



# UNLEASHING THE POWER OF PENTECOST

## A RETREAT GUIDE ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

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## INTRODUCTION

### Retreat Overview

When did the people of Israel in the Old Testament really become God's people? It wasn't when Abraham started his divinely inspired wanderings. It wasn't even when Jacob was renamed Israel after wrestling with the Lord. And it wasn't when God divided the Red Sea and let the Israelites out of slavery, destroying the entire Egyptian army in one fell swoop.

Those were mighty works of the one, true God, but they were a preparation. The moment in which the people of Israel truly became a "kingdom of priests, a holy nation," as God described it to Moses, was when they received the Law.

It was when Moses went up the sacred mountain of Sinai and received the commandments of the Lord amid fire and smoke and thunder. And the Bible tells us that that happened in the third month after Israel's flight from Egypt.

When you do the math, you find that the reception of God's sacred law, the law that set Israel apart as God's chosen people in the Old Testament, happened at the same time of the year as the feast of Pentecost.

Through the centuries, the Church has reflected on this apparent coincidence.

And it has found a parallel between the two events:

- the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai created a chosen people who were united by something outside themselves: the commandments of the Old Covenant;
- the giving of the Holy Spirit to Christ's followers on the feast of Pentecost created a new chosen people, the Church, united by something within themselves: the presence of the Holy Spirit, the living law of God's love that makes up the New, interior and everlasting, Covenant.

What happened with Moses and the people of Israel at Sinai was a dim shadow of what was going to happen later, at Pentecost, to Peter and the people of Christ's Church.



When we were baptized into that Church, we received the same Holy Spirit that the first Apostles received on Pentecost.

And so, the power that the Spirit gave to the first members of the Church, the power that has been transforming hearts and redeeming sinners for two thousand years, is at work in us.

How can we tap in to that power? How can we allow this new, interior law to truly transform our lives and our circles of influence?

That's what this Retreat Guide, *Unleashing the Power of Pentecost*, will reflect on.

- In the first meditation, we will look at the four gifts of the Holy Spirit that can renew our minds.
- In the second meditation, we will look at the three gifts of the Holy Spirit that can renew the power of our will and enhance our freedom.
- And in the conference, we will get practical and reflect on how to cooperate with the inspirations that the Holy Spirit sends us.

Before we get started, take a few moments simply thanking God for giving you this chance to spend time alone with him. And ask him confidently for all the graces you need to follow him more closely - and ask especially for the grace to understand a little bit better how to live your Christian life more and more under the powerful guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## FIRST MEDITATION

### The Goal

St. Paul, who wrote almost half the New Testament, was convinced that one of the central tasks faced by every Christian is the renewal of our mind.

Here is how he put it in his Letter to the Christians in Rome:



*Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...*

– Romans 12:2, NABR

And here is how he put it in his second Letter to the Christians in Corinth, when he described our task of engaging in spiritual warfare:



*We... take every thought captive in obedience to Christ...*

– 2 Corinthians 10:5, NABR

What St. Paul means is that being a Christian involves changing the way we see things, the way we understand things, the way we interpret things. And this makes a lot of sense, because one of the main consequences of original sin was a darkening of the human mind.

God created us in communion with him, enjoying a special knowledge and intelligence that enabled us to see ourselves and the world around us as God sees it. But when original sin separated the human family from that communion, we lost that light: our minds were darkened, and we were thrown into confusion and fear.

To accept the message of Christ is to reject the falsehood, darkness, and ignorance of sin, and to welcome the light of his truth. As Jesus himself put it:



*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*

– John 8:12, NABR



But how does this renewal of our minds take place? How does the light of Christ push back the distorting shadows of worldly ignorance and confusion? That's where the Holy Spirit comes in.

At baptism, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our souls, and he brings with him his seven ordinary gifts. Then, through the sacrament of confirmation, those gifts are strengthened.

Four of those seven gifts are directed towards renewing our minds, so that under their influence we learn to see God, the world, and ourselves more and more as Christ does.

Let's look at these four gifts that renew our minds in Christ — the better we understand them, the more we will desire them, and the better chance we will have of plugging into them as we go through our daily lives.

## FIRST MEDITATION

### *The Gift of Wisdom*

The first gift that renews our minds is the gift of wisdom. Through this gift, the Holy Spirit opens our minds not only to know about God from a distance, but to know God himself directly — to taste the divine goodness itself.

In fact, the word for this gift in Latin is “sapientia,” and the root of that word is linked to the word for “taste” or “flavor.” When we taste God’s goodness, we can’t help falling more in love with him.

And that’s why this gift is considered the highest of the seven gifts: it is a kind of experiential knowledge that almost automatically increases love.

When we receive the sacrament of confirmation, we are anointed with a special oil called chrism. Chrism is a combination of olive oil and balsam, and it gives out a sweet, delicious aroma. That sweetness is in part a symbol of this most excellent gift of the Holy Spirit.

Often, the gift of wisdom is activated during our times of prayer, and we suddenly find ourselves filled with joy at God’s presence, resting in his love, and eager to do whatever we can to build up his Church.



## FIRST MEDITATION

### *The Gift of Understanding*

The second gift that the Holy Spirit uses to help renew our minds in Christ is the gift of understanding. This gift enables us to grasp the truths that God has revealed to us about himself and about our salvation; it gives us the ability to penetrate their depths and see more and more clearly how they relate to one another.

For example, by faith we know for certain that Jesus rose from the dead. But it is through the gift of understanding that we come to see the connection between the Resurrection itself, and the prophecies of the Old Testament that looked forward to the Resurrection.

Even Jesus' own disciples didn't understand what he was talking about when he predicted that he would "rise again on the third day." It was only after Pentecost that they were able to make the connection between that unique event and everything that God had revealed about his plan of salvation in the Old Testament.

In the Mass for the Easter Vigil, this gift is reflected in the numerous readings. In a normal Sunday Mass, there are three readings and a Psalm. But in the Easter Vigil Mass, there are nine readings and multiple Psalms (that's one of the reasons the Vigil takes so long). And all of those readings, from the Old and New Testaments, are connected in some way to Christ's Resurrection.

That's an amazing fact, if you think about it. The Bible was compiled over a period of a couple of thousand years, and yet it all fits together as a single story — the story of salvation in Jesus Christ. The gift of understanding opens our mind to perceive the unity and the meaning of that story, more and more fully.



## FIRST MEDITATION

### *The Gift of Knowledge*

The third gift that the Holy Spirit uses to renew our mind is the gift of knowledge. This gift enables us to view and interpret normal human events and earthly realities as God does. For example, death is a common human reality. It is all around us all the time. We will all face it, personally, at some point.

Our faith tells us that death is not the end of our story, but only a doorway to the next chapter. And the gift of knowledge helps us activate that faith in the midst of real life — it helps calm our fears of death; it helps comfort us in the face of death; it helps us comfort others in the face of death; it nourishes our hope.



The gift of knowledge also opens our minds to see the real meaning behind the beauty of nature, the pain of suffering, the unfolding of historical events, and the different situations that we and our loved ones have to face in life.

Someone filled with this gift is no longer at the mercy of the latest social or intellectual fashions, the latest pseudo-scientific theories, or the latest headlines: they have a deeper knowledge, more certain reference points, and a clearer connection to reality.

## FIRST MEDITATION

### *The Gift of Counsel*

The fourth gift that the Holy Spirit uses to renew our minds in Christ, to help us see things as Christ sees them, is counsel. If the gift of knowledge helps us see ordinary human events and earthly realities from God's perspective, the gift of counsel helps us navigate the extraordinary ones.

At times, we are faced with very complicated situations, confusing choices, tangled and messy issues. In these moments, we need an extra ray of light to see what next step to take or to avoid — in other words, we need some supernatural advice. That's what the gift of counsel is.



When St. Peter gave his first homily on the Day of Pentecost, he didn't have time to think it over and prepare it. And he wasn't exactly a respected rabbi in Jerusalem. He was a fisherman from the boondocks, and his master, Jesus, had been disgraced by the highest religious and civil authorities in the land.

Was it just his natural intelligence and shrewdness that told him what to say on that birthday of the Church? Hardly! It was the gift of counsel, enlightening his mind and giving a supernatural power to his words. That was a dramatic example of this gift in action.

But sometimes it works in quieter ways, too. I know that often when I am hearing confessions, I find myself offering advice or encouragement that I had never thought about before — this too, I believe, is the Holy Spirit, showing his love for each one of us through activating the gift of counsel.



## FIRST MEDITATION

### *Conclusion & Further Reflection*

There is a beautiful painting by Rembrandt that, I think, captures the essence of how these first four gifts of the Holy Spirit work. It shows St. Matthew writing his Gospel. But of course, St. Matthew's Gospel was not just a human book — it was inspired by the Holy Spirit, just as the rest of the Bible was.

In the painting, Rembrandt depicts this inspiration by showing an angel whispering in St. Matthew's ear. The angel isn't dictating the book — he is not doing St. Matthew's job for him.

No, rather, he is whispering some ideas, some concepts, some guidance, and with that, St. Matthew is able to put down all and only what God wants him to, but he still puts it down in his own words and writing style. This is how the renewal of our mind happens in our Christian journey.

The Holy Spirit works with us, within us, guiding and enlightening, but not taking away our natural abilities and personality. It's a partnership, and these four gifts of the Holy Spirit — wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and counsel — make us better partners, better listeners, better disciples.

Take some time now to savor these gifts, which you have already received. Reflect a little bit on how these gifts have influenced your life up to now, and stir up a fresh desire in your heart for a new outpouring of these gifts, so that you can say, as Pope Benedict XVI said on his last birthday as Pope:



*I know... that the light of God exists, that he is Risen, that his light is stronger than any darkness, that the goodness of God is stronger than any evil in this world. And this helps me to go forward with certainty*

– Homily, April 16, 2012








## Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 St. Paul encourages us not to be “conformed to this age” but to be “transformed by the renewal of your minds.” In what ways does a Christian point of view differ from the popular point of view of “this age” in our society today? Try to think of some specific examples.
- 2 When have I “tasted the goodness of the Lord” through the gift of wisdom? Try to remember, reflect on, and thank God for those experiences.
- 3 How often do I ask the Holy Spirit to increase his gifts in my soul? How often should I ask for this grace? If there is a discrepancy between the two, why is that?



FIRST MEDITATION

## Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation

-  *Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...*  
– Romans 12:2, NABR
-  *We... take every thought captive in obedience to Christ...*  
– 2 Corinthians 10:5, NABR
-  *The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD, and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD.*  
– Isaiah 11:2-3, NABR
-  *Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us.*  
– Romans 5:3-5, NABR
-  *Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD, my God, you are great indeed! How manifold are your works, O LORD! The earth is full of your creatures. If you take away their breath, they perish and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth. May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD be glad in his works! Pleasing to him be my theme; I will be glad in the LORD.*  
– Psalm 104: 1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34, NABR

## SECOND MEDITATION

### The Goal

In his Letter to the Christians in Rome, St. Paul described a situation that all of us are only too familiar with. He described the kind of civil war that goes on in every soul: the civil war between what our better selves really want to do, and what our selfish selves so often end up doing in spite of our better selves.

Here is how St. Paul puts it:

*What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate... So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me... The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want... For I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?*

– Romans 7:15, 17-19 22-24, NABR

This is the interior battle for every Christian, and in a sense for every human being. It's a battle for true interior freedom. It's a battle that has raged ever since original sin — which not only darkened our minds, but wounded our freedom, weakening and twisting the power of our will.

Our fallen, wounded human nature is actually drawn towards selfishness — we have a built in tendency towards the capital sins. Theologians call this tendency “concupiscence.”

Here's how the Church expresses this truth in the Catechism:

*This dramatic situation of “the whole world [which] is in the power of the evil one” makes man's life a battle.*

– CCC 409



In one of the statements from the Second Vatican Council, the Church describes this drama with greater detail:



*Examining his heart, man finds that he has inclinations toward evil too, and is engulfed by manifold ills which cannot come from his good Creator... Therefore man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. Indeed, man finds that by himself he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though he is bound by chains.*

– Gaudium et Spes 13

This is a pretty dismal picture of our condition in this fallen world. But the good news is that God didn't abandon us in this condition.



The Gospel is all about how Jesus came to save and redeem us — to give us back authentic freedom. We were redeemed from slavery to sin and given the immense freedom of becoming children of God. As St. Paul put it:



*So you are no longer a slave but a child...*

–Galatians 4:7, NABR

The remaining three gifts of the Holy Spirit are essential elements in this redemption.

They are infused into our souls in order to strengthen us in the proper use of this redeemed freedom, to heal our wounded willpower, so that we can better overcome our self-centered tendencies in order to make courageous, Christ-centered choices.

Let's take a look at these three gifts one at a time.

## SECOND MEDITATION

### *The Gift of Piety*

The first gift that the Holy Spirit pours into our souls in order to heal and strengthen our freedom is the gift of piety. Piety gives us a supernatural affection for God as our loving Father, and for other people as brothers and sisters in God's family.

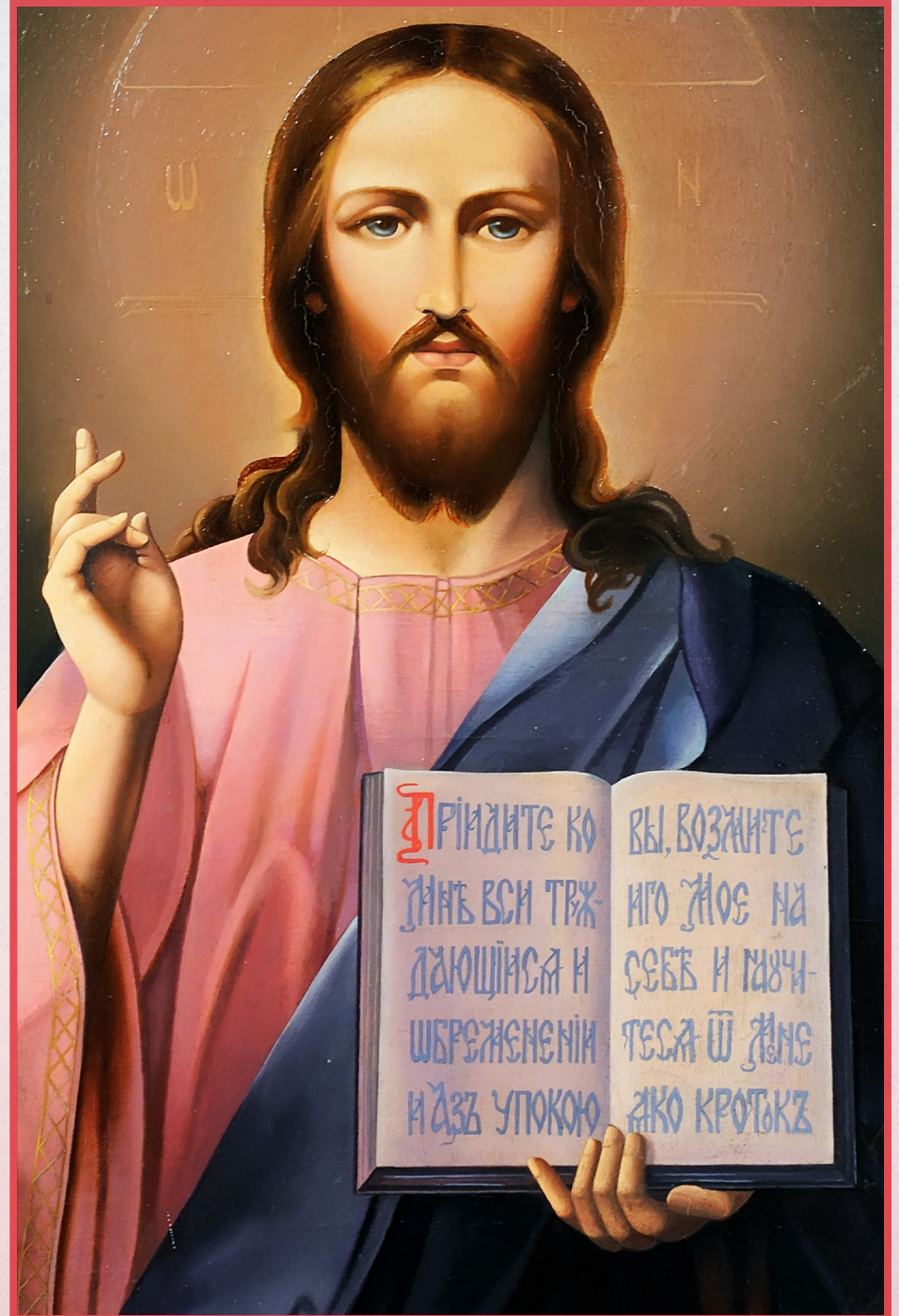
In other words, piety fuels a desire to live in a faith-based communion of hearts with God and with others.

This desire is a powerful ally in our fight against selfishness and false self-sufficiency. The gift of piety overflows into many areas of our lives:

- it fills us with desires to pray and to stay close to our loving heavenly Father through the sacraments;
- it gives us a healthy and balanced devotion to the saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary, who are so close to God our Father;
- and it opens our hearts to be generous towards others not in order to get things from them in return, but just because we know that in God's eyes, we are all members of the same family, either actually or potentially.

We have all seen pictures of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta carrying dying homeless people in her arms, and beaming at them with a beautiful, sincere smile. She did that not once or twice, but every day for forty years. Only a supernatural affection can explain such an amazing phenomenon.

That's what the gift of piety gives us: it brings us to a supernatural level in our affection for God and neighbor.



## SECOND MEDITATION

### *The Gift of Fortitude*

The second gift that the Holy Spirit uses to heal and bolster our wounded freedom is the gift of fortitude. If the gift of piety gives us supernatural affections, the gift of fortitude gives us supernatural strength in the face of spiritual obstacles and enemies.

It's not always easy to do what we know is right. It's not always easy to follow where we know God is leading. The Holy Spirit knows this, and that's why he brings us the gift of fortitude.

Fortitude is the interior courage that enables us to keep going through what Jesus called the "narrow gate" and to keep following what he called the "constricted road" that "lead to life" (Matthew 7:14, NABR).

We need this supernatural gift because the Christian journey is a supernatural journey.

- When Catholic college students put their social status on the line by refusing to compromise their Christian morals, they need the strength that comes from this gift.
- When Catholic doctors risk their careers by refusing to prescribe or perform medical practices that violate human dignity, they need the strength that comes from this gift.
- When a young woman follows God's call to a life of consecrated service in the Church, against the pressures of a post-Christian culture, she needs the strength that comes from this gift.

By pouring into our hearts this gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus pours his own strength into our weakness, just as he transforms fragile wafers of unleavened bread into the Eucharist.

We see this gift reach its fullness in the lives of the Christian martyrs, who preferred to die rather than take a detour off the Christian path.



Here's how the liturgy describes the dynamics of martyrdom in one of the Prefaces of the Mass, a prayer addressed to God the Father:



*Their very sufferings are but wonders of your might: in your mercy you give ardour to their faith, to their endurance you grant firm resolve, and in their struggle the victory is yours...*

– Preface II of Holy Martyrs

## SECOND MEDITATION

### *The Gift of Fear*

The third gift that the Holy Spirit uses to heal our freedom is the gift of holy fear, what the Bible calls the “fear of the Lord” (e.g., Proverbs 9:10). This gift is hard to understand for those of us who live in the modern world. We tend to think of all fear as a bad thing.

And the New Testament seems to agree with us, since God is always telling people “do not be afraid,” and St. John the Evangelist even writes in one of his Letters that “perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18, NABR).

To understand and appreciate this gift, we need to make a distinction. God doesn’t want us to relate to him as if we were his slaves. Slaves are afraid of their masters because their masters can be cruel and unjust. But God is never cruel — he is our loving Father. Servile fear, therefore, should have no place in our relationship with God.



But there is another kind of fear that is healthy: it’s what the theologians call “filial fear.” This is the fear that children have of being separated from their parents. This is the fear of real dangers — dangers that can damage things that we value.

And there is nothing more valuable than our relationship with God. And that relationship can indeed be damaged, or even lost — because of sin. And so, the gift of holy fear is like an interior warning alarm that goes off when we find ourselves in morally and spiritually dangerous situations. This gift helps us turn around, or flee, or change course, so that we avoid the threat.

It’s the gift that helps us follow the example of Joseph in the Old Testament, who fled from Pharaoh’s wife when she tried to trap and seduce him — it was better to be falsely accused by her and get sent to prison than to actually give into sin.

In the modern world, we need this gift maybe more than all the others — for two reasons.

- First, because of our democratic mentality, we tend to have very little reverence for holy things. Even in our relationship with God, we sometimes forget that he is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-glorious. We prefer to think of him merely as a good buddy, or a grandpa. But God is God, and a healthy reverence for him will keep us humble, attentive, and open to his grace.
- Second, because we live in a post-Christian society, we have lost a healthy awareness of the reality of sin. Our culture actually glorifies the capital sins (lust, gluttony, laziness, envy...) in advertising, entertainment, and popular literature. That dulls our conscience and makes us vulnerable to unhealthy compromises with something that always causes damage: sin.

The gift of holy fear sharpens up our awareness both of God’s awe-inspiring wonder-fullness and also of the true evil of sin: it keeps us out of trouble, and the damage trouble can cause.

## SECOND MEDITATION

### *True Freedom*

Just as wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and counsel enlighten our mind, so piety, fortitude, and fear strengthen and heal our freedom. With these three gifts, the Holy Spirit urges us to be faithful to true love. He makes it easier for us to use the precious gift of our freedom to fulfill our greatest potential, and not to squander it.

You can see all three of these gifts at work in the heroism of Christians and Catholics who stay faithful under persecution.

For an example, we can turn back to the inspiring life of Archbishop Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, who was sent to prison and to reeducation camps for 14 years by the Communist leaders of Vietnam.

During one stay in a concentration camp, he secretly found out which of his fellow prisoners were Catholics. Together, they would smuggle some bread and wine into their barracks. Each night, he arranged to have some of the Catholics sleep close to his bunk.

After the lights went out, they would wait till the other prisoners were asleep, then the Archbishop would celebrate Mass, lying on the boards in the dark, just loud enough for those close to him to hear. He would use just three drops of wine and one drop of water, offering the Holy Sacrifice in the palm of his hand, saying the prayers from memory. And then he would distribute communion.

They were all risking their lives in doing this, because religion of any kind was absolutely forbidden. But the Archbishop — who later became a Cardinal — was filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit:

- the piety that drove him to find ways to bring his beloved Lord and his beloved neighbors together;
- the fortitude to put his life on the line day after day;
- and the holy fear that kept him from renouncing his faith, even under the extreme pressure of his captors and torturers.



Through the power of those gifts at work in Cardinal Van Thuan, God was able to accompany and strengthen his children, even in the midst of their horrible sufferings.

Physically, he was indeed weak and imprisoned; but spiritually, he was a giant and a victor, and magnificently free.



## SECOND MEDITATION

### *Conclusion & Further Reflection*

There is a civil war going on in our hearts, between our better selves and our selfish selves. And with the gifts of piety, fortitude, and fear, the Holy Spirit wants to arm us to conquer more and more territory there for God's redeeming love.

Let's take some time now to reflect on the beauty of these gifts, to stir up a strong desire to live from them more and more fully, and to ask the Holy Spirit to increase their influence in our souls.



### *Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion*

- 1 How would I describe the gift of piety in my own words? What areas of my life would be most enhanced by an increased influence of this gift?
- 2 How would I describe the gift of fortitude in my own words? Right now, what circumstances of my life are most in need of an increased influence of this gift?
- 3 How would I describe the gift of holy fear in my own words? When have I experienced this holy fear? Reflect on those experiences and speak to God about them in the silence of my heart.

## Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation



What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate... So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me... The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want... For I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?

– Romans 7:15, 17-19 22-24, NABR



I will sprinkle clean water over you to make you clean; from all your impurities and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you so that you walk in my statutes, observe my ordinances, and keep them.

– Ezekiel 36:25-17, NABR



I say, then: live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want. But if you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit. Let us not be conceited, provoking one another, envious of one another.

– Galatians 5:16-26, NABR



## CONFERENCE

### *Introduction*

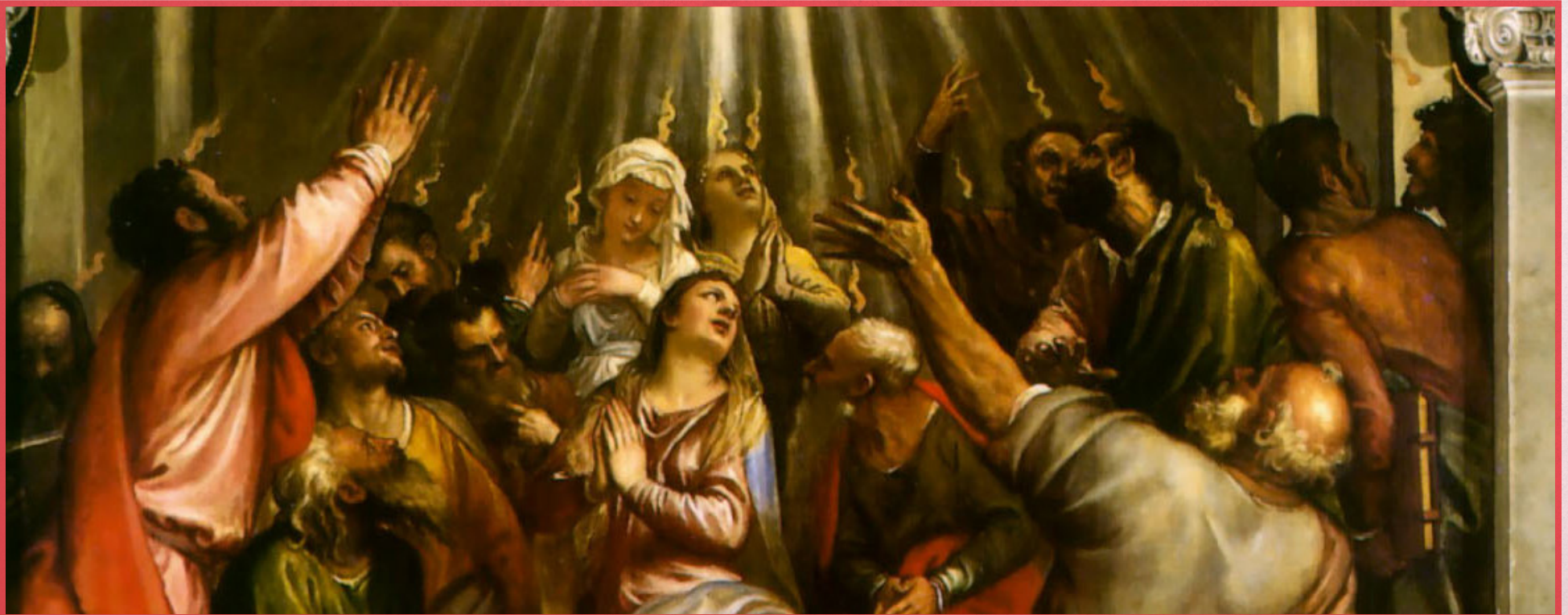
We have spent some time meditating on the seven ordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit and their role in our Christian lives. I like to call them the Christological gifts, because God gives them to every Christian, in order to help every Christian live more and more as Christ lived — to help us grow in holiness.

The Bible and our theological tradition also identify other gifts from the Holy Spirit — these are sometimes called the charismatic gifts. They can also be called extraordinary gifts, because they are not ordinarily given to every Christian. These gifts include prophecy, speaking in tongues, the discernment of spirits, healing, miracles, and others. I like to call these the ecclesiastical gifts, because they are always given for the sake of building up the community of believers, the Church. They do not necessarily help the person who receives them become holy.

We have reflected on the seven ordinary, Christological gifts one by one. And now in this conference, I would like to take one more step forward and reflect on all of them together. Taken as a whole, the gifts of the Holy Spirit have a very specific purpose in our lives: they make us better able to receive and respond to the inspirations that the Holy Spirit sends us.

The Christian journey is the exact opposite of the self-help journey. Christians don't make themselves perfect through their own efforts. No. The Christian life is a life in which God himself is the main protagonist. He is our savior and our redeemer and our sanctifier. He is the one who makes the difference and enables us to make spiritual progress.

Certainly he doesn't violate our freedom in order to do that — he doesn't force us into holiness; rather, he makes us his partners. But it is a supernatural work, and so he is the senior partner, and we are the junior partners. This is made clear throughout the Old and New Testaments, and in the lives of all the saints.



As Jesus told his Apostles during the Last Supper:



*It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain.*

– John 15:16, NABR

God took the initiative to create us, and to redeem us, and he is the one, as St. Paul puts it,



*... who, for his good purpose, works in you both to desire and to work.*

– Philippians 2:13, NABR

Jesus put it another way when he said,



*I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.*

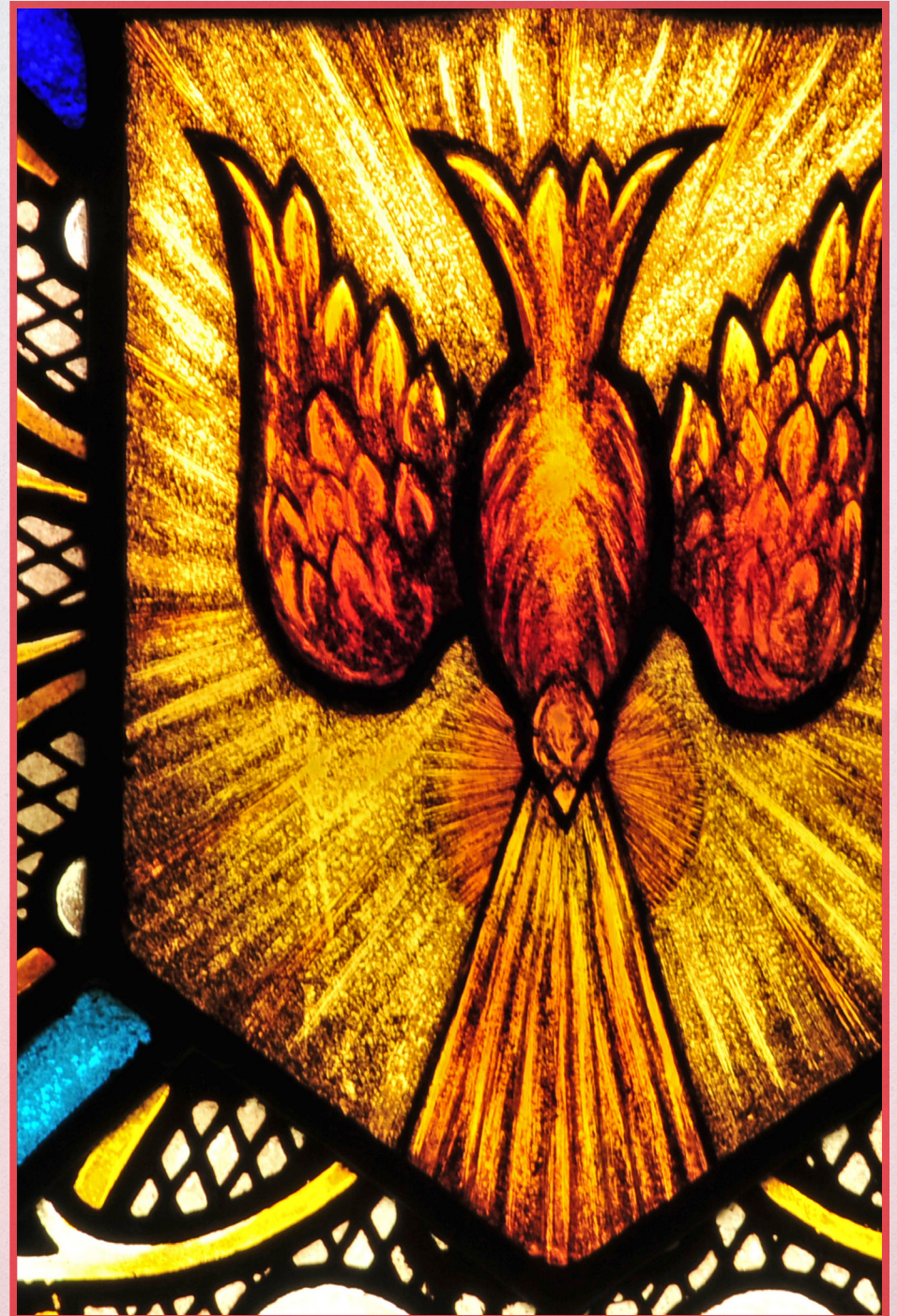
– John 15:5, NABR

The gifts of the Holy Spirit, in a sense, are the life of God himself at work within us, just as the life of the vine is at work in the branches.

Our job in this great Christian adventure is really just to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, to go where he leads us, to say yes to what he asks of us, to let him mold us in accordance with God's original dream for our lives. It kind of takes the pressure off, doesn't it?

It should! God doesn't pressure us to follow him; he loves us into following him, and he wants his love to stir up our love. That's the Holy Spirit's job.

There are many things we can do to cooperate effectively with the Holy Spirit in our Christian journey, to stay open and docile to his inspirations. In this conference I only want to talk briefly about four of them.



## CONFERENCE

### *Feeding Holy Desires*

First, we need to feed holy desires. Jesus taught us that “where your treasure is, there also will your heart be” (Matthew 6:21, NABR). We know what we treasure by looking at what we desire, at what we are always thinking about and talking about.

It’s no coincidence that the first question Jesus asks in the Gospel of John is “What are you looking for?” (John 1:38, NABR). We know what we should desire: all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, all the virtues of the saints, all the holiness that God wants us to have.

But how often do we really think about those things? How often do we daydream about them? Much of our spiritual growth will depend on the intensity of our desire for spiritual things.

But because of our fallen nature, those desires won’t grow if we don’t feed them. In the Bible, a common symbol of the Holy Spirit is fire. And to keep a fire burning, you have to keep adding fuel, and you have to protect it from the rain. Spiritually, we need to do the same things.

We can add fuel by reading solid spiritual books — especially by studying the Bible and the lives of the saints. This is called “spiritual reading.” And we can protect our inner spiritual desires by being temperate in our consumption of popular culture: romance novels, TV, movies, advertisements, web-surfing, social-networking...

In past ages, popular culture was in harmony with Christianity, but not anymore. And so, if we are careless and over-indulgent in our consumption of it, we can douse the flames of divine love and drain our holy desires.

If we make deepening our relationship with God into our true treasure, our dominant desire, our hearts will be daily plunged into the fire of the Holy Spirit’s love and gradually transformed into the image of Christ’s own Sacred Heart.



## CONFERENCE

### *Asking for the Gifts*

Feeding holy desires is the first thing we can do to cooperate with the Holy Spirit's action in our lives. Asking for his gifts is the second thing.

Jesus talked a lot about this. For example, in the famous Sermon on the Mount, he said:

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened...*

– Matthew 7:7-8, NABR

Another example: the Our Father, the prayer that Jesus taught us, includes seven different petitions!

My favorite example is from the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus almost begs us to ask continually for an outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He says:

*What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?*

– Luke 11:11-13, NABR

We can ask for the gifts individually, when we feel a real need for them. For instance, when holiday time rolls around and we know we are going to have to deal with some relatives that we don't get along with very well, we can ask specifically for an increase in the gift of piety, so that the Holy Spirit can help us see our relatives as God does, and have a true, supernatural affection for them.

We can also ask for the gifts in general, when we are in between errands, or before falling asleep, or when waiting in line — the more we ask for the gifts, both for ourselves and for the whole Church, the more channels of grace we open up.

A beautiful prayer to use for this purpose is the Gospel Acclamation that the Church uses on the Feast of Pentecost:

*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love.*



## CONFERENCE

### *Obedience in the Obvious Things*

The third thing we can do to keep ourselves in tune with the Holy Spirit is to practice heartfelt obedience in the obvious things. Even though obedience is looked down upon in today's popular culture, for Christians it is a virtue — a good thing. After all, it was disobedience that brought sin and evil into the world.

Jesus himself worked the redemption through heroic obedience to the Father's will. As St. Paul put it:



*He [Jesus] humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.*

– **Philippians 2:8, NABR**

When we freely obey God's will in our lives, we express our love for God, our faith in him, and we give him a chance to lead us down the path of true spiritual maturity.

But sometimes we are looking for dramatic paths of obedience, extraordinary and amazing feats of holiness, when God is actually asking us to be obedient in the simple and the obvious things.



## CONFERENCE



If we focus on the obvious things, then we will create the habit of obeying God's voice, and we will prepare ourselves for bigger things. Jesus made this point explicitly:



*The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones.*

– **Luke 16:11, NABR**

Most of the time, we don't need special inspirations from the Holy Spirit to know what God wants us to do. On a day-to-day basis, he expresses his will to us through the commandments of the Bible, the teachings of the Church, and our normal responsibilities and duties. If we faithfully obey him in those obvious things, we will be ready to receive special inspirations and special projects from the Holy Spirit.

God had big plans for St. Francis of Assisi, but it all started when Jesus told him in prayer to "rebuild my church." St. Francis took the inspiration literally, and started to fix the crumbling rock walls of the chapel where he was praying.

That wasn't exactly what the Lord had in mind, but Francis' spirit of obedience was all God needed in order to make his bigger plans eventually come true.

## CONFERENCE

### *Accepting Invitations*

If we feed holy desires every day, and if we ask for the gifts of the Holy Spirit sincerely and constantly, and if we obey God in the obvious things, then we will find ourselves living more and more in the Holy Spirit. We will be on his wavelength, so to speak. And when we get to that point, the Holy Spirit can really roll up his sleeves and get to work.

He will invite us to say things or do things that we wouldn't have thought of on our own. These invitations, or inspirations, usually come in little ways at first. And if we welcome them and accept the little ones, then the Holy Spirit will gradually send bigger and bigger ones. And if we welcome and accept those bigger ones, we can become junior partners in truly wonderful works of God's transforming love.

The trick is to accept these invitations, even when they make us a bit uncomfortable, or when they involve taking a bit of a risk. In those uncomfortable and risky situations, the gifts of the Holy Spirit help us make the generous decision.

It is not always easy to know if an idea comes from the Holy Spirit, or if it comes from our own head, or if it comes from the evil spirit (who is a very good deceiver). The best way to learn to discern is through experience:

- When we say yes to God's inspirations, even if we feel a bit of resistance in our human nature at first, we are usually filled with peace and interior joy afterwards.
- And so, gradually, we learn to distinguish God's quiet invitations from the rather noisier invitations of our selfishness, as we experience the results of following them.





But as we gain this experience there are a few rules of thumb that can be helpful to keep in mind.

- First, the Holy Spirit will never contradict himself. For example, he will never inspire us to disobey the Ten Commandments, or to reject the moral teaching of the Church, or to irresponsibly abandon the normal responsibilities of our life. His extraordinary inspirations will never be contrary to his ordinary guidance.
- Second, the Holy Spirit is gentle, but persistent. This is why it's sometimes wise to wait and pray for light if we are unsure whether an inspiration comes from God. If it is from him, he will keep nudging us, keep insisting. But if it's just a whim or a temptation, it will come and go.
- Third, these inspirations will always move us to acts of love for God and neighbor. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles in what appeared to be "tongues of fire." The fire is a symbol of the power and the love of God, and the shape of a tongue is a symbol of how God always wants us to communicate that love, to spread it, not to keep it all just for ourselves.
- Fourth, the Holy Spirit is very, very respectful — he will never force us. As a result, his inspirations are usually more like whispers in the quiet of our hearts, rather than violent and thunderous commands. One of the biblical images used to describe the Holy Spirit is the dove, precisely because doves are so gentle and quiet. This is a common characteristic of God's spiritual invitations: respectful, calm, loving. This is why we have to learn to be good listeners if we want to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit.

Those are some helpful rules of thumb to aid in our discernment of invitations that come from God. But the most important thing is to want to obey God's plans in our lives, to want to be a faithful partner in building up his eternal Kingdom.

With that holy desire burning in our hearts, the Holy Spirit will be able to work wonders.



## CONFERENCE

### *Smooth Sailing: Conclusion & Questionnaire*

Church tradition uses a beautiful image to describe the difference between someone who is living their Christian journey leaning only on their human efforts, and someone else who is living their Christian journey in docility to the Holy Spirit and his gifts and inspirations.

The first person, the virtuous person, is like someone on the sea in a row boat. He rows hard, sweating and straining. And he makes progress across the water towards his goal. But the progress is slow and requires immense effort.

The second person, the one who has surrendered to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is like someone crossing the sea in a sailboat. He still has to man the rudder and tug at the sails, but it is the wind that carries the boat forward, much more swiftly and easily than if he were simply rowing.



In this analogy, the sail is like the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the wind is like the Holy Spirit's inspirations.

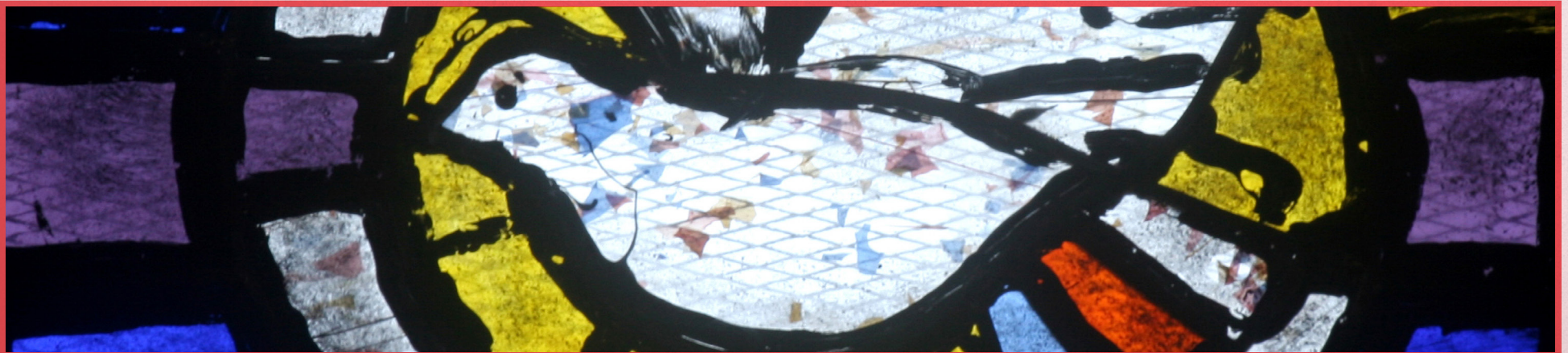
If we feed our holy desires, ask for the seven gifts, obey in the obvious things, and accept his invitations, we will all gradually learn to move ahead with the power and the grace of a boat in full sail.

Take some time now to reflect on the ten items in the personal questionnaire, going at your own pace and even talking to God about them as you reflect.

They may help you discover new ways to plug your daily life into the transforming power of Pentecost.

## Personal Questionnaire

- 1 Of the four gifts that the Holy Spirit uses to enlighten our minds (wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel), which one has been most present in my spiritual journey so far? Which one do I think I need most right now?
- 2 Of the three gifts that the Holy Spirit uses to heal and empower our freedom (piety, fortitude, holy fear), which one has been most present in my spiritual journey so far? Which one do I think I need most right now?
- 3 Have I ever felt an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, an “invitation” from God to say or do something? What happened? What did I learn from the experience?
- 4 On most days, where is my “treasure”? What do I desire most and think about most?
- 5 How would I describe my use of popular culture (movies, TV, Internet, video games, etc.): balanced, purposeful, and intentional? Or indulgent, undisciplined, and distracting?
- 6 When it comes to what I allow into my thoughts and imagination, what proportion would I consider healthy and nourishing, and what proportion would I consider spiritual or intellectual “junk food”?
- 7 What kinds of things do I usually ask God for? What things do I ask for most frequently and most passionately? What things do I think God wants me to ask him for more insistently?
- 8 In my life — according to my unique situation and life commitments — what are the “obvious things” that I know God wants me to do and obey?
- 9 What could I do to create more silence in my heart, so that I would be better able to hear the whisperings of the Holy Spirit?
- 10 What do I remember most (or what struck me most) from the celebration of the sacrament of confirmation (when I received it, or when someone I know received it)?



## FURTHER READING

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### *For Reflection & Prayer*

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *The Sanctifier*  
by Luis Maria Martinez
- *On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World*  
by Blessed Pope John Paul II
- *Theology and Sanity*  
by Frank Sheed
- *Theology for Beginners*  
by Frank Sheed
- *In the School of the Holy Spirit*  
by Fr. Jacques Philippe

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