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"Bearers of the flame of the Spirit"

In his 30 October general audience, Pope Francis continued catechetical cycle on how the Holy Spirit guides the People of God through salvation history, speaking about the sacrament of Confirmation.

10/30/2024

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we will continue our reflection on the presence and action of the

Holy Spirit in the life of the Church through the Sacraments.

The sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit reaches us primarily through two channels: the *Word of God* and the *Sacraments*. And among all the Sacraments, there is one that is quintessentially the Sacrament of the Holy Spirit, and it is on this that I would like to focus today. It is the Sacrament of Confirmation.

In the New Testament, beyond baptism with water, another rite is mentioned, that of the *imposition of hands*, which has the purpose of communicating the Holy Spirit visibly and in a charismatic way, with effects analogous to those produced by the Apostles at Pentecost. The Acts of the Apostles refer to a significant episode in this regard. Having heard that some in Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John there

from Jerusalem. They “went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit” (8:14-17).

Added to this is what Saint Paul writes in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: “The one who gives us security with you in Christ and who anointed us is God; He has also put His seal upon us and given the Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment” (1:21-22); the guarantee of the Spirit. The theme of the Holy Spirit as a “royal seal” with which Christ marks his sheep is at the basis of the doctrine of the “indelible character” conferred by this rite.

With the passing of time, the rite of anointing took shape as a Sacrament in itself, assuming diverse forms and

content in the various ages and different rites of the Church. This is not the place to retrace this very complex history. What the Sacrament of Confirmation is in the understanding of the Church seems to me to be described in a very simple and clear way by the Catechism of adults of the Italian Episcopal Conference. It says: “Confirmation is for all the faithful what Pentecost was for the entire Church. ... It reinforces the baptismal incorporation into Christ and the Church and the consecration to the prophetic, royal and priestly mission. It communicates the abundance of the gifts of the Spirit. ... If, therefore, Baptism is the Sacrament of birth, Confirmation is the Sacrament of growth. For this very reason it is also the Sacrament of witness, because this is closely linked to the maturity of Christian existence” (*La verità vi farà liberi*, Catechismo degli adulti,

Vatican Publishing House 1995, pg. 324).

The problem is how to ensure that the Sacrament of Confirmation is not reduced, in practice, to “last rites,” that is the Sacrament of “departure” from the Church. It is said that it is the *farewell Sacrament*, because once young people do it they go away and then return for marriage. This is what people say... but we must ensure that it is rather the Sacrament of participation, of active participation in the life of the Church. It is a milestone that can seem impossible, given the current situation throughout the Church, but this does not mean that we should stop pursuing it. It will not be so for all Confirmands, children or adults, but it is important that it is at least for some who will then go on to be the animators of the community.

It can be useful, for this purpose, to be helped in preparing for the Sacrament by lay faithful who have had a personal encounter with Christ and have had a true experience of the Spirit. Some people say that they have experienced it as a blossoming of the Sacrament of Confirmation received as children.

But this does not relate only to future Confirmands; it relates to all of us and at any time. Together with *Confirmation* and *anointing*, we have received, the Apostle assures us, also the *bond* of the Spirit, which elsewhere he calls “the first fruits of the Spirit” (*Rm* 8:23). We must “spend” this bond, savour these first fruits, not bury underground the charisms and talents received.

Saint Paul exhorted the disciple Timothy to “stir into flame the gift of God^{*} that you have through the imposition of my hands” (2 *Tim* 1:6),

and the verb used suggests the image of one who breathes on the fire to revive the flame. Here is a good goal for the Jubilee year! To remove the ashes of habit and disengagement, to become, like the torchbearers at the Olympics, bearers of the flame of the Spirit. May the Spirit help us to take a few steps in this direction!

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