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THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE SOUL OF THE NEW COVENANT

Holy Thursday
Chrism Mass
12 April 1979

Isaiah 61:1-3a,6a,8b-9

Revelation 1:5-8

Luke 4:16-21

Dear fellow priests and dear sisters and brothers, the Holy Spirit is the soul of the new covenant. During Lent we have tried to trace the thought of divine revelation from the perspective of a God who never tires of loving and who keeps renewing his covenants with humankind. We arrive now at Holy Thursday, when we celebrate the promise that these ancient covenants had been long announcing. In this unique Mass, which is celebrated in all cathedrals and is called the Chrism Mass, we want to render homage to the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit who makes the new covenant promised by God a reality.

In a few moments we are going to consecrate the holy chrism in the presence of the people and the priests. The liturgy uses this sign of the chrism to represent the presence of the Holy Spirit who anoints the Mediator of the new covenant, Jesus Christ, true God and true man, as Prophet, Priest, and King of humankind. This Spirit anoints all of us who believe in him and makes us participants in the divine anointing. Without the Holy Spirit we cannot understand all the divine efficacy of Christian redemption. The Holy Spirit, then, is the central focus of our adoration and our gratitude this morning. In him we recognize the force that impelled Christ to make the supreme sacrifice for us and that now unites us with Christ the Redeemer.

The liturgy this morning seeks to highlight three great works of the Holy Spirit that we are now celebrating. The first work is Christ. The second work is the priestly people, which includes all the baptized faithful and also the priests, who are ministers of God chosen from among the people. And the third great work is the sacraments through which the Holy Spirit continually sustains the covenant by which God gives us life, forgives us, and sanctifies us. In response, we consecrate ourselves as his people, and we enthusiastically commit ourselves to the Lord.

The anointing of Christ

The first master work of the Holy Spirit that we're celebrating this morning is the anointing of Christ. When the angel announced to Mary that she was to be the Virgin Mother of the God who would become man, she asked, «How can this be?» (Luke 1:34-35). The angel explained to her that it would be the work of the Holy Spirit. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, that humanity, body and soul, formed in the virginal bosom of Mary would be born just as all other children are. He would have the same nature as any human person, but the Holy Spirit would adopt that new

creature in Mary's womb and graft onto the embryo, we might say, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Therefore, Mary was going to give birth not to a simple child but to a God-Child, and so she would be called the Mother of God. This was a work of the Holy Spirit.

The anointing of Christ was therefore an inner anointing, an anointing that did not come from outside but rather from the originating principle, so that it was a marvelous work of the Holy Spirit. That is why we heard in today's first reading these words: «The Spirit is upon me» (Isa 61:1). Commenting on this prophecy of Isaiah, the Messiah declared, «Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled. The Spirit of God is upon me (Luke 4:21). I am the marvelous work of the Holy Spirit. While I appear among you as just another man, I have the Spirit's anointing, and I bear within me the person of God who gives divine value to all my human acts. If my human arms, when nailed to a cross, are going to have power to save the world from all its sins, it is not by the blood of a son of Mary; it is because this son of Mary has been anointed as the true Son of God and everything he suffers has divine value».

Truly Christ, the Messiah, is the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when the hour of his glorification arrived, the Holy Spirit moved him to the great act of obedience which was his passion. Moved by the Holy Spirit, he embraced the cross; impelled by the Spirit he died to redeem humankind; but it is also by the force of the Spirit that he rose again. God raised him up by the same Spirit of life by which he was anointed, because death could not conquer him.

And if Christ, reigning now in heaven, pours down on humanity the gifts of forgiveness, holiness, consolation, and the truth that guides his church, then we owe all of this to the fact that this Son of the Virgin was anointed by the Holy Spirit. Now, seated at the right hand of the Father, that humanity born from the bosom of a woman has been divinely glorified, as Saint Paul's letter tells us, «God has given him a name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth» (Phil 2:9-10).

And so we now have with us, dear sisters and brothers, the Mediator of the new covenant, the author of the renewed relationship between heaven and earth, the artist of human redemption, the priest who penetrated into heaven and sanctifies this world continually with his eternal priestly ministry. Let us open wide the eyes of our faith so that we can see that the great Protagonist of Holy Week is the marvelous work of the Holy Spirit. He is this same Christ who is carrying his cross and dies on Calvary—the same Christ we are going to bury, not to leave him forever in a grave but to see him rise in triumph.

The priestly people

A second great work of the Holy Spirit comes about through the divine dignity of Christ, through the anointing by which the son of Mary is made Son of God. Such a work could be accomplished only by the infinite power of the Spirit of God. All the divine power of redemption that Christ has and all the priestly ministry by which Christ offers his sacrifice for the forgiveness of the world's sins—all this becomes something in which we also participate. That is why in today's reading from the Apocalypse we hear Saint John say, «He has appointed us as a kingdom and as priests for God» (Rev 1:6). We are able to say the same thing on this Holy Thursday, and it is for this reason that we come to this chrismal liturgy on Holy Thursday morning: to feel that we are priests, a priestly people who through baptism are identified with that Christ who is the Divine Redeemer.

The Second Vatican Council captures well this beautiful scene of the cathedral filled with the faithful and presided over by his priests when it states, «Christ instituted this new covenant—the new testament, that is to say—by calling together a people made up of Jews and Gentiles, making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit. This was to be the new people of God, for those who believe in Christ are reborn not from a perishable seed but from an imperishable seed through the word of the living God, and not from flesh, but from water and the Holy Spirit, and thus are they finally established as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people» (LG 9).

What a wonderful honor it is for you, dear sisters and brothers, and for all of us who are children of the flesh! Our Christian parents brought us to the baptismal waters to be incorporated into this royal race, this priestly people! This is a morning when we should go and kiss the baptismal font of our parish church and gratefully embrace our dear mother who with our godparents carried us to be baptized and to be made Christians. This is a morning when we should say to the Lord, «Thank you for making me a partaker of this dignity. Even though I'm poor and insignificant in the eyes of the world, this participation in the dignity of your eternal priesthood makes me great and enables me to be part of this people that renders true worship to you».

But here we discover the mysterious difference that separates and at the same time unites these two categories of priests we see here in the cathedral. Here around the altar are the presbyters, and all of you are the priestly people. The Council goes on to tell us, «Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial and hierarchical priesthood are none the less ordered one to another; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ» (LG 10). You are a priestly people, and we have been chosen from among the people to serve you as priests. We received the imposition of hands that gave us a priestly character so that we could represent Christ and guide the people. That is the essential difference; it does not distinguish and separate us but rather makes us mutually complementary.

Here I want to highlight a wonderful gesture of Pope John Paul II, namely, his letter dated on Palm Sunday so that it would reach all the priests on Holy Thursday. It is called simply, «A Letter from the Supreme Pontiff to All the Priests of the Church on the Occasion of Holy Thursday». In our printing office we were able, thank God, to make copies and deliver them today not only to the priests of the archdiocese but also to the four dioceses of El Salvador. This excellent letter from the pope expresses the same thoughts as the Council does when it states, «Let us not concentrate on the theoretical aspect of this essential distinction between the common priesthood and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood. Rather, let us look at the existential aspect of love, service, and commitment» (NI 4). The Holy Father stresses that this difference helps us see the full richness of the eternal priesthood of Christ. Just as the sun pours its rays onto countless different creatures, so does the priesthood of Christ take on many diverse forms, becoming embodied in parents, in professionals, in the world of the laity, and in the special realm of hierarchical or ministerial priests.

The pope analyzes these two words—hierarchical and ministerial—in order to explain that the difference is more than anything a difference that should fill us with love and gratitude for it allows us to know both the richness of Christ's priesthood and the service that comes

from our own priesthood. For if the Lord has chosen us from among people and has authorized us to act in his name in the midst of the people, then his purpose is to sanctify, teach, and guide this people toward their true goal. When we speak of hierarchical priesthood, there is no question of superior power. Rather, it is characterized by the service of presiding and governing, and that means governing in the sense of service, leading, showing the people the true path.

The pope then reminds us in this superb letter that there is a certain pastoral charism which we priests have by virtue of our special vocation and anointing (NI 5). On the day of our priestly ordination we are configured with the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep (John 10:11), and we are thus obliged to exercise a more generous zeal and concern for the kingdom of God than are you lay people. We explain to you the responsibility involved in the common priesthood of baptism, but because of our priesthood we carry a heavier responsibility, even though it becomes lighter when your own common priesthood works in close collaboration with our ministerial priesthood.

The Holy Father speaks also about our commitment to celibacy. But before discussing the pros and the cons of priests who are celibate or married, the pope invites us to see celibacy as a charism that a man embraces only after testing to see whether he truly has it. Since the church makes it a condition of priesthood, the man should accept it freely. Rather than canonical norms or other considerations, it is a question of honoring a promise made to Jesus Christ. The pope says that we must consider it «our pledge of love for Jesus Christ and the church» (NI 5). When there is love, one does not look for reasons. When there is love, there is commitment, and the joy of serving and following Christ makes it possible to bear with the pain that the charism brings: not having a home, not having a family, not having your name passed on. The priest, however, shares in the great paternity of God, and he bears testimony to the world of the maturity and freedom that come from making an option for God. By honoring the promise he has made, he gives a true expression of personal dignity.

Finally, the pope tells the priests that they have put their hand to the plow and should not look back (Luke 9:62). With generosity they should follow the furrow and work with the Lord. There are those, however, who do look back as if regretting the generous offer they made to the Lord. They enter into crisis and doubt their vocation and their identity. The pope invites us all to consider a perspective that moved me deeply: «Think of the places where people anxiously await a priest, the places where for years they have felt his absence but never stop desiring his presence». I imagine the pope in his pastoral visits around Poland often encountered scenes such as the one he describes here: «Sometimes it happens that the people meet in an abandoned sanctuary and place on the altar a stole they carefully preserved. They recite all the prayers of the eucharistic liturgy, and then at the moment that corresponds to the words of consecration, there descends upon them a profound silence, sometimes interrupted by a sigh. So ardently do they desire to hear the words that only the lips of a priest can efficaciously utter» (NI 10). Only the priest can say, «This is my Body» and give to the people of God the Body that nourishes. When there is no priest—the scene he describes is touching—the people can recite all the prayers of the Mass, but when they reach the moment of consecration, they keep silence. No one can say anything—the priest is missing.

«They earnestly desire the communion of the Eucharist, which they can participate in only by virtue of the priest's ministry. They also anxiously wait to hear the divine words of

forgiveness that only a priest can utter: “I absolve you of your sins”. They feel the absence of a priest in their midst profoundly! There is no lack of places in the world like this. Therefore, if some of you»—the pope is speaking directly to us priests—«if some of you have doubts about the meaning of your priesthood, if you think that it has now become socially irrelevant, think about these places!» (NI 10).

I tell you that this letter, especially this last reflection, makes me feel a strong desire to keep serving the Lord. And I ask the holy people of God to think especially about scenes like this one. So many towns and so many villages have to keep silent and refrain from pronouncing the words that only the priest can pronounce! Pray that our dear fellow priests are given the holy perseverance and fervor they need and that our homes will produce vocations to fill the empty posts.

The sacraments

Finally, sisters and brothers, this homage to the Holy Spirit will be represented in the urns that will soon be brought to the altar. The three oils—the chrism, the oil of the sick, and the oil of the catechumens—are like the fountains of our sacramental life; they are like the rivers that the prophet saw flowing from the sanctuary (Ezek 47:1-12). They are consecrated here in the cathedral, the liturgical center of unity for the whole diocese, and from here they are carried by the priests to serve as rivers of grace and holiness. With these oils will be administered the seven sacraments which give our people their priestly life. Baptism brings us to life as children of God. Confirmation gives us the special force of the Spirit of God. The Eucharist unites our lives with the sacrifice of Christ. Penance reconciles us with God and with the church. The anointing of the sick joins our human weakness and suffering to the redeeming passion of Christ and makes the sick person a redeeming member of the crucified Christ. Holy orders enables a child of the people of God to shepherd the church of the Lord in the name of Christ. And matrimony is a sign of our participation in the fruitful love that unites Christ to his church and is reflected in the Christian home.

How beautiful is this reality of the Holy Spirit giving life through these seven rivers of the city of God, the seven sacraments! That is why we have come to the cathedral this morning: to experience ourselves as the people of God, together with our priests, being sanctified for God. Let us proceed now, sisters and brothers, with this wonderful chrismal liturgy of Holy Thursday. It is a liturgy which we have the privilege of celebrating in the cathedral but which is not celebrated in any other church of the diocese. In this way we express the unity of our faith and of our Christian life. Since we are at the heart of our covenant with God, let us reaffirm our respect and our obedience to the Holy Spirit who touches the heart of every Christian, inviting all of us to be active and worthy members of this priestly people from whom God expects great things.

May our Christian lives truly do honor to the dignity that Christ has conferred on us, together with his love. In handing himself over to death on the cross, he shared out his priestly dignity in the common priesthood of the faithful. This morning our mother the church convokes the priests to whom the Lord has given this privilege for the sake of serving you better. They unite around the bishop, who more than anyone needs the help of the priests and the priestly people, and they reaffirm before one and all the sublime commitment which flows from Christ’s priesthood, which has become ours.