

CONCERNING THE BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap

It is important to understand what the Renewal in the Spirit is all about. After the Second Vatican Council, many things in the Church's life were renewed--the liturgy, pastoral care, canon law, the constitutions and dress of religious orders. Although all these things are important, they are only external things. Woe to us if we stop there and think the task is finished. It is not structure but souls that are important to God. "It is in men's souls that the Church is beautiful," writes St. Ambrose...and therefore it is in men's souls that she must make herself beautiful.

God is Author and Power

The Renewal is a renewal in which God, not man, is the principal author "I, not you," says God, "make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). "My Spirit--and He alone--may renew the face of the earth" (see Ps. 104:30). From the religious point of view, we tend to view things from a Ptolemaic perspective: at the foundation are our efforts--organization, efficiency, reforms, and goodwill. These have the earth here as the center which God comes to strengthen and crown by His grace and our effort.

We must--at this point as the Word of God cries out--"give the power back to God" (Ps. 68:35) because "the power belongs to God" (Ps. 62:12). For too long we have usurped this power of His by managing it as if it were ours, as if it was up to us to "govern" the power of God. We have to totally change our perspective. That is, we have to acknowledge simply that without the Holy Spirit, we cannot do anything, not even say, "Jesus is Lord!" (1Cor. 12:3).

The Baptism in the Spirit is not a sacrament, but it is related to the sacraments of Christian initiation. The Baptism in the Spirit makes real and in a way renews Christian initiation. The primary relationship is with the sacrament of Baptism.

We believe that the Baptism in the Spirit makes real and revitalizes our Baptism. To understand how a sacrament which was received so many years ago, usually immediately after our birth, could suddenly come back to life and emanate so much energy, as often happens through the Baptism in the Spirit, it is important to look at our understanding of sacramental theology.

Catholic theology recognizes the concept of a valid but bound sacrament. A sacrament is called bound if the fruit that should accompany it remains bound because of certain blocks that prevent its effectiveness. Extreme examples of this are the sacrament of Matrimony and Holy Orders received in the state of mortal sin. In such

circumstances these sacraments cannot grant any grace to people until the obstacle of sin is removed through Penance. Once this happens, the sacrament is said to live again, thanks to the indelible character and irrevocability of the gift of God.

God remains faithful even if we are unfaithful because He cannot deny Himself (see Tim. 2:1-3).

In the case of Baptism, what is it that causes the fruit of the sacrament to stay bound? The sacraments are not magical rituals that act mechanically, without the person's knowledge, disregarding any response on his part. Their effectiveness is the fruit of a synergy or cooperation between divine omnipotence--in reality the grace of Christ or the Holy Spirit--, and human freedom. As St. Augustine said, "The one who created you without your cooperation will not save without your cooperation."

The opus operatum of Baptism, namely God's part, or grace, has several aspects: forgiveness of sins, the gifts of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity (these, however, only as a seed), and divine sonship. All of these aspects operate through the effective action of the Holy Spirit. But what does the opus operantis in Baptism--namely, man's part--consist of? It consists of faith! "Whosoever believes and is baptized shall be saved"(Mark 16:16). Along with Baptism therefore, there is another element: the faith of man. "To all who received Him He gave the power to become children of God: to those who believe in His name" (John 1:13).

Baptism is like a divine seal put on the faith of man. Having heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and having believed in it, you have received (of course, in Baptism) the seal of the Holy Spirit (see Eph. 1:13).

Baptism and Confirmation of Faith

At the beginning of the Church, Baptism was such a powerful event and so rich in grace that there was normally not a need of a new effusion of the Spirit like we have today. Baptism was ministered to adults who converted from paganism, and who, properly instructed, were in the position to make on the occasion of Baptism, an act of faith, and a free, mature choice. It is sufficient to read the mystagogic catechesis on Baptism attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem to become aware of the depth of faith to which those waiting for Baptism were led. In substance, they arrived at Baptism through a true and real conversion, and thus, for them Baptism was a real washing, a personal renewal, and a re-birth in the Holy Spirit.

The favorable circumstances that allowed Baptism at the origins of the Church to operate with so much power was that the grace of God and man's response met at the

same time. There was a perfect synchronization.

Infant Baptism in a Non-Christian Environment

But now this synchronization has been broken since we are baptized as infants. Little by little this aspect of the free and personal act of faith no longer happens. It was substituted instead by a decision made by intermediary parents or godparents. When a child grew up in a totally Christian environment, this faith could still flourish, even though at a slower rate. Now, however, this no longer the case, and our spiritual environment is even worse than the one at the time of the Middle Ages. Not that there is no normal Christian life, but it is now the exception rather than the rule.

In this situation, rarely, or never, does the baptized person ever reach the stage of proclaiming in the Holy Spirit, "Jesus is Lord." Until one reaches this point, everything else in the Christian life remains out of focus and immature.

Miracles no longer happen, and we experience what Jesus did in Nazareth: "Jesus could not perform many miracles because of their lack of faith" (Matt. 13:58)

God's Will

Here, then, is what I feel to be the significance of the Baptism in the Spirit. It is God's answer to this malfunctioning that has grown up in the Christian life in the sacrament of Baptism.

It is an accepted fact that over the last few years there has been some concern on the part of the Church, among the bishops, that the Christian sacraments, especially Baptism, are being administered to people who will not make any use of them in life. As a result, it has even been suggested that Baptism should not be administered unless there are some minimum guarantees that it will be cultivated and valued by the child in question. For one should not throw pearls to dogs, as Jesus said, and Baptism is a pearl because it is the fruit of the Blood of Christ.

But it seems that God was concerned about this situation even before the Church was, and He raised up here and there in the Church, movements aimed at renewing Christian initiation in adults. The Charismatic Renewal is one of these movements, and in it the principal grace is, without doubt, linked to Baptism of the Spirit and what comes before it.

Release and Confirmation of Faith

Its effectiveness in reactivating Baptism consists in this: Finally man contributed his

part--namely, he makes a choice of faith, prepared in repentance, that allows the work of God to set itself free and to emanate all its strength. It is as if the light is switched on. The gift of God is finally “unbound”, and the Spirit is allowed to flow like a fragrance in the Christian life.

In addition to the renewal of the grace of Baptism, the Baptism in the Spirit is also a confirmation of one’s own Baptism, a deliberate “yes” to it, to its fruit and its commitments. As such, it is also similar to Confirmation. Confirmation is the sacrament that develops, confirms and brings to completion the work of Baptism.

From it, too, comes that desire for greater involvement in the apostolic and missionary dimension of the Church that is usually noted in those who receive the Baptism in the Spirit. They feel more inclined to cooperate with the building up of the Church, placing themselves at her service in various ministries both clerical and lay, to witness for Christ--to do all those things that recall the happening of Pentecost and which are actuated in the sacrament of Confirmation.

The Baptism of the Spirit is not the only occasion known within the Church for this reviving of the sacraments if initiation. There is, for example, the renewal of the baptismal promises in the Easter Vigil. There are also the spiritual exercises and religious profession, sometimes called a “second Baptism.” At the sacrament level there is Confirmation. It is not difficult to discover in the lives of the saints the presence of a spontaneous effusion, especially on the occasion of their conversion. The difference with the Baptism in the Spirit, however, is that it is open to all the people of God, small and great, and not only to those privileged ones who do the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises or make religious profession.

The Will of God in History

Where does this extraordinary force that we experienced when were baptized in the Spirit come from? What we are talking about is not just some theory, but something that we ourselves have experienced and therefore can say with John, “What we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what our hands have touched, this we also announce to you, so that you too can be in communion with us (see John 1:1-11). The explanation of this force is in the will of God because God was pleased to renew the Church today by this means, and this is enough.

There are certainly some biblical precedents, like the one told in Acts 8:14-17, when Peter and John, having heard that Samaria welcomed the Word of God, went there, prayed for them and laid hands on them so they could receive the Holy Spirit. But these biblical precedents are not sufficient to explain the vastness and depth of the

contemporary manifestations of the Spirit.

The explanation, therefore, is in God's plan. We could say, by paraphrasing a famous saying of the Apostle Paul: Because Christians, with all their organization, were not able to transmit the power of the Spirit, God was pleased to renew the believers through the foolishness of Baptism in the Spirit. In fact, theologians look for an explanation, and responsible people for moderation; but simple souls touch with their hands the power of Christ in the Baptism of the Spirit. (1Cor. 12:1-24).

We men, and in particular, we men of the Church, tend to limit God in His freedom. We tend to insist that He follow a compulsory pattern (the so-called channels of grace). We forget that God is a torrent that breaks loose and creates its own path, and that the Spirit blows where and how He wants. (Notwithstanding the role of the teaching of the Church to discern what actually comes from the Spirit and what does not come from Him.)

What does the Baptism in the Spirit consist of, and how does it work?

In the Baptism of the Spirit, there is a secret, mysterious move of God that is His way of becoming present in a way that is different for each one. Only He knows us in our inner part and how to act upon our unique personality. There is also an external community part which is the same for everyone. This consists mainly of three things: brotherly love, laying on of hands, and prayer. These are non-sacramental but simply ecclesiastic elements.

From the Father and Son

Where does the grace we experience in the Baptism of the Holy Spirit come from? From those around us? No! From the person who receives it? No! It comes from God! We can only say that such grace is related to Baptism because God always acts with coherence and faithfulness. He honors the commitments and institutions of Christ. One thing is certain--it is not the brothers who impart the Holy Spirit, but they do invoke the Holy Spirit on the person. Only Jesus may give the Holy Spirit.

As to the manner of this grace, we may speak of a new coming of the Holy Spirit, of a new mission by the Father through Jesus Christ, or a new anointing corresponding to a new degree of grace.