

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Yr. A
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Father Mike Holloran

John the Baptist said, “The one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On Whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’”

Kind of sounds like they were expecting someone to come baptizing with the Holy Spirit. And they were. The Prophet Joel, around 400 BC, spoke God's promise about that future day: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; even upon the servants and the handmaids, in those days I will pour out my spirit.” (Joel 3:1-2)

There were others, but I mention Joel because on the day of Pentecost, when tongues of flame descended on the apostles, and they heard a strong driving wind, and their first public proclamation of Jesus risen from dead was understood by a big crowd each in their own language, St. Peter remembered that prophecy of Joel and said that it was now being fulfilled. In the past the spirit of God had come upon certain individuals for exceptional purposes; now, in the day of the Messiah, it was being poured out upon all mankind.

But first, John had been sent to baptize with water, as a preparation. His water baptism was a symbol of repentance. The one being baptized confessed their sins and determined to work harder at keeping God's commands. In the new age, the baptism of the Holy Spirit writes the commands of God on the heart by infusing it with divine love, love that fulfills the Law. God, through His Holy Spirit, comes to dwell within the person and makes him or her a new creation, dead to sin and alive with divine life.

So, how does one get baptized with the Holy Spirit?

Pentecostals and Charismatic Catholics use the expression “baptism of the Holy Spirit” to describe an experience. When a person surrenders to God and welcomes the Holy Spirit into their life they may receive special gifts, called charisms, such as speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, healing, preaching. Many report a sense of great joy and relief, as the conviction grips them that God is present and active right then and there, God Who is overwhelming, unconditional love. Someone at another parish told me that when she went up to be prayed over at a parish mission, she felt a tremendous warmth move through her whole body, from the top of her head down to her toes. She felt almost like she was on fire, but it was a wonderful fire, and it surprised her because she was rather skeptical about the whole thing beforehand. From her account and others, I think there is something to it.

St. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, discusses spiritual charisms. He accepted that they

were real, and valued them, but he understood them to be like gravy. (Paul doesn't use the term gravy) They are nice to have, but the real Christian life is meat and potatoes. He said that of all the gifts given by the Holy Spirit the greatest are faith, hope, and love – and the greatest of those is love. Love can be experienced as a strong emotion, but feelings eventually die down, and when they do love becomes more like a steady, daily discipline--made possible by the indwelling power of God's Spirit, made lighter by a willing heart – but a steady discipline nonetheless.

St. Paul is reminding us that those felt gifts of the Holy Spirit are means to an end, not ends in themselves. People have told me how troubled they were that strong spiritual feelings had subsided. They wondered if God had abandoned them, that maybe they were doing something wrong to drive away the Holy Spirit. My answer is, no, probably not. Sure, sin has a way of driving out the Holy Spirit, but what's more likely is just that such moments of consolation aren't meant to last. It's gravy on potatoes. It's icing on the cupcake. God gives them to encourage us, remind us of His abiding presence, to sustain us through a tough time, but following Jesus is not about feeling a certain way. It's about fidelity, persevering in the love He showed us by his own example.

We see this in the lives of the saints. In a time of clear conviction, even of enthusiasm, they embark on their vocation. They are sustained from time to time by booster shots of spiritual adrenalin. But it's the long haul discipline, the quiet working of the Spirit in their daily lives that transforms them. For example, it may have been a specific prompting of the Holy Spirit that moved Maximilian Kolbe to trade places with the condemned man in Auschwitz, but it was his whole life of fidelity to the Spirit that prepared him for it. Otherwise, he might have refused the prompting on that fateful day.

It helps to remember that the Holy Spirit is first given in the Sacrament of Baptism. This grounds the gift of God in the community of the Church. Babies who are baptized don't come out of the water speaking in tongues, unless that's what the screaming is about. They show no visible signs of God's indwelling Spirit, but that doesn't mean that God is not present and active.

In the Gospel of John Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to his disciples on the day he rose from the dead. He appeared to them, said “Peace be with you”, and then he breathed on them and said “Receive the Holy Spirit”. No strong driving wind, just a breath. And Acts of Apostles tells us that Jesus continued to appear to them for forty more days, instructing them by the Holy Spirit. They had the Spirit, but it was working quietly in them, preparing them for active service.

The point is-- if you have received the Sacrament of Baptism, you have been baptized with the Holy Spirit. As you go through life be faithful to him who lives within you and loves you unconditionally. Rely on his guidance. Call upon his help. Exercise a discipline of

prayer so that he has a chance to make His presence felt in your life. Rejoice in thanksgiving when consolation is given.

People who are constantly on the go, immersed in the noise of daily life, don't even notice their own breathing. How can they notice the Spirit of God breathing within them? Pray to the Holy Spirit, asking him to strengthen his gifts in your life so that by faithful perseverance you may bear fruit. Faith, hope, and love endure, and the greatest of these is love.