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The Comforter is Come (I)

The article by Fr. Ralston is reprinted from 1999.

Such is the very simple-appearing message of this day. The very same Spirit which worked in Jesus for us is now given to us to work within us. The message of Whitsunday is therefore just about the most comfortable word we can ever hear. Comfort means strength. More precisely, it connotes power. What is the nature of the power of the Holy Spirit?

To answer this we must take a prior step and ask an even more basic question. What is the nature of power itself, of the ultimate energy of being? What is it like? What is its character?

We hold God to be omnipotent. All the power there is belongs to Him. There is no "god" worth speaking of as God who lacks power. Power is what makes a "god", and a god who is impotent is unthinkable. Elijah made this point to the prophets of Baal, and none of them survived to recognize it. But once this is granted there comes another question, the determinative one. What kind of power is it? How does the divine energy work? Is the power of God coercive; does it work by compulsion and force? Or is it determinative; does it work by direction?

Today is the great answer, insofar as the power of God is thought of in relation to us human beings. The power of God in relation to creatures such as we are is like what we have learned to call "love". It is what we find in Jesus, and in those who in any way share the quality of his purity and charity. What the divine energy is in relation to the whole of creation is beyond us. Dante rises to a vision of "the love which moves the sun and the other stars". It is a dizzying and sublime idea. And it may indeed be the truth. But here we approach the realm of thick darkness and impenetrable mystery, where God dwells in light unapproachable. We know only what we need to know.

Trying to define the love of God is very foolish, because it is impossible. It would mean the attempt to confine God within a definition; in other words, to name Him. We know what the power of God is like as it operates within human nature because we can observe it in

operation in Jesus. Looking at it from this point of vantage we can say a few things.

(I) The Gospel lesson for Pentecost tells us that such love is "not of this world". That is, our knowledge of the nature of God's power is not something derived from our ordinary experience of this world. Rather, it is something given in our experience. We do not in reality learn how to love. We are led to recognize it, to recollect it, to invoke it, to remember it, to be possessed by it.

Love is as absolute as creation itself. To do justice to the experience of love made manifest in the life and words of Jesus we must say: "Love was there before we were." Even more, without love we would not be here at all. It is not that "we love God, but that He first loved us." The proof of this is the fact of Jesus of Nazareth. When he says, "Before Abraham was, I am," we confront the absolute ontological priority of the power of God in Christ.

Our lives recall this absolute, creative love of God. Again and again, over and over we must say it: we do not and we can not in the strictest sense ever make love. We cannot produce it. It is there; it is real; its energy is omnipresent and dangerous. We participate in it; we recognize it when it finds us and becomes actual for us; we fall into it, and may be exalted or driven mad by it; but we never make it.

Love is real, It becomes actual for us whenever and in whatever way we are willing to acknowledge it and accept it and let it have its way with us. Love is the basic order of our human world. It is the form itself of human life. St. Francis knew love just this way. He once cried out, as if from God Himself: "Set love in order, thou that lovest me."

(II) Jesus states this as the absolute condition of life in him—that is, of being a Christian: "If a man love me..." This does not mean having sentimental affec-tions about Jesus. It means adhering in all truth of mind, in all integrity of will, and in all passion of heart to the kind of thing Christ is. It means both the inward and the outward imitation of him.

Without love for Christ we cannot keep his commandment to love one another. We are very ignorant and imperfect lovers. His love for us creates our love for him. The order of priority is categoric-ally strict. Christianity is not having the words of Jesus on our lips, saying "Lord, Lord" from morning 'till night. Christianity is only one thing. It is sharing in the substance of the Saviour, and that living substance is his life of love.

Why do we speak of our communion with the Lord as an act of eating and drinking his very body and blood? Why do we pray to be filled with his grace and heavenly benediction? Why do we ask for him to dwell in us and for us to dwell in him?

All these are metaphors and modes of union, not feeling. If you love Jesus you will keep his commandments and heed his words. No true lover has ever wanted anything but to please the beloved. St. Augustine knows all about it: "Love God, and do what you please." If you love God your pleasure will be to do what pleases Him. Your own sweet will will be the will of heaven, and what God wills for you will be your joy and delight and freedom and blessedness.

(to be continued)

The Rev. William H. Ralston, Jr.

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