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THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION

Vigil of Pentecost
13 May 1978

Genesis 11:1-9

Romans 8:22-27

John 7:37-39

Dear brother priests, dear young people who today will receive the fullness of your Christian initiation, dear sisters and brothers all.

The presence of these young women and men in the cathedral and the gospel we just heard correspond to one another. The gospel story occurs on the most solemn day of the feast of Tabernacles, the day when young people in procession bring vessels of water from the pool of Siloam to the atrium of the temple. This procession expresses the people's desire for water as they pray to heaven for rain upon the earth. The land then comes alive, and nature bursts forth thanks to the fecundity of the water.

Christ used this ceremony, this liturgy of his people, to communicate the beautiful reality he brings to the world. Just as the parched earth longs for water and rain, so too humanity without the life of the Spirit is an arid desert. That is why in the middle of the feast, among those young people with their jars of water, Jesus cried out, «Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink» (John 7:37). The gospel tells us that Jesus was speaking about the Spirit that would be received by those who believed in him. Saint John comments that the Spirit had not yet come because, in order for the Spirit of the glorified Christ to continue his mission of being life-giving water in the world, it was first necessary that Christ's humanity be glorified by ascending into heaven (John 7:39).

Ten days after Christ ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit rained down on Jerusalem, making the world fruitful with the mystical presence of that Christ who is the water that fertilizes hearts. That Pentecost inaugurated the life of the church as a continuation of the life of Christ in the world, and even now the church continues to share the Spirit of Christ with those who believe in him. All those who believe in Christ, such as you young people who come now to receive the Spirit of Christ, are fertile ground. As the Council states regarding the sacrament of confirmation, this evening you young people are going to be more closely identified with Christ and become more intimately incorporated into the church (LG 11). Through the gift of the Holy Spirit you are given new strength to defend and spread the message that the world needs as desperately as it does life-giving water.

Blessed be God, for this dream of liturgical renewal has been realized among us, thanks to the collaboration of the Catholic schools, the parish communities, the youth groups, and the base communities. This evening we are witnessing the renewal of the sacrament of confirmation. This is not a sacrament given to little children who don't understand what they're receiving. It is a sacrament for young men and women who know, like the young people

in that Jerusalem procession, that water is necessary for the land, and so they ask God for the grace of this water. You are about to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the fruitful waters of the Spirit that the world needs in order to be more fruitful in love. You receive the Spirit so that the message of Christ will be carried forth by you yourselves, now more fully incorporated and more committed to this kingdom and to this message. You must channel to the world this torrent of life as your own testimony and your own word.

The sacrament you're now receiving is the sacrament of the martyrs. «Martyr» means «witness», witness to a life that the world does not know, witness to a life that the world in its ignorance persecutes and maligns. Those confirmed must be young men and women who are brave enough to stand up for Christ like the martyrs. We would not have these glorious stories of martyrdom in the church of Christ if it were not for this gift of the Holy Spirit that you are going to receive.

Who else but the Holy Spirit could have given strength to the young people and the young virgins of that time so that, confirmed in faith, they were willing to die among wild beasts or beneath the dagger of their executioners rather than betray their Christianity? How greatly we need that courage at this time when there are so many cowards and traitors and people who sell out their faith!

Dear young people, in you the church renews herself. In you the Spirit of God is like refreshing water for all the people of this archdiocese who tonight are experiencing a Pentecost not only here in this cathedral but throughout the land thanks to our many martyrs, those noble men and women who fearlessly professed their confirmation, their baptism, their Eucharist, their faith in Christ.

May you be this revitalizing force! Youth is always a sign of renewal. Youth is not so much a particular age but a situation; youthfulness is often found even in older people who keep renewing their faith. Just as the desert is an arid land, a place without water, so too our hearts become empty of life when we're cowardly and don't have the courage to defend this faith of the martyrs that Christ will grant you this evening.

I am happy to be the minister, along with my brother priests, of this gift of the Holy Spirit on this Pentecost of 1978. I earnestly encourage all you dear young people about to be confirmed and all you dear Christians long since confirmed: on this night let us all renew our awareness that the Holy Spirit has come to his church and that we are that church. Let us be like the apostles who under the impulse of the Spirit were changed from cowards into courageous proclaimers of Christ's kingdom to a pagan world that later came to worship Christ. At this decisive time in our history, let us be true apostles who go forth from this modern cenacle of Pentecost and bear witness to our Christian faith and hope.

We are going to proceed, then, to that beautiful moment in which the cathedral becomes a true cenacle.