

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR A

Those of us who have been raised as Catholics since childhood, or at least have been members of the Church for some years, are surely inclined to think that the way we understand the seven sacraments today is exactly like the way they were understood some two thousand years ago. For that reason, it may sound strange to have heard in today's first reading that when Peter and John were sent by the other apostles from Jerusalem to the city of Samaria after many had accepted the Good News preached there and been baptized, Peter and John laid hands on them and only then did they receive the Holy Spirit. St. Luke writes that up to that point the Holy Spirit had not come upon them, for "they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." If you are familiar with the baptismal rite, not just as it is found today but even for many centuries, you know that this rite already speaks of the Holy Spirit coming upon the newly baptized. The sacrament that we call "confirmation" was not originally understood to be the first time the Spirit descended upon a member of the Church. The very word "confirm" simply refers to the fact that although in the early Church the bishop was normally the one to preside at all the sacraments of initiation--baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist--on those occasions when for one reason or another some other minister performed the baptism (perhaps because the person to be baptized was in danger of death, or was living very far from the place where the bishop resided), the bishop would later "confirm" or "ratify" what the other minister had done by laying hands on the person who had been baptized. This laying on of hands was regularly understood as a prayerful way of calling down the Holy Spirit upon a person, and as the centuries passed this came to be the focus of the sacrament, even though it was understood that the Spirit was already given in a very real sense at baptism.

It's interesting to note that this question of "when" the Spirit is given does not normally even come up in the Eastern Orthodox Church, where the three sacraments of initiation are regularly given at one and the same time, even to infants. Liturgists today argue among

themselves about whether we in the Western Church should separate confirmation from the other two sacraments of initiation by so many years, for baptism is regularly given to infants and confirmation to children in their early teens. There are good arguments on either side of this question, but my guess is that our Western custom is going to remain.

Rather than concern ourselves about that issue, it will surely be more helpful to reflect a bit on these three sacraments of initiation. I'll start with a fine reading that we monks heard at our Morning Prayer a couple weeks ago, from a late medieval Greek theologian named Nicolas Cabasilas. In his inspiring work titled *Life in Christ*, he treats baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist in an order of ascending importance. After noting that Christ is present in each of the sacraments, he says that the first of them, baptism, "takes away the stain of sin and imprints [Christ's] own image on the baptized." However, he goes on, "we remain imperfect even after baptism ... because we have not yet received the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are given in confirmation." Nicolas justifies this statement by referring to that very passage about Peter and John in Samaria that we heard in our first reading this morning. The way he writes might imply that with confirmation we do become perfect, but he goes on to deny that by pointing out that St. Paul was very severe toward the early Christian community at Corinth, whose members "had been filled with the Spirit" and yet were in many instances "guilty of envy, rivalry, contention, and other similar vices."

Proceeding to the Eucharist, Nicolas says something that is incredibly inspiring but that may sound too good to be true. Here's what he writes:

With the Eucharist, however, it is different. No such charge [as Paul leveled against the Corinthians] can be brought against those in whom the bread of life ... has

had its full effect and who have not brought to this feast any wrongful dispositions. If this sacrament is fully effective, it is quite impossible for it to allow the slightest imperfection to remain in those who receive it.

If you would know the reason for this, it is because through Communion ... Christ dwells in us and we in him... How blessed to have become the dwelling place of such a guest! We at once become spiritual in body and soul and in all our faculties because our soul is united to his soul, our body to his body, our blood to his blood. The consequence is that the higher prevails over the lower, the divine over the human. As Paul ... writes, *It is no longer I who live: it is Christ who lives in me.*¹

It would be hard to find a more beautiful and powerful statement of the power of this sacrament, although it is important to note that Nicolas does not say the effect is automatic. What is asked of us, he says, is that we not bring "to this feast any wrongful dispositions." Put more positively, it means approaching the sacrament with sentiments like those of Christ himself, whose self-giving should be reflected in the way we deal with others: being willing to forgive whenever anyone asks to be forgiven, even if this be seventy times seven times; remaining calm and patient when another is not moving as quickly as we would like (just think of the terrible, sometimes fatal, harm caused by the "road rage" of those who are impatient); and acting on the truth of something I read the other morning in a book of daily meditations. It went like this: "When you are overcome by self-doubt and self-criticism, the smallest bit of understanding, smile, or kindness from another person [makes all the difference]. Knowing that, let's offer those expressions to others as often as possible."²

1" Nicolas Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, PG 582-83, in *A Word in Season: Readings for the Liturgy of the Hours*, III, new ed. (Villanova, PA: Augustinian Press, 2001), 205-6.

2" Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation: Daily Meditations for Men* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 146.