

6th Sunday in Easter

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 8:5-8, 14-17
<i>Response</i>	Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 66:1-3, 4-5, 16-7, 16, 20
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Peter 3:15-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Whoever loves me will keep my word, says the Lord, and my Father will love him and we will come to him.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 14:15-21

With the Sixth Sunday of Easter, the Church draws ever closer to the great feast of Pentecost. And because Pentecost is of course the feast of the Holy Spirit, one of the things that the Church gives us is the teachings of Jesus, not just from the Last Supper discourse in general, but on the Holy Spirit in particular. And that's especially true of the Sixth Sunday of Easter in Year A. So let's look at the Gospel for this week. It picks up from last week's gospel in John 14, but it continues on to Jesus's actual promise to send the Holy Spirit and to give the Holy Spirit to the disciples. So the Gospel is John 14:15-21. Jesus says:

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Let's stop there. There are a couple of points here. Number one, notice Jesus' first statement, "if you love me, you will keep my commandments." This is an important point because sometimes we think of fulfilling the commandments simply as a duty or an obligation. "I go to Mass every Sunday, why? Well because it is my obligation to do so." That is not what Jesus is calling his disciples to do. He is calling his disciples to keep his commandments out of love, because his commandments are his gift to us. They are a gift that will lead us down the path, not just to eternal life, but they will also help us to have a life of happiness, to have a life of joy in the Holy Spirit and in the Lord. So I just think that's an important point here. Usually you wouldn't say — like I wouldn't say to someone like to my wife — "if you love me, you will keep my commandments." You wouldn't tell your friend "if you love me, you will do what I say." But Jesus, although he is our friend, as he says later in the Gospel, he is more than just our friend, he is our God as well. He is our maker. So keeping the commandments is, and should be always, an expression of love for Christ and love for God. That is the first point.

The second point is that Jesus now not only calls the disciples to keep the commandments, he promises to send them what he calls another advocate — or in the Greek a *paraklētos* — another Paraclete. Some translations will have — the RSV has — another counselor. The question is what is that? What is a paraclete? What is an advocate? What is a counselor? What is Jesus talking about here? Well obviously he's referring to the Holy Spirit because he says "even the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth," so he is referring to the Holy Spirit. But the word that gets translated advocate here, that Greek word is actually really significant. It's made up of two parts. The word *para* means beside and the part *klētos* comes from the Greek word *kaleō*, that means to call. So if you put those two things together, literally Paraclete means he who is called to one's side. In other words, somebody that comes to your side and stands by your side in order to defend you or advocate on your behalf. The latin means the same thing. *Advocatus* is someone you call to your side; like a defense attorney in a legal setting, they stand beside you, they give you strength, they give you counsel, they give you advice, but they also defend you. So that's the whole image of the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth. And notice Jesus says "another Paraclete," because he himself is the first Paraclete. So in the letter of John the word Paraclete gets used to refer to Christ. So God the Father sends both the Son and the Spirit to be our advocate, to be our counselor, to be our comforter.

So Jesus here though is talking about the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. So he calls him the spirit of truth, and why does he call him that? Well because he is not just the Paraclete, he's also a spirit. And that means he's different than Jesus. So the Greek word here for spirit is the word *pneuma* and it has several different meanings. It can mean spirit, but it also means breath or wind. It's the exact same as in Hebrew, the word for spirit, *ruah*, means spirit, breath or wind. So when Jesus says "I'm sending you the Paraclete, I'm sending you the advocate, the spirit of truth," the fact that he calls him the spirit shows that it's going to be different than Jesus. For example, as the Holy Spirit is spirit, he is going to be invisible. So as he says here, "the world cannot receive him because it cannot see him." So unlike Christ, who could be seen by those who didn't believe in him, those who rejected him, the Holy Spirit is going to come but he is invisible. He can't be received by the world that doesn't believe in him because they can't see him.

So the Spirit is invisible, but he's also immaterial in the sense that unlike Jesus, who was in one place at one time in his earthly body, the Spirit is going to come and dwell with the disciples, and not just with the disciples, but in the disciples. So he says "the spirit will be with you and he will be in you." Now Jesus was able to be with the disciples in his earthly life, but he wasn't able to be in them the way that the Spirit will, so he's trying to encourage the disciples in the face of his departure that he's not going to leave them abandoned, but that another person of the Trinity, another divine person, the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is going to come and not just be with them, but dwell actually in them. That is a powerful, powerful promise.

In fact, that's what Jesus goes on to say in the next line, "I won't leave you desolate." Now literally the Greek here is *orphanos*, we get the English word orphan from that. An orphan is a child whose parents are dead or who has lost his parents in some way and so what Jesus is trying to help the Apostles know is that even though he's going to depart, he's not going to leave them fatherless. He is not going to abandon them, but in fact he's going to send the Spirit to be with them and to be among them and to console them and be their advocate in the midst of his absence. When will that happen? It will take place after Jesus departs, where he says "the world is not going to see me anymore, you'll see me; because I live." In other words, he is pointing forward to his resurrection appearances, because sure

enough in John's Gospel, when he comes back and he is raised from the dead, one of first things he is going to do is breathe on the Apostles and give them the power of the Holy Spirit to forgive and retain sins. And then at the end of 40 days, after he ascends and then Pentecost comes, he will actually give the Spirit to dwell within them in the great indwelling of the Holy Spirit that takes place on the feast of Pentecost. And he says "in that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." In other words, once the Holy Spirit comes to them, they will in a sense not comprehend, but they will grasp the mystery of the Trinity, because one of the persons of the Trinity will now dwell in them. And they will understand that Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in him, and that through the Spirit, Jesus is also in us and we are in him. It is because it is the Spirit that binds the Church together. So this is a major, major text right here. I think in one place the Catechism actually says this, that it's really only at the end of his life that Jesus gives the fullness of his teaching about the Holy Spirit to the Apostles. Up until now he has talked about the Spirit a couple different times, but they have been almost in passing, but now he's, in a sense, revealing the mystery of the Trinity to them in a full way. Only before he dies does he give them this central mystery of the Christian faith. That is what the Catechism says the Trinity is, it is the central mystery of the Christian faith.

That's the Gospel for the day. What about the first reading? Well if you go back to Acts 8:5-8, we actually have a text here, once again, that's a window onto the early Church. We are, during the Easter season, looking at what Christianity looked like in the early days. We are going back to the birth of the Church and in Acts 5:5-8 we get another window onto another sacrament. In this case the power of the sacrament we are looking at is what will later go on to be called the Sacrament of Confirmation. So I want to read the story. You might think at first glance, "what does this have to do with Confirmation?" I'll make it clear in just a second. This is a story of Philip, who was one of the deacons we saw in the Acts of the Apostles 6, he goes off into Samaria, which if you have been following the videos, you know from our study of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, was a place that was known for having the mixed descendants of both Israelites and Gentiles in the northern part of the Holy Land, who were very much at odds with the Jewish people. The Jewish people saw them as cut off, like apostates. They didn't have a healthy relationship. But after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, Philip, as a

deacon, goes to the land of Samaria in order to evangelize, in order to bring the Gospel to them. And this is what happens, Acts 8:5 and following says:

Philip went down to a city of Sama'ria, and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did. For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

Now if you skip down — in this case the lectionary actually skips several verses in which Philip not only preaches, but also baptizes various men and women amongst the Samaritans. But if you skip down, the lectionary picks up in verse 14 and it says this:

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Sama'ria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

What is going on here? Why are Peter and John sent down to Samaria to lay hands on people? Why didn't Philip just do that is kind of the question behind the story. So obviously what is happening here is Philip, the deacon, is evangelizing and he obviously has the power to preach and the power to baptize, but when it comes to this rite of laying hands on the people so that they can receive the Holy Spirit, that's evidently something that only Peter and John, who were two of the Apostles, could do. So they come all the way down from Jerusalem — actually it is up because it is North, but you get the idea — to Samaria in order to lay hands on these recent converts and give them the Holy Spirit. You might be confused, you might think “Well wait a second, don't you receive the Holy Spirit when you're baptized? It says they had been baptized.” And the answer is yes, of course you do receive the Holy Spirit in baptism, but obviously here Luke is describing some other gift of the Holy Spirit, some other special bestowal of the Holy Spirit that only Peter and John can do, and that they do not by immersing them in water, like with Baptism, but rather by laying hands on their head. Well what is this a

reference to? If you look at the ancient Church Fathers, if you look at the tradition of the Church, this has always been seen as the origins of what we now call the Sacrament of Confirmation. In the West we call it Confirmation; among Eastern Catholics and Eastern Christians, they call it Chrismation, because the laying on of hands is accompanied by an anointing as well, Chrism being the Greek word for oil.

So what's going on here? This is an extremely important passage, because it is basically the first witness to the Sacrament of Confirmation in the early Church and it tells us a few things about this Sacrament. First, number one, that it's different than Baptism. It is not the same thing as Baptism. Philip baptizes people, he's a deacon, but only the Apostles lay hands to give this special gift of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, not only is it a different rite, but it is carried out by different people. Why is it that Philip couldn't do it? Well if you look at the history of the Church, that's not a power that deacons have. They don't have the power to confirm. They have the power to preach, they have the power to baptize, but they don't have the power to confirm, because that special gift of the Holy Spirit that is tied to confirmation has to do with the preaching of the Gospel — in a sense to the bearing witness to Christ — and so it's fitting that the Apostles themselves would lay hands on the people to give them that special grace of the Holy Spirit that completes their baptism, and then sends them out as missionaries themselves, as the ones to go out and spread the good news in their lives through their witness and through their daily life and through their conversations and their witness to Christ.

I love this passage because one of the sacraments that was rejected by many of the Protestant reformers at the time of the Reformation was Confirmation. It was claimed that Confirmation was un-biblical, and so so many Christian denominations don't even have Confirmation anymore because they don't see the word confirmation anywhere in the Bible. And it is true, if you look at the New Testament, will you find the word confirmation? No, absolutely not. But do you find the reality there? Absolutely, yes, you see it right here in Acts 8. So what is Confirmation? It is a special grace of Holy Spirit that can only be given by the Apostles and their successors, and it's tied to the ritual of the laying on of hands. It's different than Baptism, but it's tied to Baptism and it completes Baptism, and it gives them this grace of the Holy Spirit to go out and bear witness themselves.

So in that light then we can actually see what the Responsorial Psalm is for today. The Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 66, is “let all the earth cry out to God with joy.” Why? Why are they crying out to God with joy? For all the powerful deeds that He has done. And sure enough, that is what we are seeing in both the first reading and the Gospel for this day. Jesus is promising to give the Spirit who will do amazing works in the lives of the Apostles, and we actually see that being carried out by Peter and John, as well as Philip in the great marvels that Philip is carrying out; baptisms, exorcisms, preaching, healings, and then above all in this grace of Confirmation, this laying on of hands that Peter and John perform. And sure enough, you don't have to take my word for it, you can actually look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church. CCC 1288 says this about Confirmation and the laying on of hands:

From that time on the apostles, in fulfillment of Christ's will, imparted to the newly baptized by the laying on of hands the gift of the Spirit that completes the grace of Baptism...The imposition of hands is rightly recognized by the Catholic tradition as the origin of the sacrament of Confirmation, which in a certain way perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church."

Now we will look at what that grace of Pentecost is when we get to the feast of Pentecost. For now though I would just like to use this as a helpful catechetical tool to emphasize why in the Western Church it is the bishop who administers the sacrament of Confirmation. So maybe you know this or maybe you don't, but in Eastern churches, like in the Orthodox Churches for example, Confirmation can be administered by priests, and usually is administered by a priest, because what they will do is they will give all three sacraments of initiation: Baptism, the Eucharist and Confirmation to infants. So they do it all at once so that the infant is fully initiated from the very beginning. Well obviously there's no way for a bishop to go and do every Baptism, it would just be too much. The bishop to children ratio would be too many, there would constantly be babies needing to be baptized. So in the East, the bishop delegates the priest to anoint the child and to confirm it, but he has to use oil that was consecrated by a bishop. That's in the East. But in the West, one of the reasons Confirmation was detached from Baptism is because in the Western Church they wanted to retain the symbolism and the significance of a successor to the Apostles being the one who anoints and lays hands on the person receiving Confirmation, because they're being sent out to be a witness to Christ.

And it's fitting that an Apostle, or their successor, would carry out the Sacrament. So in the West Confirmation is detached from Baptism and administered primarily by a bishop — now a bishop can delegate it to a priest — but you can see the connection between bishops and Confirmation already in the Acts of the Apostles. Why? Because when Philip needs somebody to come and confirm, so to speak, the Samaritans, Peter and John, the apostles, they have to come down and give that sacrament. I think it is a beautiful tradition that we have in the West that keeps this connection between the Apostles and the laying on of hands alive in the grace of this holy Sacrament of Confirmation.