

Sunday, May 17, 2020

VI Sunday of Easter (Year A)

First Reading: **Acts 8:5-8.14-17;**

Resp. Psalm: **Ps 66(65):1-7.16-20;**

Second Reading: **1Pet 3:15-18;**

Gospel: **John 14:15-21.**

“Set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts, being always ready to give an answer to anyone who asks of you a word about the hope that is in you [...] for, if that be the will of God, it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil!” (1Pet 3:15.17).

As the great day of Pentecost draws near, the liturgy of this Sixth Sunday of Easter introduces us to the main actor of this current time of the Church: the Holy Spirit. Specifically, today’s Gospel brings us to the figure of the Paraclete (cf. *John 14:16*), the “Spirit of truth” (*John 14:17*), and to the promise made by Jesus that He would ask the Father to send Him to us, so that He may abide with us, forever! Through the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Christ in us, we can enter the very dialogical relationship of love existing between the Father and the Son, as Adam and Eve before the fall (cf. *Gen 2:25*), a Love which is so strong as to overcome death itself and become the Third of the three undying persons of the Trinity! We can dance together with Them, so to say, at their presence, as David did before the ark, without having to hide anything from them for fear or shame, in the deepest and barest truth about ourselves (cf. *2Sam 6:16*)! Interestingly enough, the Gospel used to present us this divine Person is pervaded by the language of love, in the context of both truth and obedience.¹ These two elements must always go together if true love is to exist.

¹ In today’s Gospel, in fact, Jesus speaks as a bridegroom to His bride, “If you love me...” (*John 14:15*), but also as a father to His child, “I shall not leave you orphans” (*John 14:18*). The first kind of love requires subordination and obedience (cf., e.g., *John 14:15.21; Eph 5:18-24; and Col 3:18*), the second, advise, truth and protection (cf., e.g., *Ps 103[102]:13; Prov 3:12; John 1:14; 4:23; 14:16. 20; 15:26; 1Thess 2:11; and Heb 12:5-6*). Both kinds of love, however, are possible only by means and because of the Holy Spirit!

Indeed, the first thing that stands out in today's Gospel is the connection between love and *obedience*. As it is evident, obedience is the proof of sincere love.² In Hebrew, "to obey" another person is equal to listen to his or her voice (*Heb. šāma' l'qôl*). However, no one can really listen to or love another unless one truly knows the *truth* of that person, his or her name, struggles, and sufferings (cf. *John* 10:3-5). In fact, true *love* is about listening, knowing, obeying. Without knowledge of what is making a person suffer, one can certainly speak of affection, fondness, kindness for that person, one can turn and shake hand with him or her, or say one's name aloud, even within the Church assembly, but if I do not really know the person sitting next to me, if he or she feels a lonely stranger in an anonymous crowd, I cannot say I fully love him or her.³ That is why there can be no true love or worship without the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit of Christ (cf. *John* 4:23 and 14:6.17)! To obey, to love, that is, to die to ourselves and suffer for the other (cf. today's 2nd Reading), we need the Holy Spirit, who alone can give us that Word of hope, who is Christ Himself abiding in us!

Moreover, just as there is a Spirit of Truth, so there is also a *spirit of deceit*, the spirit of the antichrist (cf. *1John* 4:3.6), the "false paraclete" (*Gk. paraklētōr kakôn: Job* 16:2) that sets us before false and egotistical consolations.⁴ This spirit constantly sows doubts, dissents, discords, divisions, and darnel (cf. *Matt* 13:25-30)! It accuses us through our guilt, promises cheap relief by the false solace of sin, and robs us of all our hope (cf. *Rev* 12:10). It makes our lives miserable, by lying to us that God does not love us, that He has left us orphans, or that we are simply bastards (cf. *Matt* 4:3.6; 27:40; and *Luke* 4:3.9). In this sense, the spirit of falsehood can be compared to a malevolent prosecutor, who uses the truth only partially and to a limited extent, whereas the Holy Spirit is like the defense attorney, who knows all the truth (cf. *John* 14:26), also about our weaknesses, and uses it always with love, to

² Cf., e.g., "If you love me, you will keep my commandments [...] he who holds to my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me" (*John* 14:15.21). That is why the Virgin Mary teaches us to obey Him: "Do whatever He tells you" (*John* 2:5). She is teaching us to love Him!

³ On the occasion of their *ad limina* visit, on Tuesday, May 9, 1999, St. John Paul II, pope, addressed the Bishops of Ontario (Canada) as follows: "The anonymity of the city cannot be allowed to enter our Eucharistic communities. New ways and structures must be found to build bridges between people [...] so that there really is that experience of mutual acceptance and closeness which Christian fellowship requires. It may be that this, and the catechesis which must accompany it, would be better done in smaller communities: as the Post-Synodal Exhortation puts it, 'one way of renewing parishes, especially urgent for parishes in larger cities, might be to consider the parish as a community of communities' (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 41)". For the entire text of the address, cf., e.g., http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1999/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19990504_ad-limina-canada-ontario.html [accessed on-line: 11.05.2020].

⁴ Cf. M. CECCARELLI, "Spunti per omelie per la Messa Domenicale. VI Domenica di Pasqua 'A' – 21 Maggio 2017", [accessed on-line: 17.05.2017], http://www.donmarcoceccarelli.it/pdf/omelie/pasqua_a/pasqua_vi.pdf.

discipline us (cf. *Prov* 13:24), justify and encourage us, bearing witness “to our spirit that we are children of God” (*Rom* 8:16). That is why He is also called the Paraclete (*Gk. paráklētos*, from *pará* + *kaléō*; cf., also, *Lat. ad-vocatus*), meaning, “one called alongside” to help us, by whispering in our ears what to say in our defense (cf. *Matt* 10:19-20 and *1Pet* 3:15) or interceding directly for us, just like Christ Himself (cf. *John* 14:16 and *1John* 2:1), but from within us, and for ever (cf. *John* 14:16-17)!

Finally, even if our love for God is at times like morning mist, “like the dew that quickly disappears” (*Hos* 6:4) as soon as trials and temptations come our way, as inevitably as the sun does (cf. *Matt* 13:6.21; *Mark* 4:6.17; and *Luke* 8:6.13); even when we are incapable of listening to God’s voice or obeying His will and commandments... God still loves us and cares for us, like a Father or a Bridegroom, for He has set His heart on us (cf. *Deut* 7:7-8; *Isa* 49:15), we belong to Him, and His desire is for us (cf. *Cant* 7:10)! Thus, even when our love for Him reaches only the level of friendship (or *philia*), He welcomes all we have got to give (cf. *John* 21:15-17), and prays that the Love with which His Father loved Him may be with and within us (cf. *John* 17:26).⁵ Indeed, loving God is not a matter of choice, but a commandment (cf. *Deut* 6:5; and *John* 15:10-12).⁶ However, “since God has first loved us (cf. *1John* 4:10), love is now no longer a mere ‘command;’ it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.”⁷ In fact, “we know love by this, that He laid down His life for us” (*1John* 3:16)! And if we have known love, then we have known God, “for God is love” (*1John* 4:8; cf., also, *1John* 4:16). These are the kind of words, the message of truth, the “true comfort, encouragement, or consolation” (*Gk. paráklēsis alēthinē*: *Isa* 57:18), which our defense “lawyer” (*Gk. paráklētos*), the Holy Spirit, whispers and suggests to our ears (cf. *Luke* 2:25; *Acts* 9:31; and *Phil* 2:1-2). This is our sure hope and our joy, and whoever possesses such a hope in his heart is always ready to give an account to anyone who asks for it, in meekness and fear, in truth, and in love (cf. *1Pet* 3:15-16).

⁵ In today’s Gospel, Jesus’ initial remark, “If you love me, then...” (*John* 14:15), sounds much like the question Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” (cf. *John* 21:15-17). There, Jesus comes down to Peter’s own love-level, out of complete mercy for him. The love required by Him from Peter, in fact, decreases progressively in intensity: from the question, “Do you dearly love [*Gk. agapâ(i)s*] me more than these others do?” (*John* 21:15), Jesus goes to, “Do you dearly love [*Gk. agapâ(i)s*] me?” (*John* 21:16), and then, all the way up to, “Do you love [*Gk. phileîs*] me as a friend?” (*John* 21:15). Peter’s answer, nonetheless, remains always at the level of friendship (or *philia*): “I love you as a friend” (*Gk. philô*: cf. *John* 21:15-17). Jesus knows what kind of love we are able to give, and far from disdaining it, welcomes it and elevates it by the gift of His Spirit, thus making it sufficient for the mission He wants to entrust to us (cf. *John* 21:18-19)!

⁶ Cf. *NJB*, p. 233, n. c.

⁷ BENEDICT XVI, Pope, *Deus Caritas Est*, § 1.

Therefore, in just a few words:

Today's Gospel brings us to Jesus' promise: "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Paraclete, to be with you forever" (*John* 14:16). He will teach *truth*, *obedience*, and thus, genuine *love*! As the Book of Proverbs attests, a father who loves his son corrects him, and tells him the truth even when that is difficult to accept (cf. *Prov* 13:24). God knows us and loves us in the truth of who we are, and He is not scandalized by our failures, sins, or mistakes. Watched by this kind of love, there is no need for fear or shame. Before this "Spirit of Truth," we are no lonely strangers in a nameless crowd, but people called and chosen personally for a mission: to love as He loved us. Yet, just as there is a Spirit of Truth, a true Paraclete, with true words of love, wisdom and consolation, so there is also a spirit of deceit, that of the anti-christ: a "false paraclete," who constantly assures us of the cheap and false consolations of sin, sowing in us the darnel of doubt, dissent, discord and division. The devil, as a vicious prosecutor, uses the truth only partially, to accuse us and make us feel miserable, lying to us that God has left us orphans or that we have no loving Father in Heaven at all. The Holy Spirit, instead, our defense lawyer, uses the whole truth to bear witness to us "that we are children of God" (*Rom* 8:16).

APPENDIX (From the "Commentary on Psalm 118" of St. Ambrose, bishop; *Disc.* VII:6-7)

In the Time of Trials Hope Consoles Us

"This is what consoles me in my misery: your word gives me life" (*Pss* 118:50).

This is the hope, this is the consolation that came to meet me with your word, to enable me to bear the present bitterness. When Paul persecuted the Name, he did not have the consolation of hope; when instead he suffered for the Name, he drew hope from that consolation. Listen how he consoles us after he had become a believer: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Perhaps tribulation, anguish, persecution, hunger, nakedness, danger, or the sword? Just as it is written: 'Because of you we are put to death all day long, we are treated like sheep to be slaughtered.'" And then he adds for what reason one can bear all this with patience: "But in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who has loved us" (*Rom* 8:35-37).

If therefore someone wishes to overcome adversities, persecutions, danger, death, a serious illness, the assault by thieves, the confiscation of goods, or anything else that in this world is considered a misfortune, this person will easily overcome everything if he or she has got a consoling hope within oneself. Even if these things happen, they cannot be serious for the one who says: "I consider that our present sufferings are as nothing compared with the glory that will be revealed in us" (*Rom* 8:18). Since the one who hopes for better things is never pushed down by lighter ones.

In the time of our humiliation, therefore, the hope that does not confuse consoles us. I believe then that the time of trial is that of the humiliation of our soul. In fact, our soul is humiliated when it is left at the mercy of the tempter, when it has to be put to the test through harsh toils, experiencing thus in the struggle and in the battle the clash of contrary forces. But in these trials, the soul is vivified by the word of God.

This word is the vital substance of our soul; it nourishes it, makes it grow, and directs it. There is no other thing that can make the rational soul live as does the word of God. In fact, the more the dialogue with God grows in our soul, through the welcoming, the understanding and the comprehension of that word, the more does its life grow within us. And vice versa, when the word of God is lacking in our soul, its very life faints as well. Therefore, just as the union of soul and body is animated, nourished and sustained with the vital breath, so is our soul vivified by the word of God and by its spiritual grace.

Consequently, we must strive in every possible way to put everything aside, gathering within us the words of God and instilling them in our hearts, sentiments, cares, thoughts and actions, in order to match the words of Scriptures with facts and not to contradict the celestial precepts; so that we too may say: “Your word gives me life” (*Ps* 118:50).