

Sacramental Fruitfulness and the Power of Pentecost

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It has become quite evident that there is something like a “sacramental crisis” occurring in the Church today, that Sr. Sara in her opening remarks referred to as “this extraordinarily critical moment.” I would like to briefly explore three aspects of this crisis: a crisis in the precipitous decline in the numbers of those participating in the sacraments, a crisis in the decline of orthodox faith even in many of those who are still frequenting the sacraments, and a crisis in the decline in the evident fruitfulness of the sacraments in the lives of many who are still receiving them.

In this paper I want to particularly focus on the Sacrament of Confirmation, not to enter into the debate about what age it should be received, but rather to explore how it can actually “perpetuate Pentecost,” as the CCC states that it in fact is intended to do. For whatever age it is conferred at the same challenge remains – how can the intended effects of this sacrament actually be realized in the lives of those who receive it?

In order to propose elements of a solution to the sacramental crisis I will comment briefly on the Conciliar and post Conciliar calls for a renewal of evangelization, including at the highest level an acknowledgement that all catechesis now needs to take place in the broader context of evangelization. I will also note how the recent Popes argue for a strong link between dynamic evangelization and the experience of the Holy Spirit manifest at the first and subsequent Pentecosts. I will 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 brief study of the first Pentecost and its subsequent interpretation in the Acts of the Apostles and derive from it some principles that can contribute to a more fruitful celebration of the sacraments.

The Sacramental Crisis

A Crisis of Declining Numbers

We are all, I'm sure, somewhat familiar with the statistics that reveal the sacramental decline. But let's review them briefly because if we aren't realistic about the depth of the problem our attempts to improve the situation won't be radical enough – in the sense of getting to the roots of the problem.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown regularly updates the statistics that trace the decline from 1964 to the present. During that time span while the self-identified Catholic population has increased from 46.3 million to 81.6 million and parish connected Catholics have increased from 46.3 million to 68.1 million, almost every other measurement of institutional effectiveness has declined. (I will round off the numbers and only cite some of them). Diocesan priests have declined from 35,925 to 25,868 but in 1965 94% of the priests were active in ministry and in 2014 only 66% (17,072) were active in ministry given the increasing average age of the diocesan clergy. We are nowhere near replacement rate in terms of new ordinations.

There have been huge declines in almost every other significant aspect of Church life. There has been roughly a 50% decline in every measure of ecclesiastical health. **(Baptisms of infants** went from 1.31 million to 693,914; **baptisms of adults** went from 126,209 to 42,751; Catholic **marriages** went from 352,458 to 148,124; **Catholic elementary schools** went from 10,667 to 5,302 and **enrollment in these schools went from 4.43 million to 1.36 million.** Primary school-age children in **parish religious education programs** went from 3.45 million to 2.63 million, and those in secondary religious education programs went from 1.38 million to 635,170 million. Mass attendance decline from anywhere from 70/55% to 24%. **Priestly ordinations went from 994 to 515; graduate level seminarians went from 8,325 to 3,650. Religious sisters from 179,954 to 48,546. Religious brothers from 12,271 to 4,200. Also, parishes without a resident priest increased from 549 to 3,533.**¹

As bad as the decline has been from 1964 to today the decline seems to be accelerating in many places in the last 10-15 years. The statistics from just one mid-western diocese are

¹ The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) provides exhaustive statistics, continually updated, on many Catholic metrics. Their home page (<http://cara.georgetown.edu>) contains a section titled "Church Statistics" that opens to this information.

typical of what is happening in dozens and dozens of dioceses in the Catholic heartland - New England, the Middle Atlantic States, the Midwest and Upper Mid-West and in many other dioceses throughout the US and Canada.

The statistics I will now cite track this drop in a large Mid-Western diocese, but statistics that I've seen from other dioceses are very similar and are typical of the Catholic heartland.

Sacramental Activity in 2001 as compared to 2015

(Feb 2016)

Sacrament	Amount per year 2001	Amount per year 2015	2001-2015 Amount change	2001-2015 Percent change
Infant Baptism	15,077	7,130	-7,947	-52.7
Adult Baptism	1,261	448	-813	-64.5
Full Communion	1,714	662	-1,052	-61.4
Catholic Marriages	3,155	1,617	-1,538	-48.7
Interfaith Marriages	1,311	589	-722	-55.1
Deaths/Funerals	10,054	8,143	-1,911	-19.0
Totals	32,572	18,589	-13,983	-42.9

The number of parishes in 2001 was 313. The number of parishes included for the Kenedy 2015-2016 was 224, which is a decrease of 89 parishes (-28.4%).²

A Crisis of Faith

² For example, in another Diocese while the Catholic population of the ten counties of the diocese declined by 3.25%, the drop in Mass attendance was five times greater—a 16.37% decline since the year 2000. There has been an even more precipitous decline in that period in baptisms (-32.81%), in marriages (-44.38%), and in RCIA participation (-57.7%). The Diocese notes that the reported decline is not confined to one area of the diocese or clustered in a small number of urban parishes but is widespread.

Besides the institutional collapse evidenced by the stark statistics there is evidence of a widespread repudiation of the teaching of Christ and the Church by vast numbers of Catholics. Even those who attend Mass regularly often embody a set of beliefs that are closer to the secular elites than the teaching of Christ. 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.

I recently did a week long Clergy Convocation for one of our healthiest dioceses where they have twice as many priests as parishes and almost every parish has two priests in it, and vocations are strong. They actually could split into two groups for the Convocation with one group taking care of the parishes while the other group was at the Convocation, and then switching. (That meant giving the same four talks to both groups but the Bishop and Vicar for Clergy endured this too.) In talking to many of the priests though they are increasingly alarmed about what the active Catholics in their parish actually believe and were extremely interested in discussing how to address relativism, universalism, dissent from marriage and sexual morality, open acceptance of homosexuality and fornication, lack of understanding of the Eucharist, or a reduction of Christianity to current social justice concerns, etc.

They were also concerned about a false understanding of God's mercy – God is so merciful that no one will be lost – and a practical belief in universalism – which has led many of their flock to an easy acceptance of immorality and a skepticism about the need to evangelize.³

Despite many positive signs such as FOCUS and other movements of renewal and evangelization, the trends are not encouraging. When “millennials” are surveyed their rejection of Catholic truths at variance with the secular culture is overwhelming; not promising for any “turn around,” for the foreseeable future.

But what about the growth of the Church in the South and Southwest? The radical collapse of the Church in some of the traditionally most Catholic parts of the country is masked

³ I have written at length on the issue of doctrinal confusion over the years and how it undermines both holiness and evangelization. Besides many articles, my most recent book length treatment is *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implication for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

by the large Hispanic immigration that has kept the statistics reported on the total Catholic population relatively stable in recent years and has increased the Catholic population of some of the Southern and Western states. (The economic decline of the rust-belt has also led to the migration of many Catholics to the South and West.) But the same secularizing forces are at work among these immigrants and the lack of sufficient numbers of Spanish speaking priests doesn't bode well for the future.⁴ The challenge of evangelical and Pentecostal churches that embody more values of the Hispanic culture than the typical Catholic Anglo parish does is also a significant factor. The steady decline of Catholic adherence in second and third generations of Hispanics is well documented.⁵

A Crisis of Fruitfulness

While sacramental participation has radically declined as well as orthodox belief even among church goers, we are also 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. 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

⁴ See Jim Graves, "Where are the Priests?" in *National Catholic Register*, July 17-30, 2011, p. 1, ff. While Hispanics now comprise nearly 40% of the total US Catholic population (and over 50% of the Catholic youth population), only 10-15% of the priests ordained each year are Hispanic. Only 9% of the Bishops are Hispanic. In heavily Hispanic dioceses like Los Angeles and Phoenix ordinations of any kind are shockingly rare. In Los Angeles, the largest Archdiocese in the US, only 3 men were ordained in 2010, and only 6 in 2011. In Phoenix only 3 were ordained in 2010 and none in 2011.

⁵ While there has been growth in the West, Southwest and South, a growth which is largely due to Hispanic immigration, not growth through evangelization, the statistics about the outflow from the Catholic Church in second and third generation Hispanic Catholic immigrants are not encouraging. See Edwin Hernández, with Rebecca Burwell and Jeffrey Smith, "A Study of Hispanic Catholics: Why Are They Leaving the Catholic Church? Implications for the New Evangelization," in *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles*, ed. Steven Boguslawski and Ralph Martin (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 109-141.

confirmed are seldom seen in church again. Matthew Kelly's Dynamic Catholic Institute reports that during the past decade 85% 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."⁶

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)

⁶ <http://dynamiccatholic.com/confirmation/faqs> accessed March 31,2016

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 none 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 which 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 Call for a New Evangelization

This radical decline - in numbers, in faith and in fruitfulness - first occurring in Europe and now in all the developed nations, has led to an urgent call for a renewed emphasis on evangelization. In fact, the most authoritative catechetical documents – the *General Directory for Catechesis* and the *National Directory for Catechesis* – now call for all catechesis to be done in a framework of evangelization. As the supportive structures and networks of relationships that generally speaking supported a basic respect for God, the 10 Commandments, the Church and Synagogue, have crumbled, we are seeing, as Sr. Sara has noted, the appearance of a “new language” that speaks more and more frequently of “friendship with Christ,” “personal relationship with Christ,” “encounter with Christ,” and even “personal decision for Christ.” The most incisive definition of the core purpose of evangelization that we have, in my opinion, is found in the encyclical of John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*:

The proclamation of the Word of God has *Christian conversion* (in original) as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith . . . Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple. (RM, 46)

The “new evangelization,” then isn’t new in its message but it’s new in who it is directed to – baptized Catholics not living as disciples of Jesus. It is also new in who does it – primarily the laity. And it is new according to John Paul II in “ardor, method, and expression.” It is not a new program but many programs can be utilized in its service. It is primarily a new optic by which we assess our current situation, and recognize that transmitting the faith by “osmosis” as it were is no longer working and a much more intentional and focused effort at eliciting, faith, repentance and conversion is needed. For example, sacramental preparation today almost always needs to include a central aspect of evangelization, given by true witnesses, and not just a catechetical explanation of our theology of the sacrament in question. The model of all catechesis is supposed to be, according to the catechetical documents, the RCIA correctly implemented, which is not intended to just convey information but to lead to formation as disciples.

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.⁷ These are also the two that are most frequently mentioned in Scripture as essential for salvation, namely repentance and faith.

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)

⁷ Ralph Martin "The Post Christendom Sacramental Crisis: The Wisdom of Thomas Aquinas." *Nova et Vetera*, 11:1 Winter 2013,

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.⁸

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

⁸ 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.

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.**

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 (Wisdom 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.⁹

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)

⁹ 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.

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.) I would like to focus on what can be learned from a movement that most specifically focuses on “perpetuating Pentecost” in the Church, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which has touched more than 120 million Catholics throughout the world and is most relevant to our discussion of Confirmation. My purpose is not to promote a movement with its particular history, structure, methods and culture but rather to identify those theological and pastoral principles which are basic to our faith that this movement has succeeded in recovering in a way that can be applied in ordinary Church life apart from the specificity of a movement. The Catholic charismatic renewal attempts to “stir up the graces of the sacraments” in those who may have been “sacramentalized and perhaps catechized but not sufficiently evangelized” as Sr. Sara has noted, quoting St. John Paul II.

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 "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."

I want to concentrate in the remainder of this paper on the manifestation of power in the giving of the Holy Spirit which happened at Pentecost which the CCC says is to be perpetuated in the sacrament of Confirmation.

The Papal Calls for a New Pentecost

While not as widely known as the insistent papal calls for a "new evangelization," there have also been very insistent papal calls for a "new Pentecost." And I don't think we'll see a widespread expression of new evangelization in our day unless we have a new Pentecost, which is why many dioceses now are engaging in periods of time praying for a new Pentecost before embarking on evangelization initiatives. From St. John XXIII to Pope Francis we find passionate pleas and prayers for the Lord Himself to descend on the Church in the person of the Holy Spirit and give us zeal for holiness and evangelization, and an abundance of contemplative and charismatic graces. I don't have time to demonstrate this for you but I've done so in other publications, including an article in the summer 2011 edition of *Logos*.

Since I know that Benedict XVI is a particular favorite of many theologians here I will include a few – out of many – citations where he fervently calls for a new Pentecost.

In a 2008 address reflecting on the text from Acts in which Jesus promises his disciples that they will be baptized in the Spirit, Benedict made an invitation to the whole Church, saying,

Today I would like to extend this invitation to everyone: Let us rediscover, dear brothers and sisters, the beauty of being baptized in the Holy Spirit; let us be

aware again of our Baptism and of our confirmation, sources of grace that are always present. Let us ask the Virgin Mary to obtain a renewed Pentecost for the Church again today, a Pentecost that will spread in everyone the joy of living and witnessing to the Gospel.¹⁰

Certainly it cannot be claimed that Benedict, by using the biblical terminology of baptism in the Holy Spirit, is asking everyone to be baptized in the Holy Spirit as it is understood and culturally experienced in the Catholic charismatic renewal. It must be acknowledged, however, that he is making a very strong call to a renewal of the graces of baptism and confirmation in relationship to the event of Pentecost and its substance, which is described by Jesus as being “baptized in the Spirit.” In my own opinion I would suggest that the CCR not simply speak of “being baptized in the Spirit,” a phrase which biblical and sacramental scholars tend to agree refers to the outcome of sacramental Christian initiation, to explain what happens to its participants but, in already baptized and confirmed Catholics, to speak rather of “renewing our baptism in the Spirit,” in order to avoid the impression that this prayer for renewal is itself a sacrament.

In his visit to St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City, he even more emphatically proclaimed:

Let us implore from God the grace of a new Pentecost for the Church in America. May tongues of fire, combining burning love of God and neighbor with zeal for the spread of Christ’s Kingdom, descend on all present!¹¹

The consistent appeals from the papacy give a special importance to the discussion of what could really make possible a “new Pentecost.” In order to answer this question we need to look at how the first Pentecost happened and address this question: is it reasonable to expect something similar to happen today as part of the restoration of normal Christian life and the increase of sacramental fruitfulness? If so, how?

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, “Let Baptism of the Holy Spirit purify every heart” given May 11, 2008, printed in *L’Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, May 14, 2008, No. 20, p. 1.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Homily at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, April 19, 2008.

Lessons from the First Pentecost

In order to probe more deeply into what a “new Pentecost” could possibly be we need to take a look at the first Pentecost, the prototype of a new Pentecost. First of all it is important to note that all four Gospels speak of Jesus “baptizing in the Spirit.” (Mk 1: 1-8; Lk 3:3-18; Jn 1:22-34; Mt 3:1-12)

In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! . . . Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Mt. 3:1-12)

Jesus himself speaks of “the promise of the Father” and “baptizing in the Holy Spirit” before his ascension.

He said to them “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And he said to them, “Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power (*dynamis*) from on high.” (Lk. 24:44-49)

And then on the day of his Ascension:

In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While meeting with them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” When they had gathered together they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power (*dynamis*) when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men

dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. (Acts 1:1-12)

The promise of Jesus to "baptize in the Holy Spirit" is fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. (Acts 2:11-41)

12 They were all astounded and bewildered, and said to one another, "What does this mean?"

13 But others said, scoffing, "They have had too much new wine."

14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them, "You who are Jews, indeed all of you staying in Jerusalem. Let this be known to you, and listen to my words.

15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

22 You who are Israelites, hear these words. Jesus the Nazorean was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God worked through him in your midst, as you yourselves know.

23 This man, delivered up by the set plan and foreknowledge of God, you killed, using lawless men to crucify him.

24 But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it.

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

33 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.

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

37 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?"

38 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.

39 For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call."

40 He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.

What sometimes is not noticed is that In the *Acts of the Apostles* account of the first several decades of the Church's expansion the apostles are concerned to see that each new group of converts come into the same "Pentecost experience" as they did. They clearly thought that their experience of the Spirit was intended by the Lord to be normative as the outcome of Christian initiation.

First the Samaritans:

Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was conferred by the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me this power (*exousia*) too, so that anyone upon whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8: 14-19)

And then Cornelius and his household:

While Peter was still speaking these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word. The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit even as we have?" He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10: 44-48)

Peter has some explaining to do:

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them as it had upon us at the beginning, and I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift he gave to us when we came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to be able to hinder God?" When they heard this, they stopped objecting and glorified God, saying, "God has then granted life-giving repentance to the Gentiles too." (Acts 11: 15-18)

And finally some Ephesian disciples:

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior of the country and came down to Ephesus where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They answered him, "We have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." He said, "How were you baptized?" They replied, "With the baptism of John." Paul then said, "John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. Altogether there were about twelve men. (Acts 19: 1-7)

Not a one-time experience but an ongoing "filling with the Spirit."

After their release they went back to their own people and reported what the chief priests and elders had told them. And when they heard it, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said, "Sovereign Lord, maker of heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them, you said by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of our father David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples entertain folly? The Kings of the earth took their stand and the princes gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed.' Indeed they gathered in this city against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed, Herod and Pontius Pilate, together with the Gentiles and the Peoples of Israel, to do what your hand and your will had long ago planned to take place. And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and enable your servants to speak your word with all boldness, as you stretch forth your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." As they prayed, the place where they were gathered shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power (*dynamis*) the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. (Acts 4: 23-33)

There is sometimes the need to "fan into flame" the sacramental gift of the Spirit.

For this reason, I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power (*dynamis*) and love and self-control. (2 Tim. 1: 6-7)

The predominant interpretation of baptism in the Spirit is a "stirring up" or "renewal," a "releasing" or "actualization" of the gift of the Spirit given in the sacraments of Christian initiation, primarily of baptism and confirmation. Fr. George Montague and Fr. Killian McDonnell's scriptural, theological, and historical study of Christian initiation during the first eight centuries contains perhaps the most comprehensive argumentation for this view, though

many others adopt it as well. This was the primary interpretation given by the first theologians to publish studies on the question.¹²

Montague and McDonnell support their thesis by a review of the available evidence from the first eight centuries of the Church, which evidence they argue shows that the sacraments of Christian initiation were often characterized by an experiential dimension and manifestations of the charismatic gifts of the Spirit.¹³

The strong claim they are making on the basis of their research is that baptism in the Holy Spirit and the manifestation of charismatic gifts as experienced in the charismatic renewal are not simply optional, personal experiences, or something linked to a particular spirituality or movement, but something essential to integral Christian Initiation, something normative for the whole Church. In their own words:

The energizing power of the Holy Spirit, manifesting itself in a variety of charisms, is not religious fluff. Nor is it—as viewed by many today—an optional spirituality in the Church such as, among Catholics, devotion to the Sacred Heart or the stations of the cross. The Baptism in the Holy Spirit does not belong to private piety, but, as we have demonstrated, to the public official liturgy of the Church. It is the spirituality of the Church. By that account it is not—let it be said clearly—the property of the charismatic renewal. The unique gift which the

¹² Two of the earliest studies are those of the Ranaghans (see n. 4 above) and Fr. Edward O'Connor, CSC, *The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1971), who hold the view I refer to as the first interpretation. This is also the interpretation of Cardinals Suenens and Cordes, as well as Fr. Cantalamessa. Cf. Paul Josef Cordes, *Call to Holiness: Reflections on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997). A variation of this view ties baptism in the Holy Spirit particularly to the initiatory sacrament of confirmation. See Steve Clark, *Baptized in the Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* (Pecos, NM: Dove, 1976) and *Confirmation and the "Baptism of the Holy Spirit"* (Pecos, NM: Dove, 1969). Clark's preference for linking baptism in the Spirit to confirmation is to preserve the properly "Pentecostal" nature of baptism of the Spirit, lest it be mistaken for just any deepening of relationship with Christ or conversion that doesn't include the experiential dimension of the Spirit's presence and some charismatic manifestation. Clark makes a strong case that speaking in tongues is a normal and most common manifestation, but acknowledges that "inspired praise" whether in "tongues" or in one's own language is all that can be certainly determined from the various accounts of the charismatic manifestations accompanying Christian initiation described in the New Testament (*Baptized in the Spirit*, 35–36).

¹³ Killian McDonnell and George T. Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Evidence from the First Eight Centuries* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

charismatic renewal brings to the Church is the awareness of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. This is all the more reason why the Baptism in the Holy Spirit is not to be identified with any group or movement. . . . Indeed, the Baptism in the Spirit is normative.¹⁴

In conclusion, what lessons can be derived from our consideration of the accounts in the Acts of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that can be applied today to increase sacramental fruitfulness?¹⁵

- 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.
- Jesus told his disciples to prayerfully seek this “baptism in the Spirit.”
- 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.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 337.

¹⁵ 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*.”¹⁶

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?

¹⁶ McDonnell and Montague, *Christian Initiation*, 339.