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"Experience the joy of the presence of God"

In his 22 February general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on apostolic zeal, speaking about the Holy Spirit, the protagonist of the proclamation.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

In our catechetical itinerary on the passion for evangelizing, today we start from the words of Jesus that we have heard: ‘Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (*Mt 28:19*).

‘Go,’ says the Risen One, ‘not to indoctrinate, not to make proselytes, no, but to make disciples, that is, to give everyone the opportunity to come into contact with Jesus, to know and love Him freely. Go and baptise: to baptise means to immerse; and therefore, before indicating a liturgical action, it expresses a vital action: to immerse one’s life in the Father, in the Son, in the Holy Spirit; to experience every day the joy of the presence of God who is close to us as Father, as Brother, as Spirit acting in us, in our very spirit.’ To be baptised is to immerse oneself in the Trinity.

When Jesus says to His disciples – and also to us – ‘Go!’, He is not just communicating a word. No. He communicates *the Holy Spirit* at the same time, because it is only thanks to Him, thanks to the Spirit, that one can receive Christ's mission and carry it out (cf. Jn 20:21-22). The Apostles, in fact, out of fear, remain closed up in the Upper Room until the day of Pentecost arrives and the Holy Spirit descends upon them (cf. *Acts 2:1-13*). And in that moment the fear is gone, and with His power those fishermen, mostly unlettered, will change the world. ‘But if they can’t speak...?’ But it is the word of the Spirit, the strength of the Spirit that bears them onward to change the world. The proclamation of the Gospel, therefore, is only realized in the power of the Spirit, who precedes the missionaries and prepares hearts: He is ‘the engine of evangelisation.’

We discover this in the Acts of the Apostles, where on every page we see that *the protagonist of the proclamation* is not Peter, Paul, Stephen, or Philip, but is the Holy Spirit. Staying with the book of Acts, a pivotal moment in the beginning of the Church is recounted, which can also say a lot to us. Then, as now, tribulations were not lacking, beautiful moments and not so beautiful moments, joys were accompanied by worries, both of these. One worry in particular: how to deal with the pagans who came to the faith, with those who did not belong to the Jewish people, for example. Were they or were they not bound to observe the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law? This was no small matter for those people. Two groups were thus formed, between those who considered the observance of the Law indispensable and those who did not. In order to discern, the Apostles gathered in what was called

the ‘Council of Jerusalem,’ the first in history. How to resolve the dilemma? They might have sought a good compromise between tradition and innovation: some rules are observed, and others are left aside. Yet the Apostles do not follow this human wisdom to seek a diplomatic balance between the one and the other, they don’t follow this, but adapting to the work of the Spirit, who had anticipated them by descending upon the pagans as He had upon them.

And so, removing almost every obligation related to the Law, they communicate the final decisions, made – and this is what they write – ‘by the Holy Spirit and by us’ (cf. *Acts* 15:28), and this went out, ‘the Holy Spirit with us,’ and the Apostles always acted in this way. Together, without being divided, despite having different sensitivities and opinions, they listen to the Spirit. And He teaches one thing, which is

also valid today: every religious tradition is useful if it facilitates the encounter with Jesus, every religious tradition is useful if it facilitates the encounter with Jesus. We could say that the historic decision of the first Council, from which we also benefit, was motivated by a principle, *the principle of proclamation*: everything in the Church must be conformed to the requirements of the proclamation of the Gospel; not to the opinions of the conservatives or the progressives, but to the fact that Jesus reaches people's lives.

Therefore, every choice, every usage, every structure, and every tradition is to be evaluated on the basis of whether they favour the proclamation of Christ. And when decisions are found in the Church – for example, ideological divisions: ‘I am conservative because...’ ‘I am progressive because...’ But where is the Holy Spirit? Be careful that the Gospel is not an idea, the Gospel is

not an ideology: the Gospel is a proclamation that touches your heart and makes you change your heart, but if you take refuge in an idea, in an ideology, whether right or left or centre, you are making the Gospel a political party, an ideology, a club of people. The Gospel always gives you this freedom of the Spirit that acts within you and carries you forward. And how much it requires of us today to take hold of the freedom of the Gospel and allow ourselves to be carried forward by the Spirit.

In this way the Spirit sheds light on the path of the Church, always. In fact, He is not only the light of hearts; He is the light that orients the Church: He brings clarity, helps to distinguish, helps to discern. This is why it is necessary to invoke Him often; let us also do so today, at the beginning of Lent. Because, as Church, we can have well-defined times and spaces, well-organised

communities, institutes and movements, but without the Spirit, everything remains soulless. The organization... it won't do, it's not enough: it is the Spirit that gives life to the Church. The Church, if it does not pray to Him and invoke Him, closes in on itself, in sterile and exhausting debates, in wearisome polarisations, while the flame of the mission is extinguished. It is very sad to see the Church as if it were nothing more than a parliament. The Church is something else. The Church is the community of men and women who believe and proclaim Jesus Christ, but moved by the Holy Spirit, not by their own reason. Yes, you use your reason, but the Spirit comes to enlighten and move it. The Spirit makes us go forth, urges us to proclaim the faith in order to confirm ourselves in the faith, to go on mission to discover who we are. That is why the Apostle Paul recommends: 'Do not quench the

Spirit' (1 Thess 5:19). Do not quench the Spirit. Let us pray to the Spirit often, let us invoke him, let us ask him every day to kindle his light in us. Let us do this before each encounter, to become apostles of Jesus with the people we find. Don't quench the Spirit, either in the community or in each one of us.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us start, and start anew, as Church, from the Holy Spirit. 'It is undoubtedly important that in our pastoral planning we start from sociological surveys, analyses, the list of difficulties, the list of expectations and even complaints, this must be done, in order to touch reality. However, it is far more important to start from the *experiences of the Spirit*: that is the real departure. And it is therefore necessary to seek them out, list them, study them, interpret them. It is a fundamental principle that, in the spiritual life, is called the

primacy of consolation over desolation. First there is the Spirit who consoles, revives, enlightens, moves; then there will also be desolation, suffering, darkness, but the principle for adjusting in the darkness is *the light of the Spirit*' (C. M. Martini, *Evangelising in the Consolation of the Spirit*, 25 September 1997). This is the principle to guide ourselves in things we do not understand, in confusions, even in such great darkness, it is important. Let us ask ourselves, each one of us, let us ask ourselves if we open ourselves up to this light, if we give it space: do I invoke the Spirit? Each of us can answer within ourselves. How many of pray to the Spirit? 'No, Father, I pray to Our Lady, I pray to the Saints, I pray to Jesus, sometimes I pray the Our Father, I pray to the Father...' And the Holy Spirit? Don't you pray to the Holy Spirit, who is the one who moves your heart, who brings you

consolation, who brings you the desire to evangelize, undertake mission? Do I let myself be guided by Him, who invites me not to close in on myself but to bear Jesus, to bear witness to the primacy of God's consolation over the desolation of the world? May our Lady, who has understood this well, help us to understand it.

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