

The Spirit's Gifts

The Editors

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In the great crises of poetry, what matters is not to denounce bad poets, nor worse still to hang them, but to write beautiful verses, to reopen the sacred sources.” So wrote Georges Bernanos, reflecting on what the church needed to do in the time of Martin Luther. Today, as the church faces a worldwide crisis over the abuse of minors by clergy compounded by failures of hierarchical leadership, and even corruption, Catholics are turning once more to the lifesprings of faith to write beautiful verse. The “living source,” *fons vivus*, of the Christian life, as the chanting of the *Veni Creator Spiritus* reminds us each Pentecost, is God the Spirit dwelling in us and flowing out from us to fill the whole earth. It is the indwelling Spirit who prays with unutterable groaning when we do not know how to pray. It is the Spirit who pours out joy into our hearts and provides us with words of witness when the faith is under attack—from without and within. It is the same Spirit who will enable Catholics, especially in these cloud-dark days, to sing new verses.

The first Pentecost is often described, poetically and theologically, as the birthday of the church. Almost 50 years ago, Pope John XXIII heralded the Second Vatican Council as a new Pentecost, and the council fathers and later theologians looked on it as a unique work of the Spirit in our times. Pentecost, however, is an ongoing event; God’s Spirit gives the church a new birth in every generation. With the Spirit working in us, we can be sure God will write new verses for the church to deliver. Pentecost is a time for the church to take note of the varieties of gifts through which the Spirit is already rebuilding the church following the failures of decades. Among those we would note are: the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, the retrieval by religious congregations of their founding charisms, lay pastoral associates, lay people ministering in hospitals and prisons, novel education programs for the poor and service by young people and seniors.

The council reminded us that the Spirit bestows gifts on each of us for the good of all. The council celebrated these charisms as building up the church in conjunction with the gifts of office. In intervening years, however, the very idea of a variety of charisms given for the good of the whole church has been depreciated. With the exception of a few notable movements, many charisms bestowed on the faithful have suffocated under the weight of office and been neglected or even dismissed as unwarranted in the established order of church life. Charism and office should be complementary gifts, as they have been in the Catholic tradition.

For his part, Pope Benedict XVI has been steady in his teaching that charisms bring vitality to the church. Addressing the clergy of Rome in 2007, he reminded his listeners that “new forms of life are being born in the church, just as they were born down the ages.” With pastoral sensitivity, he understood the necessity of a multiplicity of charisms to enable the church to thrive in surprising ways. He also had the wisdom to anticipate how necessarily disruptive and challenging God’s gifts can be, especially for administrators. So he counseled his audience to gentleness and patience in exercising their pastoral responsibility for coordinating gifts in the local community. “The first rule,” he told them, “is: do not extinguish Christian charisms; be grateful even if they are inconvenient.”

For the church to flourish anew, there needs to be a reciprocity of gifts among believers and between believers and pastors. Gratitude for the gifts others bring to church life ought not be given reluctantly, but should come as a spontaneous and active response, the better to strengthen the bonds that unite the community. Men and women of faith, as the council taught, “have a right and a duty” to exercise their specific gifts in the bonds of charity for the good of the whole church, and when they do so, they ought to “enjoy the freedom of the Holy Spirit.” In this ongoing Pentecost, there should be neither

passivity nor domination, but mutual appreciation in pastoral relationships. The church suffers both from acquiescent parishioners and heavy-handed pastors, bishops and other church officials. Neither a passive faith, nor a domineering one manifests the Spirit or truly does the Spirit's work. Only in reverent attention to and acceptance of the gifts of all is the Spirit not quenched (1 Thes 4:19).

In the church's new birth, a birth by fire, some things must die. The heavy, static architecture of the overly hierarchical, pyramidal image of the church inherited from Rome and Byzantium is at the point of giving way to the more airy, light-filled style of the church as a community of disciples on mission, with the Spirit infusing and guiding the church at all levels—faithful, clergy and hierarchy. This Pentecost the Spirit is at work bringing new life to the church—if only we listen and do not quench the Spirit.