



"They laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:15)

July 2014: Reflection: Acts 8:15-20

Simon despite all his faults was still a perceptive man. After all, he recognized that the Apostles had a distinctive power, that anyone on whom they laid their hands received the Holy Spirit. He also knew that they could confer this power on others, which is in fact exactly what the Apostles did when they administered Holy Orders and appointed bishops to be their successors. He failed however to recognize that what was conferred through the laying on of hands was the gift of God and that it could never be obtained by money or even by merit. St. Paul reminds the bishop St. Timothy of this same gift of God which he received when St. Paul laid his hands on him: "Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands."

At times, perhaps many of us who are fully initiated Catholics can be much less perceptive than Simon! Peter and John anointed the faithful of Samaria with the Holy Spirit through the laying of their hands. But someone once laid hands on us as well, a legitimate minister, a priest or bishop, who received the gift of God from the Apostles through their successors. Just like Peter and John, this priest or bishop first prayed for us that we might receive the Holy Spirit and then laid his hands on us. He also anointed us with perfumed oil as a symbol of the anointing of the Holy Spirit and of being permanently "marked" as a person belonging completely to the Spirit from that point onwards. We are of course referring here to what the Church later began to call the Sacrament of Confirmation or Chrismation.

Before Pentecost, though they were commanded to do so, the Apostles had no strength, no supernatural power by which they could proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the Earth. In fact, while they were hiding in a closed room for fear of the Jews, they probably could not even dream of such a daunting task. How could they face the world when they could not even face the Jews? But they were "clothed with power from above" when the Holy Spirit came upon them. They were strengthened to proclaim the Gospel with all boldness, to endure persecution and even martyrdom for love of Christ. And they rejoiced in the Lord even through the worst of sufferings. In the Sacrament of Confirmation, we

are anointed by this same Spirit who once enlivened a fearful and cowardly group of disciples to become messengers to the ends of the Earth. The Spirit pours the love of God into our hearts, a powerful love that embraces us as God's beloved children. And this perfect love of God is precisely what casts out all the fear in our hearts. For, is there anything at all that a child of God could rightfully fear? This is why St. Paul reminds us, "you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship." We are truly beloved sons and daughters of the Almighty God, and we can even cry out to Him as "Abba! Father!" St. Paul tells us that all the blessings that the Father bestows on Christ are likewise bestowed on all of God's children. But he adds this reminder: "provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him." (Rom 8:15-17).

We have been anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit and made heirs with Christ; therefore, we can no longer fall back into fear. Rather, we must be bold to witness to Christ and yes even to suffer with Him. By our Confirmation, we are not only strengthened to proclaim Christ but we are also obliged to do so. The Catechism states, "by the sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed". Likewise, among the graces of Confirmation the Catechism includes, "to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross." Therefore we have received great Power from on high, but we have received it together with a "necessity laid upon us" to proclaim the Gospel (1 Cor 9:16). We have received a great anointing of the Spirit, but we have received it together with a participation in the sufferings of the Anointed One and the shame of His Cross. St. Paul advises St. Timothy, "Do not be ashamed of testifying to our Lord.. but share in suffering for the Gospel in the power of God.." (2 Tim 1:8). This is why a successor of the Apostles once laid his hands on us; this is what is called for by our Confirmation.

What would the world look like if we each lived out the responsibility of our Confirmation by the power of the Holy Spirit? The One Who baptizes "with the Holy Spirit and fire" once exclaimed, "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!" This is the desire of Christ. Let us then pray for ourselves and for each other, that we may be set ablaze with the fire of God's love, so that the very face of the earth may be renewed in the power of the Spirit.

"Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth."