and around the world, to this very day, in many and various ways, His Church and His Christians are subjected to hatred and persecution, both bodily and spiritually. Even now, your brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering loss and being put to death for the sake of the fair Name with which they and you have been named by the Word and Spirit of God in Holy Baptism.

But for all of that, do not be discouraged, and do not despair, but bear the Cross in holy faith and holy love, to the glory of God and the good of your neighbor, in the hope and confidence of Christ.

Bear in mind and take it to heart that the Cross of Christ and His departure to the Father have been necessary for your life and salvation. It is to your great benefit that He returns to the Father who sent Him, and that He does so by the way and means of His Cross and Resurrection and Ascension.

In particular, were it not for the departure of Christ Jesus, the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete) could not be given to you: the One who is your Comforter, your Consolation, and your Defense Attorney.

Now, to clarify, this is not some kind of tag-team wrestling maneuver on the part of Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit! But the divine Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, could not be given apart from the Atonement of the Cross, nor apart from the righteousness of the Resurrection of Christ.

The Holy Spirit could not be poured out in fulfillment of the New Creation (in Christ Jesus) until the curse of sin and death upon the first creation is overcome. Neither could the Spirit comfort and defend you, except by the forgiveness, life, and salvation of the Cross, with which He testifies of Christ on your behalf against the accusations of Satan and the condemnation of God's own Law.

The Spirit does not coddle you. He does not pat you on the head and tell you that it's all okay. He does not wink at your sin and look the other way. And He does not get you off the hook through legal trickery, loop holes, or technicalities. It is rather by and for the sake of His *holiness* that He rescues and redeems you and all His people, His own creation, from the bondage of sin and death.

He is the Spirit *of Truth*, and so He testifies only what is True. He speaks in and with the Word of God, and not at all apart from it. He speaks the divine Truth of both the Law and the Gospel.

Thus, by the preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the Name of Jesus, the Spirit convicts the world (*He convicts you*) of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. He condemns sin by the Word of the Law, which condemns you apart from faith in Christ. But He declares you to be righteous by the Word of the Gospel, by the Holy Absolution of your sins, which is the Lord's own verdict upon you, in accordance with the Cross and Resurrection of Christ Jesus. So are you judged on the sole criterion of where and how you stand in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ.

All of this the Spirit does and accomplishes — in you, throughout the Church, and all around the world — by and with the Word of Christ the Crucified: As by the preaching and ministry of the Apostles in their day, so now by the preaching and ministry of the called and ordained servants of Christ Jesus who speak and act in His Name and stand to this very day and in this very place.

Anointed by the Holy Spirit, the ministers of Christ speak as the oracles of God, and they carry out the Lord's own works by His divine authority, according to the gifts of His grace. In this way and by these means the Holy Spirit carries out His work of laying Christ upon your heart through the Gospel, and laying you upon Christ Jesus through faith.

So it is, by the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins in the Name of Jesus, the Spirit puts you to death and raises you to newness of life. In Holy Baptism He has anointed you, once and forever, as a Christian, as a beloved child of God the Father. In the Holy Communion, the Spirit feeds your body and soul with the Body and Blood of Christ Jesus. And in Holy Absolution, the Spirit bestows upon you the very Life of God in the Resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead.

None of this is set before you as anything that you must do or accomplish for yourself. Nor could you do so, in any case. It is the Lord who does it all for you, for the sake of His own Holy Name.

It has been and is accomplished for you, and it is given to you now, by the grace of God alone, by and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son, who is your Savior and Redeemer, crucified for your transgressions and raised for your justification, ascended as your merciful great High Priest.

Therefore, it is Christ whom the Spirit conveys to you through the Ministry of the Gospel, along with all the fruits and benefits of His Cross and Resurrection. And it is to the same Lord Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit leads you and guides you, by His Word and the preaching of it, through faith in His Word. So does the Spirit call you by the Gospel and gather you into the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church: out of death into Life; out of darkness into His marvelous Light.

This is the great help and comfort of the Holy Spirit, His precious and prevailing work at all times and in all places: To bring the Son of God, Christ Jesus, from the Father in heaven to you here on earth, and to raise you up in the same Lord Jesus Christ. So does the Spirit replace your heart of stone with a brand new heart of flesh and blood; and He breathes Himself into your body and soul through the Word of Christ, so that you should not perish but truly live with God in faith and love.

Thus do you walk in His statutes, according to His Word within your own place in life, as a living testimony to Christ Jesus, to the glory of His Holy Name. And thus do you pray by the Spirit of God in Christ Jesus, calling on His Name. And your prayer is heard and answered, as surely as the Father has raised Christ Jesus from the dead and seated Him at His Right Hand. So shall you see His face with your own two eyes, from your own resurrected and glorified body of flesh and blood.

Already here and now, by the Ministry of the Gospel, the Spirit calls and brings you to the Father in Christ Jesus, to live with Him in the good Land that God has prepared for you and promised to give you. That is the Paradise which is pledged and given to you in the Word of Absolution, which declares God's judgment concerning you, that you are forgiven, righteous, holy, and pleasing in His sight. And that Paradise is yours in the Body of Christ, in His Church and in His Sacrament.

Indeed, the Lord Himself is here with you in His Church on earth, that you should be and live with Him where He is, seated at the Father's Right Hand in the heavenly places, forever and ever.

As the disciples gathered daily in the Temple of the Lord to pray, praise, and give thanks to the Father in Christ Jesus following His Ascension into heaven, and as they were gathered all together in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them, just as the Lord had spoken, so then, you also, follow their example in this body and life on earth in the face of sin and death.

If you would seek His face and gaze upon the beauty of your Lord, then seek Him where He is to be found, here in the Temple of His Church, in the preaching of His Word, and at His Altar in the celebration of His Sacrament, in the Breaking of the Bread in remembrance of Him. For His Word to you is Spirit, Truth, and Life, and His Holy Supper is your Spiritual Meat and Drink indeed.

In the Name + of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.