

Homily for the Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year C

“How much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” asks Jesus, with a rhetorical twist, as he concludes his exhortation to pray with insistence and confidence and simplicity. And I ask myself, “When do I ever ask my Father in heaven for the Holy Spirit?” I know I ask God for many things: for health for my friends and loved ones, for solutions to difficult and painful situations, for consolation in sorrow in the face of tragedy or loss, for success in my endeavors. But to ask him simply for the Holy Spirit, the way a child asks for something to eat... it seems altogether too simple, or too vague, or even downright presumptuous: who am I to ask for and receive the Spirit of God Himself? I would rather ask God for blessings that are measurable by my standards, blessings I feel comfortable with... certainly not for the Spirit that hovered over the abyss at Creation, Who holds all things in existence, Who scrutinizes every thought of every heart in every moment. What would I even do with the Holy Spirit if He were given to me?



And yet that is precisely the point. The Holy Spirit is *the Gift*. Throughout the New Testament, it is the imagery of gift and being given that is most used to describe the Holy Spirit— more than wind or fire or the dove. He is the Gift. The fact that Jesus concludes His teaching about prayer with the Gift of the Holy Spirit tells us something very important about who we are and what prayer is. We are His children Created in His Image and likeness. We are not the sum of our sins as St. John Paul II reminds us, but beloved adopted sons and daughters of the Father.

As children of the Father in heaven, we have a deep need to receive His gifts, and most especially his Gift of the Spirit. There is something about receiving love that is inscribed very deeply in our identity as human persons. Indeed, we love receiving gifts. We love receiving new things. A random person came up to me once at a sidewalk café and gave me a small gift wrapped in decorative paper. She explained that her mission in life was to go through the city giving gifts to strangers. The gift was a simple notebook, worth perhaps a dollar. But receiving it from her that morning totally changed my mood that day, and marked me deeply. There is something deeply important about receiving gifts, especially when that gift is given with love and is, in fact, the other person. Pope John Paul II teaches us this in his catechesis *The Theology of the Body*. Only by a sincere gift of self can one truly come to know and be fulfilled in who he is as a child of the Most High.

This is what God is saying he will do for us if we pray. He himself wants to be the Gift. When the Holy Spirit dwells in us through faith, He brings with Him all his gifts of wisdom and fortitude and love, etc. We live a life that does not end with death, but allows us a share in the Resurrection of Christ. Living with our hearts set on eternity does not “solve” our problems now, but it does give us a new way of confronting them. Tragedy, loss, death, and health and success all take on a new and much more relative meaning when I know that my true life is hidden with Christ in God.

There is a startling contrast, however, in the readings of today’s liturgy, to which I would like to draw your attention. The Gospel passage we have been discussing is Jesus’ teaching on prayer. He gives us what we now call the Lord’s Prayer, or the “Our Father.” He explains with a parable the need to be persistent in prayer. He teaches us that God will always answer our prayers according to our true needs and what is truly good for us, and indeed, give us His very Spirit. But, consider for a moment the scene described in the first reading. It is Abraham imploring God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and it seems as if God desires to grant Abraham’s petition. He seems to be pleased with Abraham’s persistence, and to be looking to spare the cities.

Nevertheless, we know the end of the story... those two cities are utterly destroyed. There is here a mystery of evil that seems to thwart God's mercy. It is as if he pours out his gift of mercy, but it is not received. Sin is a reality, and its consequences are dire. Let us never forget it, and let us implore the Lord's mercy on ourselves and on our world. It is interesting that in the scripture reading Abraham would intercede for Sodom and Gomorrah. He didn't really have any personal stake in the matter. It was where his relative Lot lived, but he himself had no wealth invested there. And yet he intercedes as if it were his own home. May we learn to do the same for our communities and our world.

Jesus tells us we ought to ask so as to receive, similar to the way children ask for what they feel they need. Think about that comparison. Those of you who are parents know well the voices of your children asking for the things they want. Those of us who are not, are still familiar enough with the scenes of kids and their ways of asking or demanding or cajoling, or whatever else it takes to get what they want. What, though, if your children were to ask not for more toys or junk food or spending money, but what if their petitions were more like this: "Mom or Dad, can you teach me how to eat healthy food? Can you teach me how to be thrifty and moderate? Can you teach me how to be a man or woman of character? Can you teach me how to be polite and successful?" You might not even know quite how to react. But I bet you would do everything in your power to fulfill those desires. That must be a bit how God our Father reacts when we ask him for the Holy Spirit. It is the one thing He desires with all His heart to give us. And if we ask, He will find a way.



Father Daniel Hennessy, LC has been a member of the religious congregation of the Legionaries of Christ since 1993. He currently lives in Rome where he serves as International Director of the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums. Prior to coming to the Vatican, Father Daniel served for seven years as a retreat master, spiritual director and guide for faith formation programs in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. He has attended Theology of the Body I, as well as In the Person of Christ, and served as course chaplain for the Institute. He loves discovering God and his goodness in the artistic expression of the human spirit, but also in the wonderful beauty of nature.