

Pentecost

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13

The second reading for the Solemnity of Pentecost in year A comes from a very famous passage in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It's a passage that's often described as being about the charismatic gifts, these special gifts of the Holy Spirit that God uses to build up the Church. And the passage is from 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13. Now, in the lectionary, it skips over verses 8-11, but in my reading of it, I want to actually include those verses because they're helpful for understanding the context, as well as the concrete examples of the charismatic gifts that Paul's referring to in this particular reading. So let's begin in 1 Corinthians 12:3. Paul says this:

...no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

And here's the passage where the lectionary skips over, but I'm going to include it. It says this:

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

Now the lectionary picks up:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.¹

Okay, so that's the end of the reading for today. And of course, you can already see that on the feast on Pentecost—on the Solemnity of Pentecost—what are we celebrating? We're celebrating the day when the Holy Spirit comes down upon the apostles and disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem, fills them with the Holy Spirit, descends upon them in tongues as of fire, and the Church (in its present form) is born. It's often referred to as the birthday of the Church, Pentecost is. So it's fitting that on the feast of Pentecost, on this Solemnity, the Church would give us a passage from the letters of Paul that's specifically focused on the agency, the action, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the one Body of Christ, in the Church.

So with that in mind, there are a few aspects of this particular reading that stand out. The first one is the statement that:

...no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

So, this is a kind of fundamental principle of Catholic theology, but it's always worth reiterating. Namely, that even the grace of conversion itself—by which a person turns away from sin and turns to God and confesses that Jesus Christ isn't just the Messiah but the Lord, the divine Son of God—even that movement of repentance, conversion, confession, is something that is a gift. It's a gift of grace itself. So, a person's very faith and confession of Jesus as the Messiah has its origins in the gift of the Holy Spirit, in the grace of the Holy Spirit moving a person's will, moving their heart to believe and to accept the truth of who Jesus is and what He's come to accomplish. That's the first point.

With that in mind, however, Paul quickly moves to specific gifts of the Holy Spirit—not just the initial grace of conversion or repentance or forgiveness, but also

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.

specific graces, special graces...which the Greek word here for these “gifts” is *charisma*. We get the English word “charismatic” or even the English word “charisma” from that. And these charismatic gifts, these special gifts of the Holy Spirit are distinct from the basic gift of salvation or forgiveness of sins. And one of the reasons I’ve read the verses that are skipped by the lectionary is because I think it’s actually helpful for exemplifying what Paul’s talking about when he talks about the *charismata*, the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit, to see some specific concrete examples.

So in this catalog of charismatic gifts, Paul mentions a few: wisdom, knowledge, service, faith, gifts of healing, workings of miracles, the gift of prophecy, the ability to distinguish between spirits. In some older translations, you’ll actually find here the discernment of spirits—which if you think of St. Ignatius of Loyola and his famous spiritual exercises, he has a whole section at the end of the exercises on the discernment of spirits. And what Ignatius means by that is the ability to distinguish between the kind of spiritual temptations and trials that a person faces in the early stages of spiritual life—the purgative way, as he calls it—and the ability to recognize different kinds of temptations in later stages of the spiritual life, like the illuminative way. So Ignatius means discernment of spirits. He has a very specific reference. But that language that he gets actually comes from 1 Corinthians 12 here.

Now what Paul means exactly by that is actually a little obscure. It’s a little debated. But it’s some kind of ability to recognize the difference between different kinds of spirits, whether good or evil spirits. And then he also mentions the interpretation of tongues and the gift of tongues. Now this one is particularly apropos to the feast of Pentecost, because if you’ll recall, in the book of Acts chapter 2 that describes the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost, it says that they began speaking in tongues.

And there’s a long debate about exactly how to interpret that. But at the very basic level—on its most basic level—what’s happening here is that the apostles are able to speak in such a way that they’re understood by the people of the different languages, races, and tongues from around the world who have gathered for the

feast of Weeks, the feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem, which was a Jewish festival in the spring that culminated after Passover.

So it's a little unfortunate—although I don't get to make these decisions—that these verses are eliminated from the lectionary, because this is really the link, the clearest link, between what Paul is describing here and what happens in Acts. So the Holy Spirit gives the Church the gift of languages, the gift of tongues, so that the Gospel can be understood not just by the Jewish people, not just by the Hebrew people, but by all the peoples of the world whether they be from Africa or Asia Minor or Europe or Gall—whatever it might be, wherever they're coming from in the Roman Empire—they are now, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, able to hear the Good News of salvation. So that's another gift of the Spirit. That's another one of the charismatic gifts.

And then finally, the last part of the reading for today, you'll notice it says:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

So notice here, there are really two parts of the reading for today. The first part focuses on specific gifts of the Holy Spirit—whether it be miracles or prophecy or healing or the discernment of spirits or the gift of tongues or the interpretation of tongues—that are meant for building up the Body of Christ, building up the Church...the Church's mission in the world as we see, which begins on Pentecost.

But Paul also mentions here the grace of conversion itself, the grace of Baptism—the fundamental gift of sanctifying grace, that makes a person a member of the Body of Christ, which is Paul's distinctive. — it's unique to him — it's his distinctive image for the Church. It's very common for us to talk about the Church as the Body of Christ, as the mystical Body of Christ—of which all Christians are members. But we sometimes forget that that's only Paul. It's only Paul who uses that image to describe the Church as the Body of Christ.

So here Paul's talking about the grace of Baptism, which also takes place through the Holy Spirit, by which we're united not just to Christ but to one another...so that whether we're Jews or Greeks—Paul says here—slaves or free men (which are two of the major categories in the first century in the Roman Empire), we are all now one in the Body of Christ through the power, the unifying power, of the Holy Spirit. So you can see real easily why this is such a fitting reading for the feast of Pentecost.

Now I'd like to close out our discussion with a couple of key quotations, though, from the *Catechism* that are really helpful for understanding the passage that we've just read...and for understanding the theological distinction between what the Church refers to as sanctifying grace and charismatic graces. So in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 768, we read these words. This is in the section of the *Catechism* on the Holy Spirit, the article of the Creed "I believe in the Holy Spirit." And it says this:

So that she can fulfill her mission, the Holy Spirit "bestows upon [the Church] varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her."²

So you'll see there, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quoting the Second Vatican Council, is talking about the reality of these charismatic gifts. And that's drawing directly on the language of gift, *charisma*, that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12. Now what exactly are these charismatic gifts? Well, in paragraph 2003, the *Catechism* gives a little bit more detail, and I think this is a really helpful paragraph for understanding the nature and the distinction—not the separation but the distinction—between the different gifts of the Holy Spirit. So this is what the *Catechism* says about grace:

Grace is first and foremost the gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us. But grace also includes the gifts that the Spirit grants us to associate us with his work, to enable us to collaborate in the salvation of others and in the growth of the Body of Christ, the Church. There *are sacramental graces*, gifts proper to the different sacraments. There are furthermore *special*

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 768

graces, also called *charisms* after the Greek term used by St. Paul and meaning “favor,” “gratuitous gift,” “benefit.” Whatever their character—sometimes it is extraordinary, such as the gift of miracles or of tongues—charisms are oriented toward sanctifying grace and are intended for the common good of the Church. They are at the service of charity which builds up the Church.³

Alright, so notice there: the way the *Catechism* is distinguishing between these two is simple but really profound. In the Sacrament of Baptism (and other sacraments), we receive sanctifying grace. This is the grace that’s ordered properly toward our own sanctification, i.e. our own becoming holy—our justification, as it also uses there, which means being forgiven of sins and becoming a member of the Body of Christ...being set apart from Original Sin or mortal sin and being set apart for Christ as a member of His Body. Those are sanctifying graces, like we receive in Baptism.

But in addition to sanctifying grace, the Holy Spirit also operates in the soul of the Christian by giving them special charismatic graces that are not ordered primarily toward our own sanctification or salvation but toward the salvation of others—toward the mission of the Church in evangelization. And those charismatic graces, as the *Catechism* says, sometimes they can be extraordinary, like the gift of miracles or the gift of tongues. So if you think about in the context of Pentecost in the book of Acts, the gifts of performing miracles and the gift of tongues are specifically evangelical charisms. In other words, they’re ordered toward the conversion of others, especially the pagan world. So as the Gospel goes out into the pagan world, one of the things that miracles and tongues are going to function are as signs of the supernatural character of the Gospel. They’re signs that the Church isn’t just a human institution, but it’s a divine institution.

In fact, in St. Gregory the Great, in his *Dialogues*—this is Pope Gregory the Great writing the 6th century. In his famous work of *Dialogues*, which is a kind of category of the various miracles of the saints, he’s very clear about this...that miracles are extraordinary graces of the Holy Spirit that function primarily as

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 2003

witnesses to outsiders, as signs to unbelievers like the pagan world, that Christianity is a supernatural religion. However, there are also somewhat less flashy or fantastic or extraordinary charismatic gifts like faith or wisdom or knowledge or the discernment of spirits. These also serve—think here how wisdom or knowledge would serve in the catechetical mission of the Church, building up the Body of Christ by having the wisdom and the knowledge to explain the faith to teach others. That too is a charismatic gift of the Holy Spirit that's not ordered primarily toward your or my personal salvation, but toward the salvation of others.

So as we bring this study to a close, I just invite you to consider what the *Catechism* is saying here and ask yourself the question: When did I receive sanctifying grace? Well, it would be through the grace of Baptism primarily...but through other sacraments as well, the Eucharist, Confession. But also: What are the particular charismatic gifts, what are the special graces Christ has given to me in order for me to participate in the mission of the Church? Because the missionary outreach of the Church isn't something that's just limited to priests and bishops and consecrated religious. Every single baptized Christian was made to drink of that one Spirit. And you and I have not just received sanctifying graces...we've also received special charismatic graces that are ordered toward the salvation of those around us. So discerning what those gifts might be, what particular gifts you might have and how you can utilize those gifts in the service of the Church and Her Mission and salvation of others is a very important part of becoming a full member (so to speak) of the mystical Body of Christ, as Paul says here in 1 Corinthians 12.