

A Current of Grace for Evangelization

Rome June 2017

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It is commonly accepted that the event of Pentecost transformed the disciples who were praying together in the Upper Room. They overcame fear and doubt and emerged with a burning conviction that Jesus indeed is both Lord and Savior and is calling the whole human race to faith, repentance, and to become part of His body, the Church, through baptism. All the years of instruction, training, and teaching by Jesus that hadn't quite come together yet before Pentecost now exploded in their souls with a personal conviction of the universal truth of His message and mission and a burning desire to share it with everybody, for the sake of their salvation, so they too could receive the gift of eternal life. The link between the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the fervor of evangelization is clear.

I believe we also have reached a consensus in the Renewal that Peter's proclamation, which interpreted the experience of Pentecost to its first witnesses, clearly indicates that what happened at Pentecost is for everybody. And without going into the theological or Scriptural reasons for his exhortation to share the baptism in the Spirit with everyone, Pope Francis seems to accept this interpretation as well.

God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses.

Exalted at the right hand of God, he received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father and poured it forth, as you (both) see and hear. . . .

"Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, "What are we to do, my brothers?"

Peter (said) to them, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.

He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." (Acts 2: 32-40)

I believe we also have a general consensus that every time we see a new group of converts entering the church in the rest of the Acts, we see the explicit concern of the apostles that the new

converts receive the “same” gift that the apostles themselves received at the first Pentecost, and that this concern is the practical, pastoral response to Peter’s declaration that the gift is for everyone. (Acts 8: 14-19; Acts 10: 44-48; Acts 11: 15-18; Acts 19: 1-7).

In this paper, I want to particularly focus though on the Sacrament of Confirmation, not to enter into the debate about at what age it should be received, but rather to explore how it can actually “perpetuate Pentecost,” as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) states that it in fact is intended to do (1287-1288). For at whatever age it is conferred, the same challenge remains—how can the intended effects of this sacrament actually be realized in the lives of those who receive it? How can the gift of the Holy Spirit be experienced today so that it produces similar effects as it did at the first Pentecost? How can the sacrament intended to perpetuate Pentecost actually perpetuate it in a way that it produces evangelizers? The celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation is a rich field for doing evangelization and for producing evangelizers, if its sacramental power can be released sufficiently through proper preparation.

I will only briefly comment on the “sacramental crisis” that the Church in many parts of the world is undergoing, whether through declining numbers of people receiving the sacrament of confirmation or its manifest lack of intended effect. I will devote the main part of this short paper to show how Thomas Aquinas' insightful identification of subjective factors that can block the fruitfulness of validly conferred sacraments need to be taken into account in all sacramental preparation and conclude with a suggestion that this wisdom can help provide a conceptual framework for understanding what is going on in the Renewal, as we continue to effect real renewal in peoples’ lives through instruments such as the Life in the Spirit Seminars.

The Sacramental Crisis

A Crisis of Declining Numbers

We are all, I’m sure, somewhat familiar with the statistics that reveal a widespread sacramental decline. In many, many countries the reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation is seen as the last obligation a young person has to fulfill before he can stop coming to church. In many other countries, the numbers of those still receiving the sacrament are radically declining.

A Crisis of Faith

The powerful secular culture, with its immense power of electronic distraction and fascination, seems to be doing more to form our people in what to believe and how to behave than what can happen at occasional or even regular Mass attendance. Surveys, at least in the developed countries, of what Catholics actually believe indicate widespread disagreement with even foundational elements of faith and morality.

A Crisis of Fruitfulness

While both sacramental participation and orthodox belief have declined even among church goers in many countries, we also are facing a crisis in what appears to be the lack of sacramental fruitfulness in those who still participate in the sacraments. One of the most dramatic indicators of this is the experience of many parishes when it comes to the Sacrament of Confirmation. I realize that I can't make meaningful comments about the entire worldwide Church, and so I will restrict what I am saying to what is commonly experienced in the developed countries and rely on those from other parts of the world to share their own experience.

As I've spoken to youth ministers, religious education directors, and pastors in many parts of North America, and in my classroom at the seminary, the most common difficulty that I've heard expressed when discussion turns to confirmation is that the majority of youth confirmed are seldom seen in church again. Matthew Kelly's Dynamic Catholic Institute reports that during the past decade, eighty-five percent of young Catholics leave the Church within seven years of their confirmation. They conclude: "For generations we have said, 'They will come back!' But they have stopped coming back. An increasing number are not coming back to get married or to baptize their children."¹

¹<http://dynamiccatholic.com/confirmation/faqs> accessed March 31,2016

The sacrament that is supposed to express and effect deeper, conscious commitment to being witnesses to the faith seems in many cases to result in directly the opposite. Many who are engaged in preparation for confirmation tell me that it is quite common to have parents drop off their children for preparation classes, but not attend Mass themselves, with no expectation of their children attending after confirmation as well.

The Catholic theology of the sacraments is truly beautiful, but the gap between theory and practice in many cases is embarrassingly wide. There seems to be a tendency at times to focus almost exclusively on getting the theology right, while ignoring the huge gap between theory and practice. And yet that very orthodoxy calls for an effective orthopraxis, however little it is averted to. The shocking disconnect about what our theology claims is happening in young people who are confirmed and what the actual fruits are is something like the “elephant in the living room” of the Catholic Church today. Let’s briefly note what our sacramental theology says about the sacrament:

This fullness of the Spirit was not to remain uniquely the Messiah’s, but was to be communicated to the whole messianic people. On several occasions Christ promised this outpouring of the Spirit, a promise which he fulfilled first on Easter Sunday and then more strikingly at Pentecost . . . Those who believed in the apostolic preaching and were baptized received the gift of the Holy Spirit in their turn. . . . Confirmation . . . in a certain way perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church. (CCC 1287-1288)

And what does our theology say concerning the intended effect of the sacrament?

It is evident from its celebration that the effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost. (CCC 1302)

And:

From this fact, Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace: it roots us more deeply in the divine filiation which makes us cry, “Abba! Father!” it unites us more firmly to Christ; it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us; it renders our bond with the Church more perfect; it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ, boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross. (CCC 1303)

And as Aquinas says about the sacrament: “The confirmed person receives the power to profess faith in Christ publicly and as it were officially (*quasi ex officio*)” (ST III, 72, 5, ad 2. (Quoted in CCC 1305).

But what are we to make of the continued conferral of the Sacrament with none or hardly any of the effects it is supposed to have, actually happening? We are quite clearly facing a situation where sacraments are being “validly” conferred, but remain in many cases manifestly unfruitful. There’s a text in the CCC that sums up Catholic teaching on both the validity and fruitfulness of the sacraments.

From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them. (CCC 1128)

The Wisdom of St. Thomas

One of the best sources for understanding what now needs to be present in our initial celebration of the sacraments and in our attempts to stir up the graces of the sacraments already conferred but not as fruitful as intended is the wisdom of St. Thomas on the subjective dispositions that can block sacramental fruitfulness. We can find these primarily in the *Summa theologiae*, especially in the *Tertia pars* (III, qq. 66–71). In these questions, Aquinas identifies very insightfully the obstacles that block the fruitfulness of the sacraments, even when they are validly conferred: lack of faith, lack of understanding, lack of desire to live a new life, lack of repentance, or the omission of the exorcisms that need to proceed, accompany, and follow sacramental conferral. I have written on this at greater length in an essay that appeared in *Nova et Vetera* and I simply want to highlight here two of the many elements that Aquinas cited as causes for the lack of fruitfulness in the reception of validly conferred sacraments.² These are also the two that are most frequently mentioned in Scripture as essential for salvation, namely repentance and faith.

² Ralph Martin “The Post Christendom Sacramental Crisis: The Wisdom of Thomas Aquinas.” *Nova et Vetera*, 11:1 Winter 2013,

The Baptism of Adults: The Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas

Repentance

Thomas unambiguously teaches that those who are not willing to repent of sin should not be baptized. Quoting scripture and Augustine to support this point he states:

Now so long as a man wills to sin, he cannot be united to Christ. . . Secondly, because there should be nothing useless in the works of Christ and of the Church. Now that is useless which does not reach the end to which it is ordained; and on the other hand, no one having the will to sin can, at the same time, be cleansed from sin, which is the purpose of Baptism; for this would be to combine two contradictory things. Thirdly, because there should be no falsehood in the sacramental signs." (ST III, q. 68, a. 4)

In contemporary sacramental practice when someone physically presents oneself to receive a sacrament proper disposition is often assumed. Thomas teaches the contrary.

A man is said to be insincere who makes a show of willing what he wills not. Now, whoever approaches Baptism, by that very fact makes a show of having right faith in Christ, of veneration for this sacrament, and of wishing to conform to the Church, and to renounce sin. Consequently, to whatever sin a man wishes to cleave, if he approach Baptism, he approaches insincerely, which is the same as to approach without devotion. (ST III, q. 69, a. 9, ad 3)

On the other hand, according to St. Thomas, when a lack of sincerity such as lack of true repentance or lack of faith or lack of intention to receive and live the unique grace of the sacrament, blocks the fruitfulness of a validly received sacrament, subsequent repentance and recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation can release or increase the fruitfulness of the sacrament.

In like manner, when a man is baptized, he receives the character, which is like a form: and he receives in consequence its proper effect, which is grace whereby all his sins are remitted. But this effect is sometimes hindered by insincerity. Wherefore, when this obstacle is removed by Penance, Baptism forthwith produces its effect. (ST III, q. 69, a. 10.)

The points that Thomas makes in regards to the necessity of repentance and the sincere intention to receive the graces of the sacraments in connection with adult baptism has application to other sacraments as well. Cardinal Mueller's recent

impressive restatement of Catholic doctrine on marriage and case for an orthodox interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia* makes use of Thomas' insight on "insincerity" in application to the possibility of admitting the divorced and remarried to the Eucharist.³

If one does not will to conduct one's life in harmony with the purpose of the sacrament one will not receive it fruitfully. For there to be no "falsehood in the sacramental sign" the recipient of the sacrament must intend what the sacrament intends. This, of course, raises serious questions about the widespread practice regarding the Sacrament of Confirmation today where the great majority of those receiving it, rather than becoming more committed witnesses to their faith, drift away from it. There appears to be a widespread "falsehood" in the sacramental sign. The same can be said in many cases of sacramental marriage as well as in the reception of the Eucharist by those who don't believe in its substance or intend its effects and perhaps even receive it in unrepented serious sin.

Faith

Thomas clearly teaches that the sacraments aren't "magic" but require faith on the part of their adult recipients in order to bear fruit.

Therefore the sacrament of Baptism is not to be conferred save on those in whom there appears **some sign of their interior conversion** ... Baptism is the sacrament of faith. Now dead faith does not suffice for salvation." (ST III, q. 68, a. 4, ad 2, 3) Right faith is necessary for Baptism, because as it appears from Rom. 3: 22 "the justice of God is by faith of Jesus Christ." (ST III, q. 68, a. 8). Just as the sacrament of Baptism is not to be conferred on a man who is unwilling to give up his other sins, so neither should it be given to one who is unwilling to renounce his unbelief. **Yet each receives the sacrament if it be conferred on him, though not unto salvation.**

³ A lecture given at the seminary of Oviedo, Spain, May 4, 2016.

<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1351294?eng=y> accessed May 14, 2016.

Sherry Weddell when engaged in the writing of her very influential book, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, came across this text of Thomas, and appropriately shocked, asked some of us at SHMS to confirm whether this is really what Thomas is saying. We confirmed it.

Something very similar is said in *Lumen Gentium* 14, which is then taken up and repeated by JP II in *Redemptoris Missio*.

Even though incorporated into the Church, one who does not however persevere in charity is not saved. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but 'in body' not 'in heart' (Augustine, several citations). All children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be the more severely judged. (Citations from Lk, Mt, James). (LG 14, RM 11)

It would seem that by "right faith" Thomas is not meaning "perfect faith" but at least a living faith and intention to receive the sacrament as it is understood by the Church. (See ST III, q.68, ad 3).

Thomas though envisions that in some cases there can be such a defect of willing the intention of receiving the sacrament that the sacrament has not even been validly conferred and the person in that situation needs to be "rebaptized." Not only is repentance of sins necessary but also the recipient of the sacrament must "of his own will, intend to lead a new life ... it is necessary for him to have the will or intention of receiving the sacrament." St.

Thomas cites Rom. 6: 4 which states that we are buried with Christ "so we may walk in newness of life." (ST III, q. 68, a. 7). **"If an adult lack the intention of receiving the sacrament, he must be rebaptized."** (ST III, q. 68, a. 7, ad. 2).

It is written (Wisd 1: 5): "The Holy Spirit of discipline will flee from the deceitful." *But the effect of Baptism is from the Holy Spirit. Therefore insincerity hinders the effect of Baptism ... consequently in order that a man be justified by Baptism, his will must needs embrace both Baptism and the Baptismal effect. Now, a man is said to be insincere by reason of his will being in contradiction with either Baptism or its effect.* (ST III, q. 69, a. 9)

In contemporary sacramental practice, one often hears that even though there appear to be serious defects of intention and preparation in someone who is approaching a sacrament, "The sacrament will take care of it." Thomas does not agree. Thomas teaches that the reception of the sacrament should not be counted on to remove obstacles of lack of

repentance, unbelief and other forms of “insincerity.” The removal of these obstacles needs to precede the reception of the sacrament.⁴

When God changes man’s will from evil to good, man does not approach with insincerity. But God does not always do this. Nor is this the purpose of the sacrament, that an insincere man be made sincere: but that he who comes in sincerity, be justified. (ST III, q. 69, a. 9, ad 2)

Could there be some—many even—who are being confirmed or married in the Church, who lack the intention of receiving the sacrament as it is defined by Thomas, lacking the intention to lead the new life that each of the sacraments uniquely signify, lacking the intention of the sacramental effect? If so, if they come to a subsequent Christian awakening do they need to be “reconfirmed” or “remarried” to use the language that Thomas uses in connection with Baptism?

The Need for and the Reality of a New Pentecost

Fortunately despite the magnitude of the problems we are facing there are also many signs of hope, precisely in the realization of sacramental fruitfulness. Out of the many movements and programs that are present in the Church today that are effectively helping Catholics “activate” the graces of sacraments they have received (Neo-Catechumenal, Cursillo, Ignatian Retreats, Third Orders, Christlife, Alpha, etc.) we are particularly blessed (and tasked!) in the Catholic charismatic renewal to be a witness in the Church to how Pentecost can be perpetuated in the Church today.

When Aquinas speaks about sacramental fruitfulness he is talking about what our theology of the sacraments says should happen in a person’s life through receiving the sacrament, to some degree at least, actually happening in a manifestly discernible manner. He is talking then about the real power of the sacrament to effect identifiable change. In resolving the sacramental crisis then we not only need to pay careful attention to the truth dimension but also the power dimension. I would like to suggest that some theological attention to the biblical category of

⁴ See Colman O’Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, revised edition, Romanus Cessario (New York: Society of St. Paul, 1991), pp. 38 and 126 ff.

“power” will bear much fruit. Orthodoxy is not enough. Correct liturgy is not enough. We also, as Jesus says, need to be “clothed with power,” and be “baptized in the Spirit.”

It is precisely in the content and method of the Life in the Spirit Seminars (LSS) and other similarly purposed “seminars,” that the wisdom of St. Thomas is actually being applied. As such, what we are learning in the theological, spiritual and pastoral dimensions of preparation for baptism in the Spirit can be a resource for the whole Church in sacramental renewal. For what is embodied in the LSS is not only the wisdom of St. Thomas but the wisdom of Jesus and the apostles as they prepared people to be “clothed with power from on high.”⁵

- Jesus taught His disciples about the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit, and so must we.
- Jesus told His disciples not to attempt to carry out the mission until they were clothed with power from on high, and so must we.
- Jesus told His disciples to prayerfully seek this “baptism in the Spirit,” and so must we.
- The disciples believed Jesus, obeyed Jesus, and received the fulfillment of the promise.
- The disciples before and after Pentecost are a fruitful source of ongoing reflection as we confront the question of sacramental fruitfulness.

⁵ Renewal programs such as Alpha and Christlife have incorporated these principles in their programs with success without an identification with the Catholic charismatic renewal movements. Renewal Ministries has developed a 7 session DVD program, *As By A New Pentecost*, that allows individuals and groups to engage in a “renewal catechesis” which incorporates these principles as well.

- We are not only theologians, but first and foremost disciples ourselves.

As almost 1,700 years of Christendom collapse and a new international pagan culture gains ascendancy, even rising to the “dictatorship of relativism” that Benedict warns us about, the Church in the West is encountering circumstances that are more like those encountered by the early Church than anything we have known in our lifetimes. The recent and consistent papal calls for a new Pentecost, as perhaps the deepest need of the Church today, surely can be advanced by a deeper theological understanding of what many millions have experienced as baptism in the Holy Spirit.

And yet whatever theological interpretation one favors, as McDonnell has graciously and wisely said: “Whether the release of the Spirit is due to an awakening of sacramental grace or merely the fruit of prayer, the important thing is that it *happen*.”⁶

Facing the current doctrinal and pastoral crisis regarding sacramental fruitfulness, cannot the wisdom of Aquinas and the contemporary experience of successful renewal movements, show us a pathway to the genuine “new Pentecost” that was St. John XXIII’s deepest hope for Vatican II? And would this not be a very positive step in resolving the shocking disconnect between our sacramental theory and sacramental practice?

⁶ McDonnell and Montague, *Christian Initiation*, 339.