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The gifts of the Holy Spirit: The gift of fear of the Lord

Today, on the Feast of Pentecost, we celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit.

What an extraordinary change we see in the apostles! They, who were faint-hearted and fearful, become, thanks to the presence of the Holy Spirit, powerful messengers of God's love; and they fearlessly proclaim the Gospel. The great miracle that each of the listeners - coming from the most diverse corners of the world - could understand the message of the apostles in their own language (cf. Acts 2:6) was a sign for the future. It was as if for a moment the confusion of tongues had been abolished, so that when the apostles proclaimed the wonders of God, all people could understand them.

We see, then, that the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son for evangelisation; to carry forward the work of the Lord, enlightening, strengthening and moving the Church, which had received from the Risen One the commission to go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News (Mt 28:19-20). Therefore, the Holy Spirit is the great evangeliser.

But, at the same time, He is also the Master of our inner life. He leads us to conversion and makes us advance on this path, so that our heart is transformed. The Holy Spirit wants to mould our souls in the image of God. To this end, He invites us and moves us to practise the virtues, and whenever we come up against the limitations of our fallen nature, He Himself comes to our aid with His seven gifts, which "complete and perfect the virtues" and "make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1831).

So, we want to meditate on each of these seven gifts of the Holy Spirit throughout the Octave of Pentecost, to understand how they transform our souls. Today we begin with the gift of fear of the Lord.

"The root of wisdom is fear of Yahweh" (Ps 111:10a).

The spirit of fear of the Lord arouses a deep aversion to sin in the soul of the person who lives in a state of grace. Thus, he clearly recognises its destructive power, and is well aware that, with sin, the majesty and love of God is offended.

This is one of the first lessons which the Holy Spirit gives to those souls who earnestly aspire to holiness, for He wants to prepare them to walk the path to unification with God.

When the gift of fear becomes effective, the soul has already awakened to love. She clearly understands that only sin can separate her from God. She recognises the Lord as a loving Father, and therefore has towards Him the respect of a child towards her father. She does not want to do anything that could separate her from God's love or offend Him. Thus, she tries to live with great vigilance.

In her effort to avoid anything that might affect her relationship with God, the soul is not moved by a servile fear, which fears punishment above all. Rather, the spirit of fear of the Lord instils in her a growing sensitivity and gentleness towards God. If she follows His motions, she will be led to an ever more generous surrender to the Lord.

The soul recognises, on the one hand, the immeasurable greatness of God and, on the other hand, His infinite mercy. This twofold understanding brings to maturity in the soul the gift of fear, which unfolds harmoniously in the spiritual life. Righteous reverence for God, hand in hand with love for Him, makes the soul more and more receptive to God's presence.

Reverence - awe at God's holiness - will prevent any over-familiarity in dealing with Him. At the same time, true familiarity with our Heavenly Father will prevent us from having a great distance in our relationship with Him, which could make the spiritual life dry.

When the gift of fear of the Lord unfolds in us, we will also appreciate more deeply all the other gifts He gives us for our salvation: the greatness of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Holy Scriptures, the authentic doctrine of the Church, the holy sacraments, among so many other things the Lord has prepared for us.

Under the influence of the spirit of fear, we will be able to counteract more easily what does not correspond to reverence for the sacred. We will be more attentive to what we say and the way we treat other people will change. Indeed, the same Spirit that moves us to treat God with proper reverence and love will teach us to act in the same way towards people, created in His image and likeness.

When the gift of fear is made effective, love - which is the Holy Spirit Himself - takes over the reins of our lives. If we follow His motions and impulses, we will be able to overcome more and more our shortcomings and all that hinders us from practising virtue. The more docile and sensitive we are to the Holy Spirit, the more easily we can allow ourselves to be moved by Him, who will also give us the strength to put into practice what He points out to us.

In this way, the Holy Spirit becomes our inner teacher, who guides us on the path of holiness. We will have set out on the path of God's wisdom, and He Himself will bring His work in us to fulfilment, as long as we remain faithful to the path He has shown us.