

RETREAT OF THE FRATERNITY

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Teachings of Bishop Emmanuel Dassi

III- Welcoming the Holy Spirit faithfully as the living water of our lives, or our Divine Inheritance

Welcoming the Holy Spirit faithfully in order to ensure the fruitfulness of the Church is to continually welcome the Life of God which comes to us from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. It is this Divine Life that we have received at Baptism and which was deepened, reaching full maturity at Confirmation. But, just as in our natural life, the initial welcome given to life at conception and birth has to be welcomed each day in the oxygen in the air we breathe, the nutrients we derive from food, and the water that is essential to maintain life. The life-giving significance of water in our ordinary life has indeed given rise to on the well-known saying that water is life. Thus, we understand why water is one of the most important symbols of the Divine Life and therefore of the Holy Spirit. Our genuine welcome to the Spirit begins with the genuine welcome that we give not only to the initial gift of this life (in Baptism and Confirmation), but to the Life which is ceaselessly given in the other Sacraments, in our welcome to God's Word, and in the life of the Church in prayer. But, first of all, to introduce this meditation on the Spirit Who gives us Life, I am going to talk about a well-known scene in the Gospels that deals with the problem of inheritance.

The Holy Spirit is our True Inheritance!

One day, a man in the crowd said to Jesus: "Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." At first sight, what Jesus answered is surprising and final: "Who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you? ... "... one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Lk 12:13-15) The fundamental question here is: so, what does the life of man depend on? It is essential that we constantly ask ourselves this question, so that we do not go back to the old temptation of looking for life where it is not to be found.

Indeed, sadly, this man believed that his inheritance lay in these goods which do not last and that possessing them would ensure that he would have life to the full. He was like the other man whose fields had produced a large harvest and who thought he had achieved certainty in life thanks to all the stores filling his barns. No! Alas, our true Inheritance lies elsewhere; our true life is utterly different. And, essentially, it was to give us this life that Christ came into the world. Yes, the Only-begotten Son of the Father became our elder brother in order to share the true inheritance with us. Unlike other inheritances consisting of goods which do not last, this is an Inheritance that will never be destroyed, or defiled, nor grow old ... an Inheritance which is Eternal Life. And unlike the other elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (or the Bountiful Father), the elder son who wanted to claim all this illusory inheritance for himself, Jesus wants to share the True Inheritance with everyone. So it is this that we need to seek above all else! And to do so, let us accept the temporal sacrifice of renouncing the other inheritance or, rather, of using this other inheritance in accordance with its true purpose - as a means of attaining our eternal Inheritance, namely, Life in God,

which begins in this world with our life in the Spirit. And on this subject, St. Paul says: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ - if, in fact, we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him." (Rom 8:16-17)

This Inheritance therefore has a price; but Jesus has, in fact, paid the price that we ourselves could not pay. Yes, it is at the price of his death that we have Life in its fullness. Hence the importance of the well-known passage in Saint John's Gospel - namely John 7:37-39, and which is surely meditated on in any course of preparation for Baptism or Confirmation, and in any course of preparation for the outpouring of the Spirit. We are told that on the solemn day of the Feast of Tents, which was one of the great Jewish feast days, Jesus, standing in the Temple, cried out: "Let anyone who is thirsty ... come to Me and drink." And Saint John helps us to understand by revealing to us that Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit Whom those who believed in Him would receive. Saint John adds that at that time the Spirit had not yet been given, because Christ had not yet been glorified; that is, He had not yet died and been resurrected. This means that if Christ came into this world, suffered his passion, died and rose again, He did so to give us the Holy Spirit. It was at the price of being handed over to death that He shares with us the Eternal Inheritance which is the Holy Spirit, Divine Life in person.

So the good news for us today is that for more than 2,000 years Christ has been glorified; He died and has risen. That is why He gives his risen Life, that is, the Holy Spirit, to all who believe in Him. Let us recall that on the very evening of his resurrection, meeting his disciples gathered in a house, Jesus said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit! Those whose sins you forgive, they will be forgiven ..." It is, in fact, the Holy Spirit who is acting in all the Sacraments instituted by Christ through his death and resurrection. It is the Holy Spirit who, at Baptism, gives to us the Life of children of God; it is the Holy Spirit who descends on bread and wine to transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist; it is the Spirit Who in the Sacrament of Reconciliation cleanses us from sin and sanctifies us, and so on. In short, it is the Spirit given by the risen Christ who is acting in all the Sacraments in order to give us, or to deepen in us this New Life in Christ. And what can we say about the Sacrament of Confirmation, which is par excellence the Sacrament of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit? It is this Divine Life we have received in the Sacraments that is rekindled and deepened through a real experience of the outpouring of the Spirit. But we must see that the continual actualization of the great outpouring of the Spirit proclaimed in the book of the Prophet Joel (Joel 3) and fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost takes place, above all, in the Sacraments where it flows in profusion as living water for our salvation. Even though the Spirit blows when and where He pleases, and touches people of every kind in the most surprising circumstances, He normally directs us towards the Sacraments, so that we may continue to drink at the spring of living water, and towards the Church, which is the Minister of the Sacraments and also the huge family of all those who are the dwelling-place of the Spirit of the Father.

=> Personal Testimony: After my first experience of the outpouring of the Spirit, my first desire was the daily Eucharist at 12:05 in our University Chaplaincy chapel. The words, which I had been hearing in the Liturgy since childhood, had suddenly become for me real living water which my soul was eager to drink each day. The consecrated Host that I had been seeing since I was a child had really become for me the Bread of Life which I no longer wished to spend a single day without feeding on it. Yes indeed, the Eucharist, the source and summit of the whole life of the Church thus is the constant source of the Spirit of the Father, who is giving Himself through the Son.

As Christ Himself indicated, water is thus one of the images most commonly used to express the gift of the Spirit in human language. Jesus uses this image in the passage: "Let anyone who is thirsty... come to me and drink." In the first volume of his work 'Jesus of Nazareth' Chapter 8, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI comments brilliantly on this passage when he speaks of water as one of the great images of the Gospel of John:

"The feast began as an invocatory petition for rain, which was so vitally necessary in a land chronically threatened by drought. But the ritual was then transformed into a remembrance of a piece of salvation history, of the water from the rock that, in spite of all their doubts and fears, God gave the Jews as they wandered in the desert. (cf. Num 20:1-13). Finally, the gift of water from the rock increasingly became a motif of messianic hope. Moses had given Israel bread from heaven and water from the rock as the people wandered in the desert. On this pattern, the new Moses, the Messiah, was expected to give these two essential gifts of life as well. ... In the words that Jesus speaks during the water ritual, He responds to this hope: He is the new Moses. He Himself is the life-giving rock."

We understand why John (Chapter 19) dwells particularly on the piercing of the heart of Jesus and on the blood and water that flow from it. The Rock has been struck and the water gushes forth and will continue to flow for the life of the world. Happy are those who drink from it.

Yes, just as water quenches thirst in our earthly life, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, quenches thirst in the true Life. This surely reminds you of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. He told this woman who thirsted, not so much for the water from the well which she drank every day, but for true life, for true love: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ... "Everyone who drinks of this water (from the well) will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (John 4:10-14)

This is an opportunity to emphasize this: in our life in this world, every man and woman experiences thirst. I would even say that we have many thirsts, that is to say many desires, all linked to our natural striving for a better life. Many people, especially young people, are slaves to these desires. But obviously, we are all involved. We seek, often awkwardly, to satisfy these desires with all that the world around us has to offer, or by relationships of all kinds. Sadly, like the Samaritan woman who, in her search of love, had finally had five husbands (or rather five men) one after another in her life, some of us, sooner or later, end up profoundly unhappy. Fortunately for the Samaritan woman, she met Jesus; and her life was changed. Her real thirst had been quenched. There is an advertisement for a drink in the form of an imperative: "Listen to your thirst!" If contemporary men and women could only listen to their real thirst! However, it is precisely our mission to arouse the thirst of our contemporaries, as the Samaritan woman did for her contemporaries.

This is an opportunity to emphasize a remarkable point in the passage of John 7:37-39.

Speaking about whoever would come to Him and drink of this water, Jesus continues: "As Scripture says: 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" (John 7:38). Pope Benedict XVI points out that there have been two interpretations of this verse about the which that is referred to here and from which flow the rivers of living water.

- The most common tradition and the most consistent from the linguistic point of view rightly emphasizes that it is the heart of the one who believes in Christ: "The believer himself becomes a spring, an oasis of which bubbles up fresh, uncontaminated water, the life-giving power of the Creator Spirit."

- Another, albeit much less widespread, but no less important and even fundamental tradition emphasizes that it is the heart of Christ himself. "He is the source, the living rock, from which the new water comes." This second understanding is based on the mention of Scripture (in the phrase "as the Scripture says ..."). And with Benedict XVI we realize that no passage of Scripture (of the Old Testament) explicitly affirms what is said in this verse. But implicitly, we have many messianic passages that refer to it. "John is obviously not thinking of any one particular passage, but precisely of 'the Scripture', of a vision that runs through its texts." It is above all the story of the rock of life, which has become in Israel an image of the hope of true life. And this first image is confirmed by the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ezek 47:1-12): the water coming out of the right side of the Temple and spreading, giving life to everything it touches; and by the prophet Zechariah (Zech 13:1), the messianic and salvific significance of the image of water becomes even clearer: "On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness." or again in Zechariah 14:8: "On that day, living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem". And in the time of the Church, especially at a time towards the end of the first century when her life was being severely threatened, this same image is echoed in the vision of Rev 22:1, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb." All these affirmations of Scripture obviously point us to Jesus, who died and is risen, who presents himself as the New Temple, or the new Rock from which flows the river of living water and from which flows the promised river of life which decontaminates the briny soil and allows the fullness of life to ripen and to bear fruit in abundance.

But with Pope Benedict, we must conclude clearly that the two interpretations go together; and this is very important to us: "The application of this passage primarily to Christ – as we saw earlier – does not have to exclude a secondary interpretation referring to the believer ... The believer becomes one with Christ and participates in his fruitfulness. The man who believes and loves with Christ becomes a well that gives life. That, too, is something that is wonderfully illustrated in history: The saints are oases around which life sprouts up and something of the lost paradise returns. And ultimately, Christ Himself is always the well-spring who pours Himself forth in such abundance." This is the heart of this third aspect of our welcome to the Holy Spirit for the fruitfulness of the Church. He who truly welcomes this true Inheritance of mankind which is the Spirit of God, the living water of our salvation, becomes in his turn, in Christ, a spring or fountain for others. Provided, of course, that we remain in Christ as He earnestly calls us to do.

And if that is how it was for St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic, for the Great Teresa and the Little Therese, in short, for all those Saints who by their absolute welcome of the Spirit, the Divine Life, have become, in their turn, a source of life for so many men and women, how much more would it be for an entire

Community which was to fully welcome the Spirit and to strive to live in Him throughout the world? Is not this the guarantee of a fruitfulness infinitely multiplied? Then others who thirst could come to it to drink. This means that through us, the Lord wants to give his life to all those who are still thirsty for real Life and who are very often seeking life where it is not to be found. Through us and all the other members of the Church, by our life, by our witness, by our commitment to the Church the family of God, by our words and our kind actions, our other brothers and sisters must be able to taste how good the Lord is, and so be attracted to Christ and the new life He began.

Cardinal Suenens wrote a book published after his death: 'Les chrétiens au seuil des temps nouveaux' (Christians on the threshold of new times). And in this book, to the question: 'Why are you Christians?' He states: 'Very important ... was encountering the living Risen Christ in authentic Christians fully living out their Baptism ... nothing is worth more than this teaching ... They have taught me that one is not really christianized if one is not, in one's turn, a christianizer...' That is to say that one is not really Christian if one does not make other Christians. Hence the insistence of Pope Francis on mission by attraction, and not by proselytism. Referring to the glorious example of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, Patroness of the Missions, during his trip to Georgia in 2016, he stated: "She reminds us that the true mission is never proselytism, but attraction to Christ by a close union with Him in prayer, Adoration and practical charity, which is serving Jesus present in the least of His brothers and sisters." ¹

But there is one more essential thing to be emphasized: this fruitfulness does not happen without suffering. It was by dying on the cross that Christ gave the Spirit. It was by accepting to drink the cup given by his Father that He became the source of living water for the world. If we want to share with Him in giving life to the world, as we have seen, we must respond positively to the question He once asked the twin sons of Zebedee: "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" Certainly, the nature of this saving dying to oneself is defined for each person by the specific call addressed to him or her. To priests and consecrated persons, to lay people whether married or single, faced with a world whose future is becoming ever more worrying, and for the salvation of this world, the same question is asked: "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" But for the members of the Fraternity of Jesus this translates as a genuine availability for Christ and for the mission He entrusts to us. It is by living the mystery of Easter ourselves that we can, in Christ, communicate the divine Life to others, and so experience the joy of true fruitfulness! It is at this price that we can really become seeds for the future of this passing world; for if the grain of wheat that falls into the earth does not die, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit!

¹ Elisabeth de Baudoüin, Thérèse et François (Therese and Francis), Paris, ed. Salvador, 2019, p. 163.