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CATHOLIC RETREATS

STRENGTH OF THOUSANDS

A RETREAT GUIDE ON THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat Overview

We all remember Samson. He was one of the Judges, or rulers, of Ancient Israel after the Exodus and before the reign of King David. He was famous for his physical strength.

We all remember that he killed a lion with his bare hands, and that he wreaked havoc among the enemies of God's people, even destroying 1000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey as his only weapon. But we sometimes forget the Bible's explanation of how Samson was able to perform such amazing feats.



The Scriptures actually point out, before each of his victories over the enemies of God, that "... the spirit of the Lord rushed upon Samson" (Judges 14:6). The spirit of the Lord was the source of Samson's strength.

The spirit of the Lord was also the source of King David's greatness. When the prophet Samuel anointed him as the future king of Israel, the Scriptures use the same phrase as they used to describe what happened to Samson:



Then Samuel, with the horn of oil in hand, anointed him in the midst of his brothers, and from that day on, the spirit of the LORD rushed upon David.

— 1 Samuel 16:13, NABRE

In spite of their sins and failings, God gave Samson and David a mission to fulfill in the history of salvation. And he also gave them the power to fulfill that mission — he poured his own divine spirit into their hearts and minds. When we were baptized, each of us received a mission as well. And when we were confirmed, God poured his spirit into our souls to give us the strength we need to fulfill that mission.

That's what this Retreat Guide, *Strength of Thousands: A Retreat Guide on the Sacrament of Confirmation*, is all about.

- In the First Meditation, we will look at what this mission really is.
- In the Second Meditation, we will look at what happens in our own lives when we accept and live out this mission.
- And in the Conference, we will look at one of Our Lord's best-known parables in order to discover how to release the full power of the Holy Spirit in our souls.

To begin, let's turn the attention of hearts to the Lord, who is already thinking of us, and eager to spend this time with us. Let's ask him for all the graces we need, most especially, the grace to experience in a new and deeper way, the onrush of the spirit of the Lord, who comes to give each one of us the strength of thousands.

FIRST MEDITATION

What's Your Mission?

The sacrament of confirmation is the final sacrament of initiation into the Church, the Christian family, the sacrament through which we receive a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit that strengthens us to fulfill our Christian mission in this crazy, wonderful world.

Every year, the Church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to the first Apostles on the liturgical solemnity of Pentecost.

Pentecost occurs seven weeks after Easter, and on that day every Catholic church in the world performs a powerful symbolic gesture that most of us don't even notice.



FIRST MEDITATION

Moving the Paschal Candle

During the seven weeks of the Easter Season, we keep the large Paschal Candle, the Easter Candle, in the sanctuaries of our churches. We light it every time Mass is celebrated.

The living flame of the Easter Candle symbolically reminds us, throughout those weeks, that Christ is alive, that he rose from the dead to put an end to the darkness of sin, just as the sun rises each morning to put an end to the darkness of night.

The tall, white candle with a burning flame on top also reminds us of God's faithfulness throughout all of history, because it also symbolizes the two miraculous pillars — a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night — that guided the ancient Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt, through the desert, and into the Promised Land.



Now it is Christ, the Risen Lord, who is our pillar of smoke and pillar of fire, our sure guide out of slavery to sin, through this world of trials and temptations, and into the Promised Land of Heaven.

All of that, and more, is brought to mind by the bold presence in our sanctuaries of the Easter Candle, throughout the liturgical season of Easter. But then Pentecost comes along, and we pick up that symbolic Easter Candle, carry it back to the sacristy, and tuck it away in a corner. Until the following Easter, we only use it during baptismal ceremonies, when Christ's risen life is given for the first time to new members of the Church.

FIRST MEDITATION

Living Pillars

Isn't it kind of strange that we take away the Paschal Candle, symbol of Christ's resurrection, and put it out of sight? Does this somehow symbolize that after the Easter Season, the risen Christ is no longer among us? Certainly it does not.

In fact, the living flame of the sanctuary lamp, shining humbly beside the Tabernacle, is a constant reminder of the reality of Christ's presence among us, a reminder that he hasn't gone on vacation and left us on our own. So why do we take the Easter Candle away? And why do we take it away every year precisely on Pentecost?

Pentecost was the day when Christ's risen life was entrusted to the Church, was handed over to the Church, in a sense, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. As the Apostles were gathered in the Upper Room, in Jerusalem, nine days after Christ had ascended into heaven, the Bible tells us that

... suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit...

– Acts 2:2-4, NABRE

At that moment a new era began in the history of salvation, the era of a missionary Church, a Church that, strengthened and guided by the Holy Spirit, would continue the very mission of Jesus himself, the mission he entrusted to his followers with the last words he spoke before returning to heaven, when he told them:

... you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

– Acts 1:8, NABRE

That new period in the history of salvation is highlighted every year on the feast of Pentecost, which marks a change in liturgical seasons.

It is symbolized by the removal of the Easter Candle from the sanctuary, because with the coming of the Holy Spirit, that light of Christ, that fire of God's love that wants to save the world, was transferred into the heart of every Christian, of each one of us.

We take the Easter Candle out of the sanctuary because we ourselves, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, have become living Easter Candles, burning flames of wisdom, pillars of smoke and fire in the wilderness of this fallen world, pillars of Christian faith and love shining brightly amid the lies and selfishness of a post-Christian culture, pillars that Christ himself has sent out into the world as his ambassadors, as his messengers, as his witnesses.

That is our mission — to be, in a sense, living Easter Candles, shining Christ's light into every corner of the world. That is why we have been given the spirit of God himself through the sacrament of confirmation.



FIRST MEDITATION

Conclusion: Supernatural Strength

It's a supernatural mission, and so it requires supernatural strength, the strength of thousands. Here's how the Catechism describes this aspect of the sacrament of confirmation:



... it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross.

– CCC 1303

We don't carry out this mission in isolation from the reality around us. There are spiritual forces in the fallen world that work against us, that try to discourage us, distract us, and even destroy us. St. Paul often referred to the Christian mission as a battle and a fight. In fact, towards the end of his life he summarized his own Christian experience by saying: "... I have fought the good fight..." (2 Timothy 4:7, Knox Translation).

In a famous chapter from his Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul described this spiritual warfare, this reason why we need the grace that comes to us from confirmation. He wrote:



Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground.

– Ephesians 6:10-13, NABRE

In the next meditation, we will reflect on what living out this mission of being living Easter Candles can look like in our lives, but for now, let's simply take some time to contemplate this amazing reality: Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world and Lord of the universe, has given us his own Holy Spirit and invited us to be coworkers in building up his Kingdom, the only Kingdom that will last forever. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.



Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 When I say, "I am a Christian" or "I am a Catholic," what do I have in mind? What do I consider to be the key ingredients in my identity as a follower of Christ?
- 2 When I recall my experience of receiving the sacrament of confirmation, what comes most vividly to mind? Why?
- 3 How do I usually express my awareness of the fact that I have been given a share in Christ's own mission of leading people to salvation and holiness?

Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation



Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground. So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace. In all circumstances, hold faith as a shield, to quench all [the] flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

– Ephesians 6:10-17, NABRE



FIRST MEDITATION



I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. But you, be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance.

– 2 Timothy 4:1-8, NABRE



You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.

– Matthew 5:13-16, NABRE

SECOND MEDITATION

The Fruits of the Spirit

God poured the Holy Spirit into our hearts in a special way when we received the sacrament of confirmation, so that we could be his witnesses, shining in the darkness of this fallen world like Easter Candles. We carry out that mission in many ways.

Living our normal, everyday responsibilities with love, attention, and excellence is one way. As St. Paul puts it:



Whatever you do, do from the heart, as for the Lord and not for others...

— Colossians 3:23

What does that mean? To do everything from the heart, as for the Lord? It's something to think about. It could mean so many things:

- Being the best worker we can be at our jobs — cheerful and helpful.
- Engaging in meaningful ways at home with our families, or with our friends, or in our neighborhoods and communities.
- Living sacrificially, going beyond the mere call of duty, often doing more than we've been asked to do... It could mean so many things.

Another way of carrying out our Christian mission is to reach out to people in need — it might be a sick relative, a sorrowful friend, or an over-worked single mother.

And then there is the more direct way of sharing the gospel with people, explaining to them the things that Jesus has explained to us: how to find real meaning and purpose in life, how to experience God's forgiveness for past sins, and how to make a fresh start, how to avoid the pain and damage that comes from sin, from ignoring right and wrong; this too is how we shine in the darkness.

Through these behaviors and actions, which require overcoming our deep-seated tendencies to selfishness and self-absorption, we bear witness to Christ, we introduce him to people who do not yet know him, and we help those who do know him follow him more closely.



SECOND MEDITATION

Evangelizing Culture

And yet, there is still another way that Christians throughout history have lived this mission of being witnesses of Christ.

This is the way of working creatively and courageously to glorify God and make Christ's light shine within the very fabric of society, finding ways to reflect and encourage true Christian values through cultural activities.



When our Christian ancestors started building hospitals, orphanages, and schools, they were engaging in this form of evangelization.

When they brought their Christian faith to bear as they worked in pagan government, economics, medicine, and entertainment, they were evangelizing culture, creating new social traditions that reflected the gospel message.

SECOND MEDITATION

A Holy Discontent

And this wasn't just a good idea that occurred to a few talented members of the Church. It was the result of Christians allowing themselves to be guided from within by the inspirations and power of the Holy Spirit, who stirred up in their hearts what one spiritual writer has called a "holy discontent."

These Christians perceived a need in the world around them, and they boldly went forth to meet that need, to make a difference, to redeem some sector of their society through reshaping it in accordance with Christian values.

Throughout the history of the Church, over and over again, great works of evangelization have begun as a small stirring of the Spirit in the heart of a believer, a holy discontent that became an idea, a project, and finally, sometimes, a society-changing reality.

We, like the Christians who have gone before us, are called to live by that same Holy Spirit, whom we received in a special way through the sacrament of confirmation. We are called to give our Christian mission the importance it deserves: in our daily duties, in our relationships, and in responding generously to whatever "holy discontent" God may stir up in our hearts.

When we do, we allow God's grace not only to work through us to transform the world, but also to work within us, bearing in our own lives what St. Paul calls the "fruit of the Spirit." St. Paul lists these fruits in his Letter to the Galatians:



...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

– Galatians 5:22-23, NABRE

That's a portrait of spiritual maturity; it's a portrait of sanctity. And it's interesting that "fruit" is a natural extension of the "fruit-bearer" — an apple tree produces apples, not by force, but because it was created to do so, and will do so if it is healthy and given the right environment. St. Paul is describing what will come to us spiritually — if we are spiritually healthy — just as fruit comes to a tree naturally. It's not dramatic, but it's real, and it's fulfilling — it's what we are created for.



SECOND MEDITATION

Witness = Martyr

But it's not easy. Being witnesses of Jesus Christ in the same world that crucified Jesus Christ brings plenty of difficulties and hardships.

The word for “witness” in New Testament Greek is “martus” — it's the same word that gives us the English word, “martyr.” To be a witness for Christ is to be a martyr. Giving up our lives instead of renouncing our faith in and friendship with Christ — this is the fullest expression of our witness to him.

Church tradition recognizes two types of martyrs. Red martyrs actually shed their blood for their faith, while white martyrs persevere in their faith through difficult, though often hidden, trials. In both cases, that kind of faithfulness is never the result of merely human effort. Rather, it's the result of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the very strength of Christ to bear our crosses and, if necessary, to die on them.



During the reign of the Roman empire, when it was illegal to be a Christian (because Christians refused to worship the false, pagan Roman gods), the most striking witnesses, the most convincing Christian missionaries, were often the virgin martyrs.

These were young women who felt called by God to consecrate their entire lives to him, giving up even the legitimate joys of marriage and family life — they were spouses of the Lord.

At times, a powerful pagan ruler would desire one of these women, and try to cajole or threaten her into marriage. When she refused to abandon her spiritual spouse, Christ, she would be exposed as a Christian, turned in to the authorities, publicly tortured, and, if she still refused to renounce her faith, executed.

SECOND MEDITATION

Conclusion: The Story of St. Agnes

St. Agnes was one of these. She was just 13, from a wealthy, aristocratic Roman family, and very beautiful. All the young noblemen were vying for her hand in marriage, but she informed them that she had already consecrated herself to a heavenly husband, Jesus. At first they laughed at her, but when she persisted they became angry and vengeful.

Knowing she was a Christian, they denounced her to the governor, hoping that interrogations and the prospect of torture would weaken her resolve. They were wrong. She resisted the governor's subtle encouragements, reiterating that she could have no spouse but Jesus Christ.

Then she resisted his threats. Then she stood firm when they lit fires and wheeled out various instruments of torture and execution for her inspection, trying to intimidate her into renouncing her faith.

Exasperated, the governor had her sent to a brothel, and announced that the Roman youth were to have their way with her free of charge. But her countenance shone with such an otherworldly light that the scores of eager profligates dared not approach her.

Finally, she explained to the governor that "You may stain your sword with my blood, but you will never be able to profane my body, consecrated to Christ."

The entire city was in an uproar by this time, and the governor, perturbed by the courageous affronts of such a young girl, gave up his attempts to overturn her faith, and executed her. Tradition tells us that she went to her execution more joyfully than most people go to their weddings. To this very day, the entire Church celebrates the anniversary of her martyrdom every January 21st.

Most of us don't have to live out our faith on the dramatic sharp-end of the sword, true enough. But we do have to make hard choices to be faithful to our Christian mission in the day-to-day realities of our lives — choices like every Christian martyr has had to make.

The martyrs found the strength to make those choices not in themselves, but in God — and we can do the same.



The opening prayer of St. Agnes's anniversary Mass points this out:



Almighty ever-living God, who choose what is weak in the world to confound the strong, mercifully grant, that we, who celebrate the heavenly birthday of your Martyr Saint Agnes, may follow her constancy in the faith.

Yes, we know that we are weak: we are often careless in our Christian duties, cowardly in defending our Lord, and hesitant to respond to the holy discontent that God stirs up in our hearts.

But God knows that. It's why he has granted us the gift of the Holy Spirit, to give us a supernatural constancy, to give us a reservoir of wisdom and courage that will never run dry, to give us — if only we are willing to accept it — the strength of thousands.

In the conference we will look at three challenges that can drain that reservoir, but for now, let's take a few minutes to consider, prayerfully, what it really means to be Christ's witness, his martyrs, and to stir up our desire for the fruit the Spirit brings when we allow him to guide our lives. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.



Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 How well do I tend to fulfill the basic responsibilities of my daily life? To what extent do I follow St. Paul's maxim: "... whatever you do, do for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).
- 2 How sensitive am I to the needs of those around me, both my close friends and relatives, and also the people in my community and the larger society? What effect does this admonition of Jesus have in my daily life: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40)?
- 3 Is God perhaps stirring up a "holy discontent" in my heart? If so, how am I responding?

Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation

I will sprinkle clean water over you to make you clean; from all your impurities and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you so that you walk in my statutes, observe my ordinances, and keep them. You will live in the land I gave to your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God...

– Ezekiel 36:25-28, NABRE



For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another. I say, then: live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want. But if you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ [Jesus] have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit. Let us not be conceited, provoking one another, envious of one another.

– Galatians 5:13-26 NABRE

[After Jesus’ resurrection...] While meeting with them, he [Jesus] enjoined them [his Apostles] not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the holy Spirit.” When they had gathered together they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”... When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

– Acts 1:4-8, NABRE

CONFERENCE

The Parable of the Sower

At the beginning of his public life, Jesus taught his followers about three ways that the power he gives to us through the Holy Spirit can be stifled. He taught this lesson in his parable of the Sower. Let's read it over together, in the version that we find in the Gospel of St. Matthew.



On that day, Jesus went out of the house and sat down by the sea. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd stood along the shore. And he spoke to them at length in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. Whoever has ears ought to hear."

– Matthew 13:1-9, NABRE

One of the great things about this parable is that Jesus himself explained its meaning to us, in great detail — we know exactly what he was trying to teach us.

CONFERENCE

God is Faithful

In the first place, he wanted us to understand that he is faithful. In the parable, he is the sower, and the seed is the Word of God, the grace of God, the action of God in our lives.

God loves us, and he wants us to live life in the Holy Spirit, to live life to the full, to bear the fruit of the Spirit. And so, he is constantly sending us grace, constantly working in our souls, constantly inviting us to follow him along the path of holiness.

This is, in fact, one of the reasons that he invented the seven sacraments. In each sacrament, he guarantees to send grace into our lives, to link us more closely to himself and to the Church.

The effect of the sacraments, including the sacrament of confirmation, doesn't depend on the holiness of the priest, or on the intensity of our feelings, or on the beauty of the celebration; it depends on God's promise to use each sacrament as an instrument to touch our lives.

God is faithful and dependable — the grace of the sacraments is real, as real as the seed that the sower went out to sow.



CONFERENCE

God Respects Our Freedom

And yet, the seed will not grow and bear fruit all on its own. It requires good soil. This aspect of the parable points to the necessity of our free response to God's action in our lives.

He loves us so much that he actually respects our freedom. He will not force his grace upon us; he will not force his friendship upon us — we have to open ourselves up to receive it. The good soil of the parable is an image of an open heart, a “generous and good heart,” a “persevering” heart, as Jesus himself explains (Luke 8:15).



The more we meditate on this comparison, the more powerful it becomes. Think about it. A seed without soil, without a place to grow — what can it do? Nothing. It will remain unfulfilled, unfruitful, undeveloped. And soil without a seed, what can it do? Nothing. It will remain barren, unproductive, lifeless. Only together do the seed and the soil each reach their full potential and fulfill their purpose.

And that's how it is in our relationship with God. On the one hand, God has chosen to make his grace and salvation depend on our cooperation. On the other hand, we have been created in such a way that we will never find the fulfillment we yearn for except in welcoming God's grace and friendship.

The power of the Holy Spirit is guaranteed to yield its fruit in our lives, but only insofar as we accept it and activate it, just as the soil accepts and activates the seed.

CONFERENCE

The Ancient Enemy: The Devil

But Jesus has more to tell us in the parable. Yes, we are free to accept or reject God's action in our lives, and God lovingly respects that freedom, but we are not alone.

Three outside factors influence our freedom, impeding the action of God in our lives, if we let them, and sapping the power of the Spirit; Jesus warns us about them in this parable.

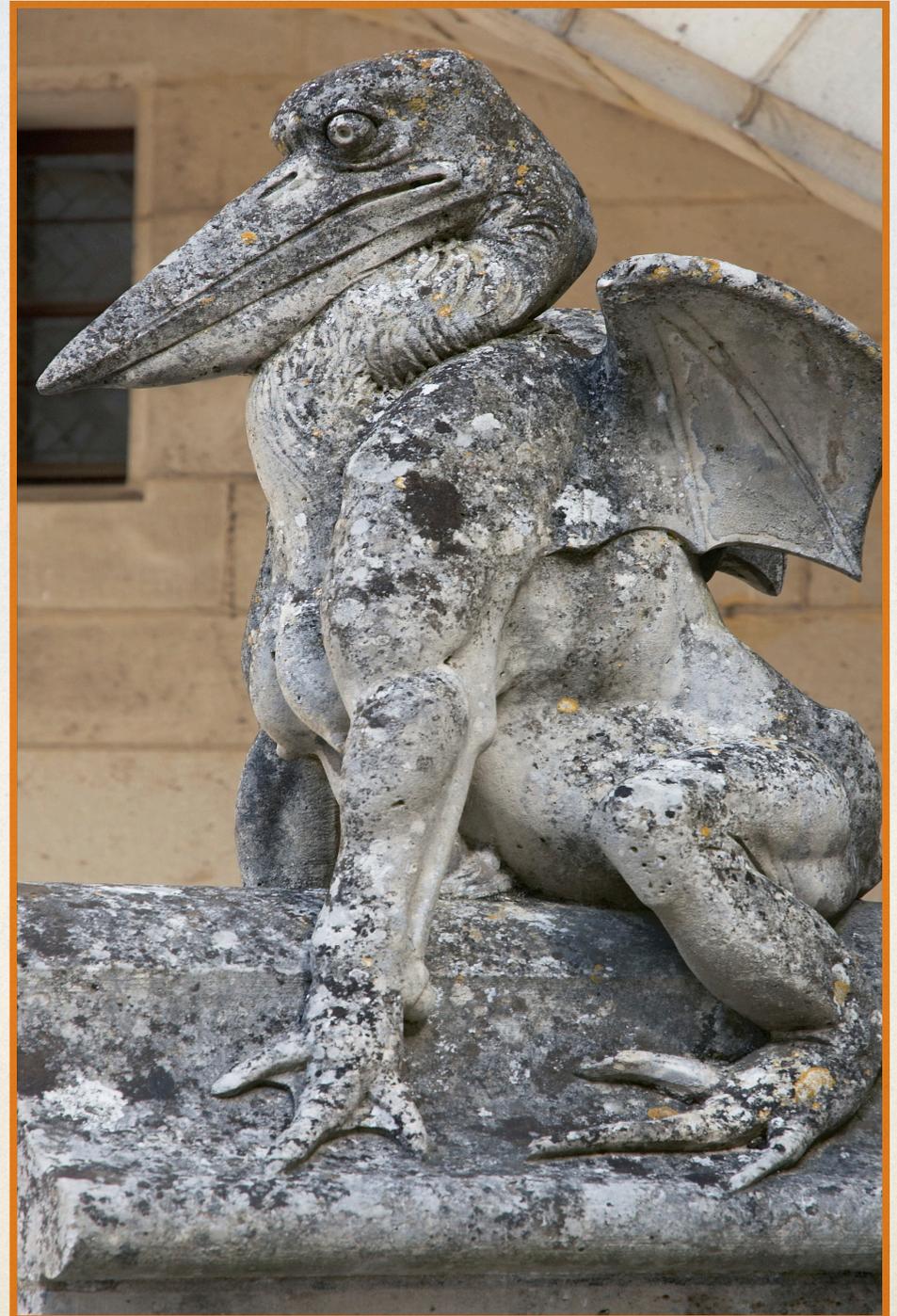
The first influence is the devil, represented by the birds that eat up the seed that falls on the path.

The devil is real. He and his army of fallen angels hate God and God's followers. They negatively influenced our first parents, Adam and Eve, successfully tempting them to disobey God's commandments, thereby breaking off their friendship with God.

The devil wants to do the same thing to us. So he is always planting doubts and deceptions in our minds:

- God won't mind if you sin just this once (as if sin were not a source of damage to the soul);
- God won't be able to forgive that sin (as if God's mercy were somehow limited);
- You don't really need the sacraments, you can grow spiritually on your own, in your own way, all by yourself (as if God's gift of the sacraments was some kind of mistake)...

He uses subtle lies like these to turn our hearts away from the life-giving truth and love of the Gospel.



CONFERENCE

Our Fallen Nature: "The Flesh"

The second negative influence that Our Lord mentions in this parable is our own tendency to laziness and comfort, an aspect of our fallen nature, what St. Paul often refers to as "the flesh."

In the parable, this factor is represented by the rocky soil, which impedes the growing plant from finding moisture when it is suffering under the heat of a pounding sun.



Many times, welcoming God's grace and obeying the inspirations of the Holy Spirit require self-sacrifice. Many times, following Christ along the path of meaning and fulfillment requires taking on a share of Christ's cross. But our ingrained love for comfort and self-indulgence resists self-sacrifice.

Unless we lovingly overcome that resistance, unless we rise above those inclinations to spiritual laziness, the work of the Holy Spirit in our souls will be cut short; it will dry up.

CONFERENCE

A Corrosive Culture: The World

The third influence is the world around us, the culture that is a product of our fallen human nature.

This is represented in the parable by the thorn bushes, which grow up side by side with the good grain, but steal all the nutrients from the soil, so that the seed never has a chance to grow to full maturity and bear its fruit.

Just so, if we allow ourselves to be swept up into the false ideals of the anti-Christian culture all around us, our missionary identity will never grow to maturity, and we will never experience to the full the fruit of the Spirit, which God so eagerly wants us to experience.

This fallen world promises happiness through money, or personal achievements, or successful careers, or popularity, or self-indulgent pleasures.

And so it invites us to invest our talents and creativity and time in pursuing those things above all else, even to the detriment of our true mission — the mission of being Christ's witnesses.

But the promise of the fallen world is a false promise; those things, good as they may seem, cannot give us the satisfaction that we truly yearn for, because God alone satisfies the human heart.

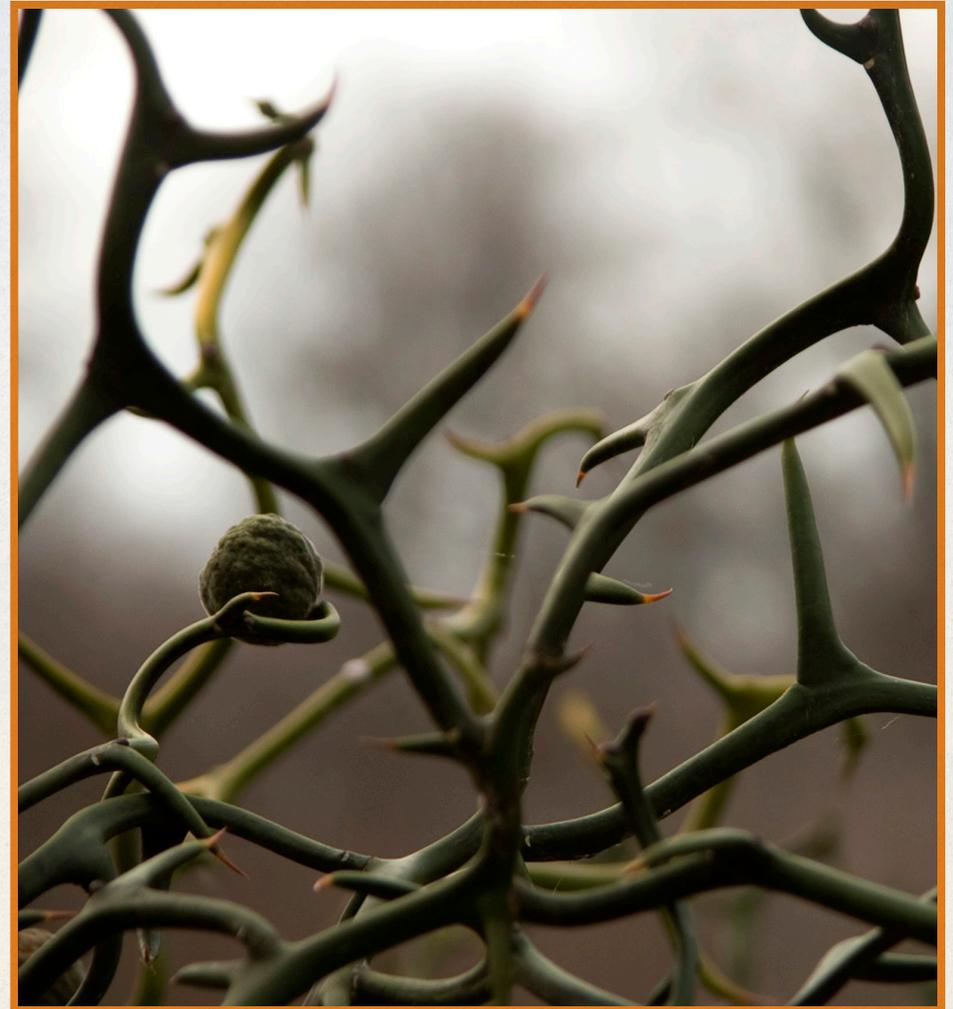
As one of my favorite lines from the Catechism puts it: "Man was created to live in communion with God, in whom he finds happiness" (CCC 45). Another line from the Catechism puts it beautifully as well:



The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for...

— CCC 27

If we truly want to experience the power of the Holy Spirit working in us and through us, if we truly want to feel the "Spirit of the Lord rush upon" us, as he rushed upon Samson, and King David, and so many of our fellow Christians through the centuries, then we need to firmly decide:



- To root out our inordinate attachments to the promises of the fallen world;
- To persevere in doing what is right and true and good, even when it means carrying our crosses alongside Jesus;
- And to turn away from the lies of the devil by filling our minds every day with the truth of God's love through prayer, and study, and good spiritual reading.

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A Post-Modern Parable

But the parable has yet another lesson — a lesson especially important for our digital age.

We have seen that the first threat to God's grace is the devil — represented in the parable by the birds that pick the seed up off the path. If we look more closely, however, we see that the devil only had a chance to nibble up those seeds because the soil on the path was hardened and packed down. The seed couldn't sink into that soil; it just stayed on the surface, where it was trampled on and exposed to the birds.

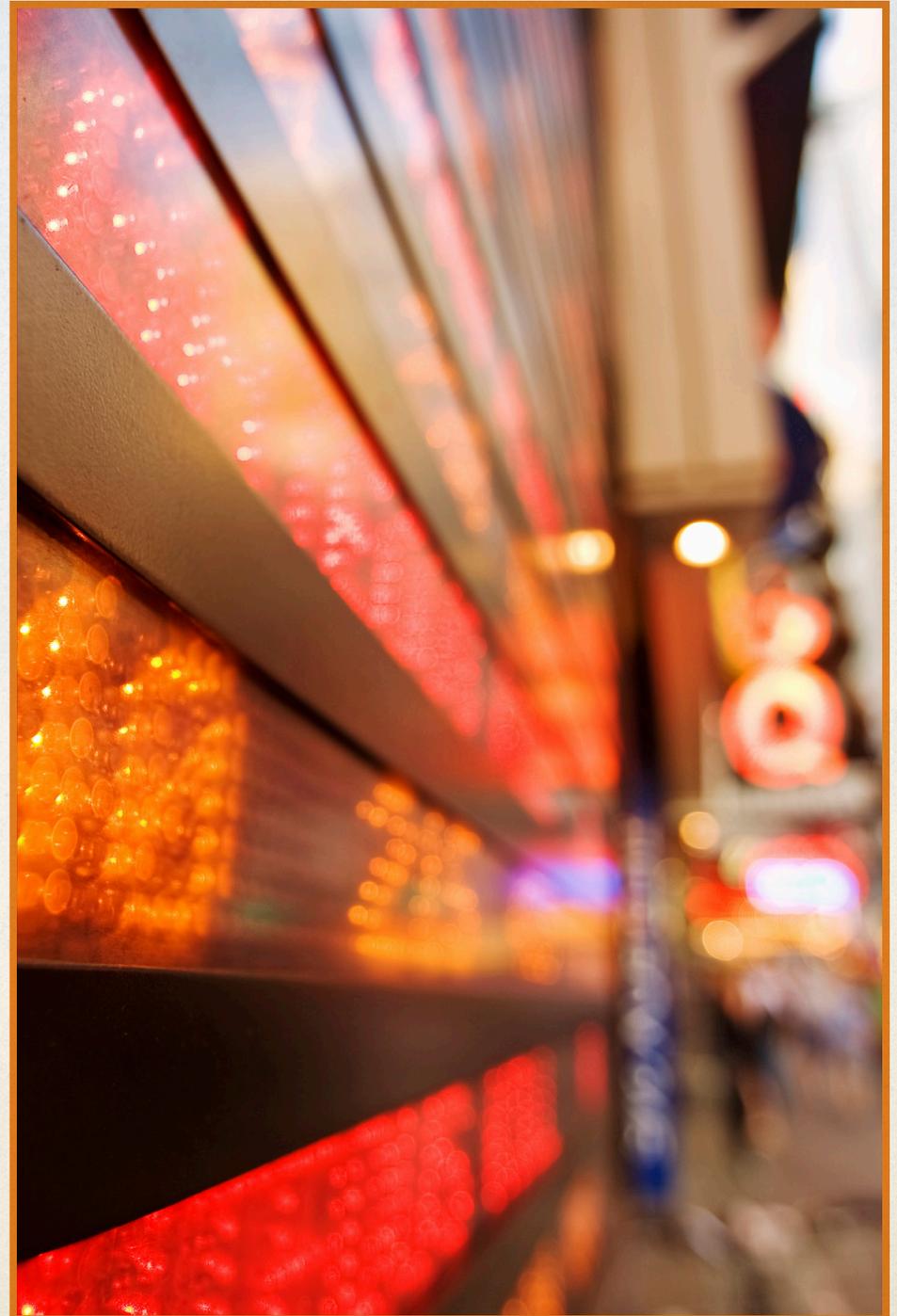
This is an image of the superficial soul, the person who never takes time to reflect, to contemplate, to think deeply; the person who lets himself be “distracted from distractions by distractions,” as T. S. Eliot put it.

In a culture more and more dominated by mass media and digital entertainment, this is perhaps the greatest danger of all. The constant flow of images, ideas, opinions, advertisements, chats, noise, music, entertainment, news, and everything else can, if we let it, create such a quantity of traffic in our minds that we become unable to savor truth and let it sink deeply into our hearts, even on the off chance that we recognize it amidst the din.

“My sheep know my voice,” said Jesus (John 10:27). But how can we hear His voice when we're surrounded by so much noise, and so many other voices clamoring to lead us?

The same mind we use all day long, the one we fill with idle chatter and sensationalistic news and everything else — that's the same mind we bring to prayer.

Unless we make room for silence, recollection, and depth in our lives, the graces God constantly sends us will bounce on the top of the beaten track and sit there, easy pickings for the devil.

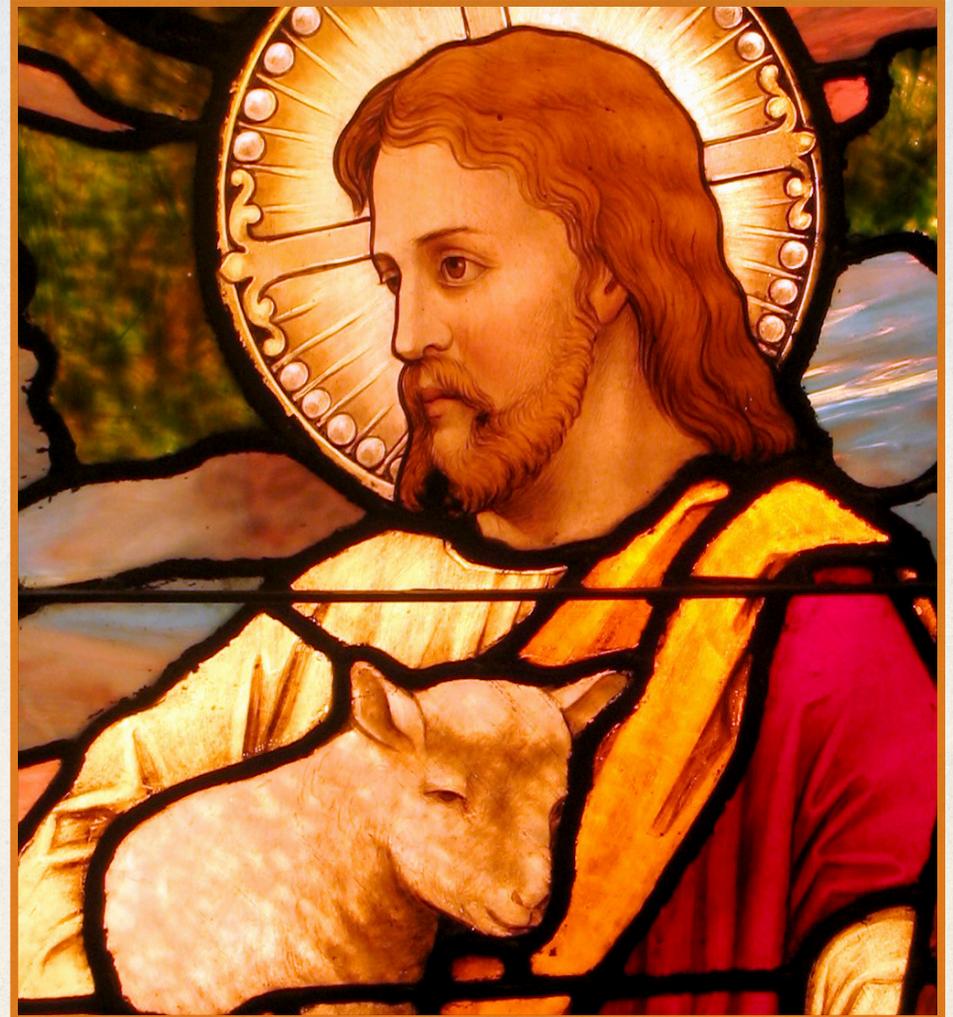


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Conclusion: A More Abundant Life

Jesus has given us this instruction, this parable, because he wants us to know what sorts of things will limit the full power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Understanding what hinders us will help us to avoid those things, so that we can truly experience what he so passionately wants to give us — a more abundant life. Those were his very words, John 10:10: “I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly!”

Take a few minutes now to prayerfully reflect on the personal questionnaire, which is designed to help you cultivate the soil of your heart.



Personal Questionnaire

- 1 How firmly do I believe that “At every time in every place, God draws close” to me (CCC 1)? How does this conviction affect my daily life?
- 2 What is my mission in life, and how do I feel about it?

3 Pope Francis wrote the following sentences in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. How do they apply to my life?

There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.

– EG 6

4 Pope Francis wrote that “When the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfillment” (EG 10). What does that mean for me?

5 What lies about myself and my relationship with God have I sometimes believed? What truths of the gospel can help me reject those lies?

6 How do I generally respond to difficulties and challenges that come my way when I am trying to be faithful to my Christian mission in the world?

7 Which crosses (self-sacrifices) are hardest for me to bear, and why?

8 How deeply rooted in my soul is the thorn bush of inordinately desiring material wealth and security?

9 How deeply rooted in my soul is the thorn bush of inordinately wanting to be liked and praised and flattered by other people?

10 How deeply rooted in my soul is the thorn bush of thinking that unless I achieve visible success my life will have no lasting meaning?



FURTHER READING

For Reflection & Prayer

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *The Sanctifier*
by Luis Maria Martinez
- *On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World*
by Pope John Paul II
- *In the School of the Holy Spirit*
by Fr. Jacques Philippe
- *Holy Discontent: Fueling the Fire That Ignites Personal Vision*
by Bill Hybels

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