

THE GREAT STRANGER

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The Great Stranger

As we read, in the Acts of the Apostles, about that day, Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down on the disciples of Our Lord, we are conscious of being present at the great display of God's power with which the Church began to spread its life among all nations. The victory achieved by Christ, through his obedience, through his offering of himself on the Cross and through the Resurrection, his triumph over death and sin, is revealed here in all its divine splendour.

The disciples, witnesses of the glory of the Risen Christ, were filled with the strength of the Holy Spirit; their minds and their hearts were opened to a new light. They had followed Christ and received his teachings with faith; but they were not always able to fathom the full meaning of his words — the Spirit of truth, who was to teach them all things,¹ had not yet come. They knew that Jesus alone could give them words of eternal life, and they were ready to follow him and to give their lives for him; but they were weak, and, in the time of trial, they fled and left him alone.

On Pentecost day, all that is a thing of the past. The Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of strength, has made them firm, strong, daring. The word of the Apostles resounds forcefully through the streets of Jerusalem.

PRESENCE AND ACTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The men and women who have come in those days to the city from all parts of the world listen with amazement. 'Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, Jews as well as proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, we have heard them speaking in our own languages of the wonderful works of God.'² These wonders, which take place before their own eyes, lead them to listen to the preaching of the Apostles. The Holy Spirit himself, who is acting through our Lord's disciples, moves the hearts of their listeners and leads them to the faith.

St. Luke tells us that, after St. Peter had spoken and proclaimed Christ's Resurrection, many of those present came up to him and

1. Cf. John 16:12-13.

2. Acts 2:9-11.

asked: 'Brethren, what shall we do?' The apostle answered: 'Repent and be baptised 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.' And, on that day, the sacred text tells us, about three thousand souls were added to the Church.³

This solemn coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Day was not an isolated event. There is hardly a page in the Acts of the Apostles where we fail to read about him and the action by which he guides, directs and enlivens the life and work of the early Christian community. It is he who inspires the preaching of St. Peter,⁴ who strengthens the faith of the disciples,⁵ who sends Saul and Barnabas to the distant lands where they will open new paths for the doctrine of Jesus.⁶ In a word, his presence and his doctrine are everywhere.

PENTECOST TODAY

The profound reality which we see in these texts of Holy Scripture is not a remembrance from the past, from some golden age of the Church which has since been buried in history. Over and above the weaknesses and the sins of every one of us, it is the reality of today's Church and the Church of all time. 'I will ask the Father,' our Lord told his disciples, 'and he will give you another Advocate to dwell with you forever.'⁸ Jesus has kept his promise: he has risen from the dead, and, in union with the Eternal Father, he sends us the Holy Spirit to sanctify us and give us life.

The strength and the power of God light up the face of the earth. The Holy Spirit is present in the Church of Christ for all time so that it may be — always and in everything — a sign raised up before all nations, announcing to all men the goodness and the love of God.⁹ In spite of our great limitations, we can look up to heaven with confidence and joy: God loves us and frees us from our sins. The presence and the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church is a foretaste of eternal happiness, of the joy and peace for which we are destined by God.

3. Cf. Acts 2:37-41.

4. Cf. Acts 4:8.

5. Cf. Acts 4:31.

6. Cf. Acts 10:44-47.

7. Cf. Acts 13:2-4.

8. John 14:16.

9. Cf. Is. 11:12.

Like those men and women who came up to Peter on Pentecost Day, we too have been baptized. In baptism, our Father God has taken possession of our lives, has made us share in the life of Christ, and has given us the Holy Spirit. God, Holy Scripture tells us, has saved us 'through the baptism of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit; whom he has abundantly poured out upon us through Jesus Christ our Saviour, in order that, justified by his grace, we may be heirs in hope to life everlasting.'¹⁰

A TEST OF OUR FAITH

The experience of our weakness and of our failings, the painful realization of the smallness and meanness of some who call themselves Christians, the apparent failure of aimlessness of some works of apostolate, all this — the realization of the reality of sin and human limitation — can still be a trial for our faith. The temptation, the doubt, can lead us to ask: where are the strength and the power of God? This is the moment when we have to react, when we have to practise the virtue of hope with greater purity and forcefulness, when we have to strive to strengthen our faithfulness.

Let me tell you about an event of my own personal life which happened many years ago. One day, a friend of mine, a man with a good heart but who did not have faith, told me, pointing toward a globe of the world: 'Look, from North to South, from East to West.' 'What do you want me to look at?' I asked. His answer was: 'The failure of Christ. For twenty centuries people have been trying to bring his doctrine to men's lives, and look at the result.' I was filled with sadness — it is painful to think that many people still don't know Our Lord, and that, among those who do know him, many live as though they did not.

But that feeling lasted only a moment. It was shortly overcome by love and thankfulness, because Jesus has wanted every man to cooperate freely in the work of the Redemption. He has not failed: his doctrine and his life are effective in the world at all times. The Redemption carried out by him is sufficient, and more than sufficient.

GOD RESPECTS OUR FREEDOM

God does not want slaves, but children; he respects our freedom. The work of salvation is still going on, and each one of us has a

10. Tit. 3:5-7.

part in it. It is Christ's will — St. Paul tells us in words that are impressive — that we should fulfill, in our flesh, in our life, what is lacking in his Passion, *pro Corpore eius, quod est Ecclesia*, for the good of his Body, which is the Church.¹¹

It is worthwhile to put our whole lives in the balance, to give ourselves completely, so as to answer to the love and the confidence that God has placed in us. It is worthwhile, above all, to decide that we are going to take our Christian faith seriously. When we recite the Creed, we state that we believe in God the Father Almighty, in his Son Jesus Christ, who died and rose again, in the Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of life. We affirm that the Church, One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic, is the Body of Christ, enlivened by the Holy Spirit. We rejoice in the forgiveness of sins and in the hope of the resurrection. But these words, do they penetrate to the depths of our own heart? Or do they only remain on our lips? The divine message of victory, of the joy and the peace of Pentecost, should be the unshakeable foundation for the way of thinking and acting and living of every Christian.

GOD'S STRENGTH AND OUR WEAKNESS

Non est abbreviata manus Domini, the arm of the Lord has not been shortened.¹² God is not less powerful today than he was in other times; his love for man is no less true. Our faith teaches us that all creation, the movement of the earth and the other heavenly bodies, the good actions of creatures and all the good that has been achieved in history, in short, everything, has come from God and is directed toward him.

The action of the Holy Spirit can pass unnoticed, because God does not reveal to us his plans, and because the sin of man clouds over the divine gifts. But faith reminds us that God is always active: he has created us and maintains us in existence; and, by his grace, he leads all creation toward the glorious freedom of the children of God.¹³

For this reason, Christian tradition has summarized the attitude that we should adopt toward the Holy Spirit in just one idea: docility. In other words: awareness to the work of the Holy Spirit

11. Cf. Col. 1:24.

12. Is. 59:1.

13. Cf. Rom. 8:21.

all around us, and in our own selves, to the gifts he distributes, to the movements and institutions he inspires, to the affections and decisions he provokes in our hearts. The Holy Spirit carries out in the world the works of God; he is, as we read in the liturgical hymn, the giver of graces, the light of our hearts, the guest of our soul, our rest in our work, our consolation in sorrow. Without his help there is nothing innocent or valuable in man, since he is the One who cleanses what is soiled, heals what is sick, sets on fire what is cold, straightens what is bent, and leads men toward the safe harbour of salvation and eternal joy.¹⁴

A TOTAL FAITH

But our faith in the Holy Spirit must be complete. It is not a vague belief in his presence in the world, but a grateful acceptance of the signs and realities into which he has poured forth his power in a special way. When the Spirit of truth comes, our Lord tells us, 'he will glorify me, for he will take of what is mine and declare it to you.'¹⁵ The Holy Spirit is the Spirit sent by Christ to carry out in us the work of holiness that Our Lord merited for us on earth.

And so, there cannot be faith in the Holy Spirit if there is not faith in Christ, in the sacraments of Christ, in the Church of Christ. A man cannot act in accordance with his Christian faith, he cannot truly believe in the Holy Spirit, unless he loves the Church and trusts it; he cannot be a coherent Christian if he limits himself to pointing out the deficiencies and limitations of some who represent the Church, judging it from the outside, as though he were not a son of the Church.

I can consider now up to what point the action of the Paraclete will be important and abundant as the priest renews the sacrifice of Calvary when he celebrates the Holy Mass on our altars.

IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING

We Christians carry the great treasures of grace in vessels of clay.¹⁶ God has entrusted his gifts to the weakness and fragility of human freedom; and, though we can be certain of the help of God's power, still our concupiscence, our love of comfort and our pride sometimes cause us to reject his grace and to fall into sin.

14. From the Sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, Mass of Pentecost Sunday.

15. John 16:14.

16. Cf. 2 Cor. 4:7.

On many occasions, since more than twenty-five years ago, when I recite the Creed and assert my faith in the divine origin of the Church: *One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*, I add, 'in spite of everything.' When I mention this custom of mine and someone asks me what I mean, I answer, 'I mean your sins and mine.'

All this is true, but it does not authorize us in any way to judge the Church in a human manner, without theological faith, considering only the greater or lesser merits of certain churchmen or of some Christians. To do this would be to limit oneself to the surface of things. What is most important in the Church is, not to see how we humans react, but to realize how God acts. This is what the Church is: Christ, present in our midst; God, who comes toward men in order to save them, calling us with his Revelation, sanctifying us with his grace, maintaining us with his help constantly, in the great and small battles of our daily life.

We could arrive at the point of mistrusting other men, and each one of us has the obligation of mistrusting himself and of ending each of his days with a *mea culpa*, an act of contrition that is profound and sincere. But we have no right to doubt God. And to doubt the Church, its divine origin, and its effectiveness for our salvation through its doctrine and its sacraments, would be the same as doubting God himself, as not believing fully in the reality of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Before Christ was crucified [writes St. John Chrysostom] there was no reconciliation. And, while there was no reconciliation, the Holy Spirit was not sent. . . . The absence of the Holy Spirit was a sign of the anger of God. Now that you see him sent in fullness, do not doubt the reconciliation. But what if people should ask. 'Where is the Holy Spirit now? We can talk of his presence when the miracles took place, when the dead were raised and the lepers were healed. But how are we to know that he is truly present now?' Do not be concerned. I will show you that the Holy Spirit is present among us now as well.

If the Holy Spirit were not present, we would not be able to say 'Jesus is the Lord,' for no one can invoke Jesus as the Lord unless it is in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12.3). If the Holy Spirit were not present, we would not be able to pray with confidence. For when we pray, we say, 'Our Father, who art in heaven' (Matt. 6:9). If the Holy Spirit were not present we could not call God Our Father. How do we know this?

Because the Apostle teaches us: 'And, because you are his children. God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father!"' (Gal. 4:6).

When you call on God the Father, remember that it is the Spirit who, with his motion in your soul, has given you this prayer. If the Holy Spirit were not present, there would be no word of wisdom or knowledge in the Church; for it is written, 'the word of wisdom is given through the Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:8). . . . If the Holy Spirit were not present, the Church would not exist. But if the Church exists, there is no doubt of the presence of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

Over and above all human deficiencies and limitations, this is what the Church is: the sign, and, in a certain sense, not in the strict sense in which the Church has defined the nature of the seven sacraments of the New Law, the universal sacrament of the presence of God in the world. To be a Christian is to be re-born of God and sent to men to announce the news of salvation. If we had a strong and manly faith, a living faith, if we were bold in making Christ known to others, we would see with our own eyes miracles such as those that took place in the time of the Apostles.

Today, too, blind men, who had lost the ability to look up to heaven and contemplate the wonderful works of God, recover their sight; lame and crippled men, who were bound by their passions and whose hearts had forgotten love, recover their freedom; deaf men who did not want to know God are given back their hearing; dumb men, whose tongue was bound because they did not want to acknowledge their defeats, begin to talk; and dead men, in whom sin had destroyed life, come to life again. We see once more that 'the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword';¹⁸ and, just at the first Christians did, we rejoice when we contemplate the power of the Holy Spirit and see the result of his action on the mind and will of his creatures.

MAKING CHRIST KNOWN

I see all the circumstances of life, those of every individual person's existence as well as, in some way, those of the great crossroads of history, as so many calls that God makes to men, to bring them face to face with truth; and as occasions that are

17. St John Chrysostom, *Sermones Panegyrici in Solemnitates D.N.I.C.*, hom. 1 *De Sancta Pentecoste*, nn. 3-4.

18. Heb. 4:12.

offered to us Christians, so that we may announce, with our deeds and with our words strengthened by grace, the Spirit to which we belong.¹⁹

Every generation of Christians needs to redeem, to sanctify its own time. In order to do this, it must understand and share the desires of other men, one's equals, in order to make known to them, with a gift of tongues, how they are to correspond to the action of the Holy Spirit, to that permanent outflow of rich treasures that comes from Our Lord's heart. We Christians are called upon to announce, in our own time, to this world to which we belong and in which we live, the message, old and, at the same time, new, of the Gospel.

It is not true that everyone today — in general, as a whole — is closed to, or is indifferent to, what our Christian faith teaches about man's being and destiny. It is not true that men of our time are turned only toward the things of this earth, and have forgotten to look up to heaven. There is no lack of narrow ideologies, it is true, or of persons who maintain them. But, in our time, we find both great desires and base attitudes, heroism and cowardice, zeal and disenchantment: men who dream of a new world, more just and more human, and others who, discouraged perhaps by the failure of their youthful ideals, hide themselves in the selfishness of seeking only their own security or remaining immersed in their errors.

To all these men and women, wherever they may be, in their more exalted moments or in their crises and defeats, we have to bring the solemn and unequivocal message of St. Peter in the days that followed Pentecost: Jesus is the cornerstone, the Redeemer, the one hope of our lives. 'For there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.'²⁰

THE GIFT OF WISDOM

Among the gifts of the Holy Spirit, I would say that there is one which we all need in a special way. The gift of wisdom, making us know God and rejoice in his presence, places us in a perspective from which we can judge accurately the situations and events of this life. If we were consistent with our faith when we looked around us and contemplated the world and its history, we would be unable to avoid feeling in our own hearts the same sentiments

19. Cf. Luke 9:55.

20. Acts 4:12.

that filled the heart of our Lord 'seeing the crowds, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were bewildered and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd'.²¹

Not that the Christian should neglect to see all that is good in humanity, appreciate its healthy joys, or participate in its enthusiasm and ideals. On the contrary, a true Christian will vibrate in unison with all the good there is in the world he lives in; and he will live in the midst of it with a special concern, since he knows, better than anyone, the depth and the richness of the human spirit.

CHRISTIAN FAITH ENRICHES OUR SPIRIT

A Christian's faith does not diminish his spirit, or limit the noble impulses of his soul — rather it makes them grow with the realization of their true and authentic meaning. We do not exist in order to pursue just any happiness. We have been called to penetrate the intimacy of God's own life, to know and love God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; and to love also, in that same love of the One God in Three Divine Persons, the angels and all men.

This is the great boldness of the Christian faith: to proclaim the value and dignity of human nature, and to affirm that, through the grace that raises us up to a supernatural level, we have been created to achieve the dignity of children of God. An incredible boldness it would be, were it not founded on the promise of salvation given us by God the Father, confirmed by the blood of Christ, and reaffirmed and made possible by the constant action of the Holy Spirit.

We must live by faith, we must grow in faith — up to the point when it will be possible to describe any one of us, or any Christian, in the terms used by one of the great Doctors of the Eastern Church: 'in the same way as transparent bodies, upon receiving a ray of light, become resplendent and shine out, so the souls that are borne and illuminated by the Holy Spirit become themselves spiritual and carry to others the light of grace. From the Holy Spirit comes knowledge of future events, understanding of mysteries, comprehension of hidden truths, giving of gifts, heavenly citizenship, conversation with the angels. From him comes

21. Matt. 9:36.

never-ending joy, perseverance in God, likeness to God, and the most sublime state that can be conceived, becoming God-like.²²

REALIZING THE GREATNESS OF HUMAN DIGNITY

The realization of the greatness of man's dignity and of the overwhelming fact that, by grace, we are made children of God forms, together with humility, a single attitude. It is not our own forces that save us and give us life; it is the grace of God. This is a truth which can never be forgotten; if it were, the *divinization* of our life would be perverted and would become presumption, pride; and this would lead sooner or later, to a breakdown of spiritual life, when the soul came face to face with its own weakness and wretchedness.

And shall I dare say, 'I am holy'? [asks St. Augustine]. If I meant, by 'holy,' that I bring holiness and that I need no one to make me holy, I would be a liar and full of pride. But if, by 'holy' I understand one who is made holy, as we read in Leviticus. 'You will be holy, because I, God, am Holy', then the whole Body of Christ, down to the last man living at the ends of the earth, may dare to say, together with its Head and under him, 'I am holy'.²³

Love the Third Person of the Most Blessed Trinity. Listen in the intimacy of your being to the divine motions of encouragement or reproach that you receive from him. Walk through the earth in the light that is poured out in your soul. And the God of hope will fill us with peace of all kinds, so that this hope may grow in us more and more everyday, by the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁴

BECOMING ACQUAINTED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

To live according to the Holy Spirit means to live from faith and hope and charity — to allow God to take possession of our lives and to change our hearts, to let him make us over to his measure. A mature and profound Christian life cannot be improvised, because it is the result of the growth of God's grace in us. In the Acts of the Apostles we read about the early Christian community in a single sentence, brief but full of meaning: 'and they continued steadfastly in the teaching of the Apostles and in the communion of the breaking of the bread and in prayers'.²⁵

22. St Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto*, c. 9, no. 23.

23. St Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 80, 4.

24. Cf. Rom. 15:13.

25. Acts 2:42.

This is how the early Christians lived, and this is how we, too, should live; meditating the doctrine of our faith until it becomes a part of us; receiving our Lord in the Eucharist; meeting him in the personal dialogue of our prayer, without trying to hide behind an impersonal attitude, but face to face with him. These means should become the very substance of our conduct. If they are lacking, we will have, perhaps, the ability to reflect in an erudite manner, an activity that is more or less intense, some practices and devotions. But we will not have an authentically Christian way of life, because we will lack that personal relationship with Christ, which is a real and living participation in the divine work of salvation.

THERE ARE NO SECOND-CLASS CHRISTIANS

This is a teaching that applies to any Christian, because we are all equally called to sanctity. There are no second-class Christians, obliged to practise a 'simplified version' of the Gospel. We have all received the same Baptism, and, although there is a great variety of spiritual gifts and human situations, there is only one Spirit who distributes God's gifts, only one faith, only one hope, only one love.²⁶

And so we can apply to ourselves the question asked by the Apostle: 'Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?'²⁷ And we can understand it as an invitation to deal with God in a more personal and direct manner. For some, unfortunately, the Paraclete is the Great Stranger, a name that is mentioned, but not Someone, one of the Three Persons in the One God, with whom we can talk and with whose life we live.

We have to deal with him simply and trustfully, as we are taught by the Church in its Liturgy. Then we will come to know Our Lord better, and, at the same time, we will realize more fully the great favour that has been granted us when we became Christians. We will see all the greatness and truth of that *divinization*, which is a sharing in God's own life, and to which I have referred before.

The Holy Spirit is not an artist who draws the divine substance in us, as though he were alien to it. It is not in this

26. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 13:1-13.

27. 1 Cor. 3:16.

way that he leads us to a resemblance with God — but rather, being God and proceeding from God, he himself marks the hearts of those who receive him as a seal upon wax; and, in this way, by the communication of his own life and resemblance, he restores nature according to the beauty of the divine model, and returns to man his resemblance with God.²⁸

Let us bring this truth to the details of our life. Let us describe, at least in a general way with the Holy Spirit, and, together with him, with the Father and the Son.

We can fix our attention on three fundamental points: docility (here I am repeating), life of prayer, union with the Cross.

First of all, *docility*: because it is the Holy Spirit who, with his inspirations, gives a supernatural 'tone' to our thoughts, desires and actions. It is he who leads us to receive the teaching of Christ and to assimilate it in a profound way. It is he who gives us the light by which we perceive our personal calling, and the strength to carry out all that God expects from us. If we are docile to the Holy Spirit, the image of Christ will be formed more and more fully in us, and we will be brought closer every day to God the Father. 'For whoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.'²⁹

If we let ourselves be guided by his life-giving principle, who is the Holy Spirit in us, our spiritual vitality will grow, and we will abandon ourselves in the hands of our Father God, with the same spontaneity and confidence with which a child abandons itself in the hands of its father. Our Lord has said: 'Unless you turn and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven'.³⁰ This is the old and well-known 'way of childhood', which is not sentimentality or a lack of human maturity. It is a supernatural maturity, which makes us realize more deeply the wonders of God's love, while leading us to acknowledge our own smallness and identify our will fully with the will of God.

In the second place, a *life of prayer*: because the giving of one's self, the obedience and meekness of a Christian are born of love and lead to love. And love leads to a personal relationship, to conversation and friendship. Christian life requires a constant dialogue with God, One in Three Persons, and it is to this intimacy

28. St Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus de Sancta et Consubstantiali Trinitate*, assert. 34.

29. Rom. 8:14.

30. Matt. 18:3.

that the Holy Spirit leads us. 'For who among men knows the things of a man save the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so, the things of God no one knows but the Spirit of God'.³¹ If we have a constant relationship with the Holy Spirit, we will become spiritual ourselves, we will realize that we are Christ's brothers and children of God, and we will not hesitate to call upon our Father at any time.

Let us acquire the habit of conversation with the Holy Spirit, who is the one who will make us holy. Let us trust in him, and ask his help, and feel his closeness to us. In this way our poor heart will grow; we will have a greater desire to love God and to love creatures for God's sake. And our lives will reproduce that final vision of the Apocalypse; the Spirit and the Spouse, the Holy Spirit and the Church — and every Christian — calling on Jesus Christ to come and to be with us forever.³²

And finally, *union with the Cross*: because in the life of Christ the Resurrection and Pentecost were preceded by Cavalry. This is the order that must be followed in the life of any Christian. We are, as St. Paul tells us, 'heirs indeed of God and joint heirs with Christ, provided, however, we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified with him'.³³ The Holy Spirit comes to us as a result of the Cross, as a result of our total abandonment to the will of God, of seeking only his glory and renouncing ourselves completely.

A LIFE OF FAITH

Only when a man, faithful to grace, decides to place the Cross in the centre of his soul, denying himself for the love of God, detaching himself in a real way from all selfishness and false human security, only then, when a man lives by faith in a real way, will he receive the fullness of this great fire, of this great light, of this great comfort of the Holy Spirit.

It is then, too, that the soul begins to experience that peace and freedom which Christ has won for us,³⁵ and which are given to us with the grace of the Holy Spirit. 'But the fruit of the spirit is: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, modesty, continency,³⁵ and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'.³⁶

31. Cf. Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15.

32. Cf. Apoc. 22:17.

33. Rom. 8:17.

34. Cf. John 14:17; Gal. 4:31.

35. Gal. 5:22.

36. 2 Cor. 3:17.

In the midst of the limitations that accompany our present life — sin is still present in us to some extent at least — the Christian perceives with a particular clearness all the wealth of his divine filiation, when he realizes that he is fully free because he is doing his Father's work, when his joy becomes constant because no one can take his hope away.

It is then that he can admire at the same time all the great and beautiful things of this earth, when he can appreciate the richness and goodness of creation, and love with all the wholesomeness and purity for which the human heart was made.

It is then that sorrow for sin does not degenerate into a bitter gesture of despair or pride, because that sorrow and that knowledge of his human weakness lead him to identify himself again with Christ's work of redemption, and feel more deeply his solidarity with other men.

It is then, finally, that the Christian experiences in his own life the sure strength of the Holy Spirit, in such a way that his own failures do not drag him down. Rather they are an invitation to begin again, and to continue being a faithful witness of Christ in all the crossroads of life, in spite of his own personal weaknesses, which, in such a case, are normally no more than small failings that hardly perturb his soul. And even if they were grave sins, the Sacrament of Penance, received with true sorrow, enables him to recover his peace with God and to become again a good witness of his mercy.

Such is the brief summary, which can barely be expressed in human language, of the richness of our faith and of our Christian life, if we let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit. That is why I can only end these words in one way: by expressing the prayer contained in one of the liturgical hymns for the feast of Pentecost, which is like an echo of the unceasing petition of the whole Church: 'Come, Creating Spirit, to the minds of those who belong to you, and fill the hearts that you have created with grace from above. . . . Grant that through you we may know the Father and become acquainted with the Son; may we believe in you, the Spirit who proceeds from Father and Son, forever. Amen.'³⁷

37. From the hymn *Veni, Creator*.

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