

PENTECOST

In one of my courses in our abbey school I regularly show the students a film that includes a segment about a gathering of Christian women in a large stadium Iowa, an assembly intended to give them a stronger sense of how they could live as followers of Christ in a more zealous and vibrant way. At one point in the film, an interviewer asks one of the women if she feels changed at the end of her week there. She answers: “Oh yes, and that’s just what I wanted. I came here wanting to be changed!”

That’s the same kind of change we heard about in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, about the first Christian Pentecost. Here we find a group of men who probably should not even be called “disciples” at this point, men who for the past seven weeks had been anything but bold. The Fourth Gospel tells us that on the evening of the first Easter Sunday, the Eleven were together in a room with the door locked “for fear of the Jews” (Jn 20:19). How changed they were after Pentecost--now truly disciples, ready and indeed eager to proclaim the Good News come what may, courageous to face the physical martyrdom that eventually took the life of almost all of them. The reason for the change is clear. As St. Luke writes in the Acts of the Apostles, “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4). That is surely one of the most powerful accounts in the entire Bible of what it means to be inspired or, perhaps more exactly phrased, to be “inspirited.”

Now this is something we should want for ourselves as well. The practical questions facing us are basically two: What is an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and how can we best recognize it? For starters, let’s hear what one of the most respected and sound doctors of the Church had to say on the subject. St. Francis de Sales, in his classic work *Introduction to the Devout Life*, writes: “By inspirations we mean all those interior attractions, motions, acts of self-reproach and remorse, lights and concepts that God works in us and predisposes our hearts by his blessings, fatherly care, and love in order to awaken, stimulate, urge, and attract us to holy

virtues, heavenly love, and good resolutions--in short, to everything that sends us on our way to our everlasting welfare.”¹ That is clear enough, and indeed one of the great virtues of Francis de Sales is the lucidity with which he discusses all that is involved in living a holy and devout life. He goes on to say that normally such an inspiration coming to a well-disposed person will result in a definite sense of joy or delight. In his words, “Even if the inspiration lasted throughout our whole life, we would be completely unacceptable to God if we took no joy in it,” for “although this delight is as yet not complete consent, yet it is a kind of predisposition to it.”² All this is reminiscent of some things that St. Benedict writes about in his Rule, such as when he says that after a monk has climbed all twelve steps of the ladder of humility he will “arrive at that perfect love of God that casts out fear” and will follow the teachings of the Gospel not out of fear of punishment but “out of love for Christ, good habit, and delight in virtue” (RB 7.67,70).

I think we are naturally drawn to agree with that. A truly virtuous person will normally experience a sense of contentment or consolation in wanting to do the right thing, in conduct or behavior that reflects those attitudes and dispositions that St. Paul calls the fruit of the Holy Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). There is lurking, however, a dangerous misunderstanding if one were to conclude that living according to the Gospel, following the example and teaching of Christ, will always and everywhere be marked by a sensible feeling of delight. Let me give an example of what I mean.

As our monks know, we recently made a few changes in our community’s liturgical calendar so as to include the feast days of some American saints. Among these additions is one that I expect few persons have heard of up till now, St. Marianne Cope, a Franciscan sister of Syracuse, New York who spent much of her life working among lepers in the Hawaiian Islands

just like the better-known St. Damien. Certain parts of her life story illustrate very well what is meant by following the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, along with the fact that such following can at times be humanly speaking quite unpleasant and distasteful. The way she and some of her fellow sisters ended up in Hawaii could rightly be called inspired. A priest named Fr. Leonor had already approached various communities of religious sisters in our country seeking volunteers to work among the lepers on those islands, but had met with nothing but refusals. Very different was the response of Mother Marianne and some of her sisters. After the priest had gone on from Syracuse to Dayton, Ohio, Marianne wrote to him in these words: “I am hungry for the work and I wish with all my heart to be one of the ones ... whose privilege it will be to sacrifice themselves for the salvation ... of the poor islanders.... I am not afraid of any disease, hence it would be my greatest delight even to minister to the abandoned lepers.”³

It is significant she uses the very word “delight” that we find in the works of St. Benedict and St. Francis de Sales. Assuredly she was open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in readily agreeing to undertake this work, and indeed she came to love the lepers, especially the children, whose physical and spiritual needs she met to the best of her ability. It would be wrong, however, to assume that such love was always marked by delight in the normal sense of that word. Even after five years of working with the lepers, she never overcame a natural repugnance. In her own words, “I suffer when I go to church. The smell and the sight of lepers everywhere is disagreeable.... How glad I was to get outside to breathe again the fresh, clean air. We met many of our old patients outside. All were anxious to shake hands--something that makes me shudder--yet we did it.”⁴

That last phrase--“yet we did it”--is the crucial one, the one that sets off someone like St. Marianne Cope from those who might feel drawn to that degree of self-giving but don't have the

courage to follow through and persevere. Even if we might fall short of the heroic virtue that we find in the disciples on the first Christian Pentecost or in saints like Marianne Cope and Damien de Veuster, let us at least recognize that we, too, are constantly receiving inspirations--or what we might call "inspirations"--to follow the Lord Jesus ever more closely. To cooperate with those inspirations even in small matters is not insignificant in the eyes of the one who said, "Whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple--amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward" (Mt 10:42). It is also the teaching of all the great spiritual masters that doing even small acts of kindness regularly disposes us to begin doing even more. As we continue our celebration of the Eucharist on this great feast of Pentecost, let us seriously pray for the grace to respond ever more generously to the same Spirit that came down on the disciples in the form of tongues of fire, so that our hearts, too, may be enkindled to an ever brighter flame of love and care for all those among whom we live and work.

1" St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part 2, sec. 18.

2" Ibid.

3" Mother Marianne Cope, quoted by Sr. Mary Laurence Hanley, O.S.F. and O.A. Bushnell, *A Song of Pilgrimage and Exile: The Life and Spirit of Mother Marianne of Molokai* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980), 72.

4" Ibid., 348.