

# *The Outpouring or Baptism in the Spirit*

**B**efore speaking about the baptism, or outpouring, in the Spirit, I think it is important to understand what the renewal in the Spirit is, where this experience happens and what constitutes its strongest effect. Then we will better understand that the outpouring is not an event in and of itself but rather the beginning of a journey whose aim is the profound renewal of life in the Church.

## **Renewal in the Spirit**

The expression *renewal in the Spirit* has two biblical equivalents in the New Testament. To understand the soul of the charismatic movement, its profound inspiration, we must primarily search the Scripture. We need to discover the exact meaning of this phrase that is used to describe the experience of the renewal.

The first text is in Ephesians 4:23–24: “Be renewed in the spirit of your minds and... clothe yourselves with the

new self.” Here the word *spirit* is written with a small s, and rightly so, because it indicates *our* spirit, the most intimate part of us (the spirit of our minds), which Scripture generally calls the heart. The word *spirit* here indicates that part of ourselves that needs to be renewed in order for us to resemble Christ, the New Man *par excellence*. “Renewing ourselves” means striving to have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had (see Philippians 2:5), striving for a new heart.

This text clarifies the meaning and the aim of our experience: The renewal should be, above all, an interior one, one of the heart. After the Second Vatican Council, many things were renewed in the Church: liturgy, pastoral care, the *Code of Canon Law* and religious constitutions and attire. Despite their importance, these things are only the antecedents of true renewal. It would be tragic to stop at these things and to think that the whole task had been completed.

What matters to God is people, not structures. It is souls that make the Church beautiful, and therefore she must adorn herself with souls. God is concerned about the hearts of His people, the love of His people, and everything else is meant to function as a support to that priority.

Our first text is not enough, however, to explain the phrase *renewal in the Spirit*. It highlights our obligation to renew ourselves (“be renewed!”) as well as what must be renewed (the heart), but it doesn’t tell us the “how” of renewal. What good is it to tell us we must renew ourselves if we are not also told *how* to renew ourselves? We need to know the true author and protagonist of the renewal.

Our second biblical text, from Titus, addresses that precise issue. It says that God “saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

Here *Spirit* has a capital S because it points to the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. The preposition “by” points to the instrument, the agent. The name we give to our experience signifies, then, something very exact: renewal by the work of the Holy Spirit, a renewal in which God, not man, is the principal author, the protagonist. “I [not you]” says God, “am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5); “My Spirit [and only He] can renew the face of the earth” (see Psalm 104:30).

This may seem like a small thing, a simple distinction, but it actually involves a real Copernican revolution—a complete reversal that people, institutions, communities and the whole Church in its human dimension must undergo in order to experience a genuine spiritual renewal.

We often think according to the Ptolemaic system: its foundation consists in efforts, organization, efficiency, reforms and good will. The earth is at the center of this scheme, and God comes with His grace to empower and crown our efforts. The sun revolves around the earth and is its vassal; God is the satellite of man.

However, the Word of God declares, “We need to give the power back to God” (see Psalm 68:35) because the “power belongs to God” (Psalm 62:11). That is a trumpet call! For too long we have usurped God’s power, managing it as though it were ours, acting as though it were up to us to govern the power of God. Instead, we need to

revolve around the sun. That's the Copernican revolution I'm talking about.

Through that kind of revolution, we recognize, simply, that without the Holy Spirit we can do nothing. We cannot even say, "Jesus is Lord!" (see 1 Corinthians 12:3). We recognize that even our most concerted effort is simply the effect of salvation, rather than its cause. Now we can begin to really "lift up our eyes" and to "look up," as the prophet exhorts (see Isaiah 60:4), and to say, "I lift up my eyes to the hills— / from where will my help come? / My help comes from the LORD, / who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:1–2).

The Bible often repeats the command of God, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy!" (Leviticus 19:2; see Leviticus 11:44; 1 Peter 1:15–16). But in one place in that very same book of Leviticus, we find a statement that explains all the others: "I am the LORD; I sanctify you!" (Leviticus 20:8). I am the Lord who wants to renew you with My Spirit! Let yourselves be renewed by My Spirit!

### **Baptism: An "Unreleased" Sacrament**

Now let's move on to the theme of the baptism of the Spirit. This outpouring is not a sacrament, but its name implies a connection to a sacrament and even more than one: the sacraments of Christian initiation. The outpouring actualizes or, in other words, renews Christian initiation. The fundamental connection, however, is with the sacrament of baptism.

The term "baptism in the Spirit" indicates that there is something here that is basic to baptism. We say that the outpouring of the Spirit actualizes and revives our

baptism. To understand how a sacrament received so many years ago and usually administered in infancy can suddenly come alive and be revived and release such energy as we see on the occasions of outpouring, we must recall some aspects of sacramental theology.

Catholic theology can help us understand how a sacrament can be valid and legal but “unreleased.” A sacrament is called “unreleased” if its fruit remains bound, or unused, because of the absence of certain conditions that further its efficacy. One extreme example would be the sacrament of marriage or of holy orders received while a person is in the state of mortal sin. In those cases, such sacraments cannot confer any grace on a person. If, however, the obstacle of sin is removed by repentance, the sacrament is said to revive (*reviviscit*) due to the faithfulness and irrevocability of the gift of God. God remains faithful even when we are unfaithful, because He cannot deny Himself (see 2 Timothy 2:13).

There are other cases in which a sacrament, while not being completely ineffective, is nevertheless not entirely released: It is not free to work its effects. In the case of baptism, what is it that causes the fruit of this sacrament to be held back?

Here we need to recall the classical doctrine about sacraments. Sacraments are not magic rites that act mechanically, without people’s knowledge or collaboration. Their efficacy is the result of a synergy, or collaboration, between divine omnipotence (that is, the grace of Christ and of the Holy Spirit) and free will. As Saint Augustine said, “He who created you without your consent will not save you without your consent.”<sup>1</sup>

To put it more precisely, the fruit of the sacrament

depends wholly on divine grace; however, this divine grace does not act without the “yes”—the consent and affirmation—of the person. This consent is more of a *conditio sine qua non* than a cause in its own right. God acts like the bridegroom, who does not impose his love by force but awaits the free consent of his bride.

### **God’s Role and Our Role in Baptism**

Everything that depends on divine grace and the will of Christ in a sacrament is called *opus operatum*, which can be translated as “the work *already* accomplished, the objective and certain fruit of a sacrament when it is administered validly.” On the other hand, everything that depends on the liberty and disposition of the person is called *opus operantis*; this is the work yet to be accomplished by the individual, his or her affirmation.

The *opus operatum* of baptism, the part done by God and grace, is diverse and very rich: remission of sins; the gift of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity (given in seed form); and divine sonship. All of this is mediated through the efficacious action of the Holy Spirit. In the words of Clement of Alexandria:

Once baptized, we are enlightened; enlightened, we are adopted as sons; adopted, we are made perfect; made perfect, we receive immortality.... The operation of baptism has several names: grace, enlightenment, perfection, bath. It can be called a “bath” because through it we are purified of our sins; “grace” because the punishments deserved for our sins are removed; “enlightenment” because through it we can contemplate the beautiful and holy light of salvation, and see into divine reality; “perfection” because nothing is lacking.<sup>2</sup>

Baptism is truly a rich collection of gifts that we received at the moment of our birth in God. But it is a collection that is still sealed up. We are rich because we possess these gifts (and therefore we can accomplish all the actions necessary for Christian life), but we do not know what we possess. Paraphrasing a verse from John, we can say that we have been sons of God until now, but what we shall become has yet to be revealed (see 1 John 3:2). This is why we can say that, for the majority of Christians, baptism is a sacrament that is still unreleased. So much for the *opus operatum*. What does the *opus operantis* consist of in baptism?

It consists of faith! “The one who believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). With regard to baptism, then, there is the element of a person’s faith. “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12).

We can also recall the beautiful text from the Acts of the Apostles that tells about the baptism of Queen Candace’s court official. When their journey brought Philip and the official near some water, the official said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Philip said, “It is permitted if you believe with all your heart” (Acts 8:36–37). (Verse 37 here, an addition from the early Christian community and not usually included in modern translations, testifies to the common conviction of the Church at that time.)

Baptism is like a divine seal stamped on the faith of man: “When you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, [you] were marked with the seal [this refers to baptism] of the promised Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 1:13).

Saint Basil wrote, “Truly, faith and baptism, these two modes of salvation, are bound indivisibly to one another, because if faith receives its perfection from baptism, baptism is founded on faith.”<sup>3</sup> This same saint called baptism “the seal of faith.”<sup>4</sup>

The individual’s part, faith, does not have the same importance and independence as God’s action because God plays a part even in someone’s act of faith: Even faith works by the grace that stirred it up. Nevertheless, the act of faith includes, as an essential element, the response—the individual’s “I believe!”—and in that sense we call it *opus operantis*, the work of the person being baptized.

Now we can understand why baptism was such a powerful and grace-filled event in the early days of the Church and why there was not normally any need for a new outpouring of the Spirit like the one we are experiencing today. Baptism was administered to adults who were converting from paganism and who, after suitable instruction, were in a position to make an act of faith, an existential, free and mature choice about their lives. (We can read about baptism in the *Mystagogical Catecheses*, attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem, to understand the depth of faith of those who were prepared for baptism.)

They came to baptism by way of a true and genuine conversion. For them baptism was really a font of personal renewal in addition to a rebirth in the Holy Spirit (see Titus 3:5). Saint Basil, responding to someone who had asked him to write a treatise on baptism, said that it could not be explained without first explaining what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, because the Lord commands,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19–20)

In order for baptism to operate in all its power, anyone who desires it must also be a disciple or have a serious intention of becoming one. According to Saint Basil:

A disciple is, as the Lord Himself taught us, anyone who draws near to the Lord to follow Him, that is, to hear His Words, to believe and obey Him as one would a master or a king or a doctor or a teacher of truth.... Now, whoever believes in the Lord and presents himself ready to be disciplined must first set aside every sin and everything that distracts from the obedience which is owed to the Lord for many reasons.<sup>5</sup>

The favorable circumstance that allowed baptism to operate in such power at the beginning of the Church was this: The action of God and the action of man came together simultaneously, with perfect synchronism. It happened when the two poles, one positive and one negative, touched, making light burst forth.

Today this synchronism is not operative. As the Church adopted infant baptism, little by little the sacrament began to lack the act of faith that was free and personal. The faith was supplied, or uttered, by an intermediate party (parents and godparents) on behalf of the child. In the past, when the environment around the baby was Christian and full of faith, the child's faith could develop, even if it was slowly. But today our situation has become even worse than that of the Middle Ages.

The environments in which many children now grow up do not help faith to blossom. The same must often be said of the family, and more so of the child's school and even more so of our society and culture. This does not mean that in our situation today normal Christian life cannot exist or that there is no holiness or no charisms that accompany holiness. Rather, it means that instead of being the norm, it has become more and more of an exception.

In today's situation, rarely, or never, do baptized people reach the point of proclaiming "in the Holy Spirit" that "Jesus is Lord!" And because they have not reached that point, everything in their Christian lives remains unfocused and immature. Miracles no longer happen. What happened with the people of Nazareth is being repeated: Jesus was not able to do many miracles there because of their unbelief (see Matthew 13:58).

### **The Meaning of the Outpouring of the Spirit**

The outpouring of the Spirit, then, is a response by God to the dysfunction in which Christian life now finds itself. In these last few years we know that the Church, the bishops, have also begun to be concerned that Christian sacraments, especially baptism, are being administered to people who will make no use of them in their lives. Thus, they have considered the possibility of not administering baptism when the minimum guarantees that this gift of grace would be valued and cultivated are absent.

We cannot, in fact, "throw our pearls before swine," as Jesus said, and baptism is a pearl because it is a fruit of the blood of Christ. But we can say that God is

concerned, even more than the Church is, about this dysfunction. He has raised up movements here and there in the Church that are proceeding in the direction of renewing Christian initiation among adults.

The renewal in the Spirit is one of those movements, and its principal grace, without doubt, is tied to the outpouring of the Spirit and what precedes it. Its efficacy at revivifying baptism consists in this: Finally a person is doing his or her part, making a decision of faith that is prepared through repentance. This allows the work of God to “be released” in all its power.

It is as though God’s outstretched hand has finally grasped the hand of the individual, and through that hand clasp, He transmits all His creative power, which is the Holy Spirit. To use an image from physics, the plug has been inserted into the outlet, and the light has been turned on. The gift of God is finally unbound, and the Spirit permeates Christian life like a perfume.

For the adult who has been a Christian for many years, this faith decision necessarily has the characteristic of a *conversion*. We could describe this outpouring of the Spirit, insofar as the person is concerned, either as a renewal of baptism or as a second conversion.

We can understand something else about this outpouring if we also see its connection with confirmation, at least in the current practice of separating it from the sacrament of baptism and administering it later. In addition to being a renewal of the grace of baptism, the outpouring is also a *confirmation* of baptism itself, a conscious “yes” to it, its fruit and its commitments. As such it parallels (at least in its subjective aspect) the effects of confirmation on the objective, sacramental level.