

Session 1: Experiencing God's Love



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Fr. Pat Collins CM – Wednesday, 5th May 2021

Opening Prayer

Father in heaven, your Spirit is a Spirit of truth and love. Pour that same Holy Spirit into our bodies, minds and souls. Preserve us tonight from all illusions and false inspirations. Reveal your presence, your word and your will to us in a way that we can understand. And we give thanks that you will do this, while giving us the ability to respond, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Introduction:

I want to welcome you all to our Life in the Spirit Seminar. It is a spiritual adventure that will last for seven weeks. I have had a strong conviction that this is going to be a time of blessing for us all and God will do more than we can ask or think through his power being poured out upon us during the coming weeks.

- Tonight we begin with an introductory talk on the **love of God**.
- Then over the next three weeks we will have inputs preparing for the baptism in the Holy Spirit.
- On the fifth week we will have an opportunity of praying for those who have never been baptised in the Spirit. If you have already received this blessing we will pray for a deepening and strengthening of that grace.
- After that there will be two more seminars which will spell out some of the implications of having been filled with the Spirit.



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Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, the papal preacher says that in Europe, including Ireland, most Christians are in fact deists because, although they believe in God and an afterlife, they **neither know or relate to Jesus and his love in a personal way**. They **know about the person of Jesus without knowing him in person**. That being so, it is not surprising to find that in 2008 Pope Benedict XVI stated:

"Christianity is not a new philosophy or a new morality. We are Christians only if we encounter Christ ... Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One do we really become Christians ... Therefore, let us pray to the Lord to enlighten us, so that, in our world, he will grant us the encounter with his presence."

In my own case, I can say that it was only after my ordination that I had this personal encounter with Jesus when I was aged 29 and in spite of 8 years study of spirituality, theology and philosophy and being a practising Christian all my life – but I had not had a personal encounter with Christ.

A Threefold Faith Crisis



I think that in the Catholic Church at the moment there is a threefold faith crisis. The reason why many Christians have not yet developed an intimate personal relationship with Jesus is because they are suffering from **a faith crisis of head, heart and hands**. I spoke about this at the recent webinar on baptism in the Spirit.

- The **crisis of the head** is about **knowledge**. Many Catholics are unaware of **the core teachings of the Christian faith (the kerygma)**, all of which are about the person of Jesus and the salvation he offers us.
- The **crisis of the heart** has to do with **experience**. Even if some Catholics know a good deal about the person of Jesus, many of them have not yet experienced the liberating power of his mercy or the transforming power of his love. That would have been me after my ordination. I knew lots *about* Jesus but I had not *experienced* the power of his love in my life.
- The faith **crisis of the hands** has to do with **Christian action**. If the truth of the gospel has not fallen from the head to the heart, it is not surprising that Catholics often fail to act in a way that would be consistent with the teachings of Christ and his church.

I've heard it said that many Catholics live like baptised pagans, that their ethics are not much different from those of secular society – you can see this in the area of sexuality and in the area of business honesty and use of money. But the good news is

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that this crisis of the head, heart and hands can be overcome. This lack of personal intimacy can be ended. The Lord wants to end this threefold crisis by pouring out the Spirit of his incomprehensible mercy and love upon us. Let me give two examples of how this can happen.

Testimony One



Some time ago I visited Southport in England, just north of Liverpool. I was asked to celebrate the Eucharist in a small country church. When I got there I found that it was full. The gospel of the day began with the words, *"the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God"* (Lk 5:1). It struck me deeply and I decided to preach on that verse. I stressed the importance of having a heartfelt desire to have a personal relationship with Jesus while pointing out that such a desire is prompted within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus explained,

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44).

So that desire within us is what impels us to press in to Jesus in order to hear the word of God.

I believe that everyone who is here tonight is drawn by the Father. You did not come of your own accord but God drew you, just as John 6:44 says.

When I completed the homily, we had the prayers of the faithful. Instead of offering a prayer, a man in the middle of the congregation said in a very poignant way, *"I have been pressing in to Jesus all my life and haven't got any closer."* Later in the Mass when the time for Holy Communion arrived, this man came forward to receive. When he had done so, he crossed his arms over his chest as a sign that he wanted a blessing. When I looked at him, I remembered what he had said about pressing in to know Jesus. I put my hand on his head and said in the words of St. Paul,

"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:16-19).

The next day I was talking to a woman who said, *"do you remember the man who said yesterday that he could not get close to Jesus?"* "Yes" I replied. *"Well he has been crying on and off ever since."* At first I thought that perhaps his tears were those of frustration and disappointment. But before I could say anything, the woman explained that ever since receiving Holy Communion the man had experienced such a strong

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sense of Jesus and his love, that it had brought tears of joy to his eyes. Later in the day I met the man himself who confirmed what the woman had told me. Clearly, he had crossed the threshold of faith. Instead of knowing about the person of Jesus as heretofore, he had **come to know Jesus in person**. That, you know, is what we would call 'a spiritual awakening'. He woke up spiritually to a wonderful relationship with Jesus, the Jesus who loved him unconditionally. It was the beginning of a new beginning in his life. In a sense, he had no longer to 'press in'; he had arrived at his destination.

B. Testimony Two

Here is a second example. A few years ago I conducted a parish mission in a North Dublin district. One of the nights I spoke about the love of God. At one point I asked quite spontaneously, *"have you ever had such a strong sense of the love of Jesus for you that it brought tears of joy to your eyes?"* Although there were hundreds of people in the church only about three people raised their hands. I was saddened when so few hands went up. So I encouraged the congregation to ask the Lord for a revelation of Christ's love in their lives. Each afternoon I made myself available for two hours in a consulting room in the church for the sacrament of reconciliation or a chat. A woman came in and said that she wanted to tell me something. She said that she had heard my talk on the love of God and was deeply touched when I spoke about being moved to tears by the experience of Christ's love. While she had to admit to herself that she never had such an experience, she longed for it, and asked Jesus to grant her that grace. She said that the previous night she woke up at 3.00 am in the morning. She said she was so aware of a presence of love that tears came to her eyes. She said that after a few moments she knew that it was the love of Jesus for her. She was so emotional that she got out of bed because she didn't want to wake her husband. She went to another bedroom where she wept for joy, on and off for about an hour. She said that she was still full of joy. I could see that was true because she was beaming with happiness. Again, she had had a spiritual awakening. She knew in theory that God loved her, but clearly having asked for that special grace, the truth fell from her head to her heart during the night when she was asleep and when she woke up she was bathed and drenched in a sense of God's love for her and, not surprisingly, it filled her with joy.

The Unconditional Love of Jesus

You will have noticed that in both of the cases I have spoken about, what made all the difference was an **experiential awareness of the incomprehensible love of Jesus**. Jesus said on one occasion to his disciples:

"As the Father loves me, so I love you. Now remain in my love" (Jn 15:9).

Let's reflect on the implications of those astounding words. God the Father's infinite love for his divine and sinless son was wholly deserved because he was endowed with every perfection of divinity. However, what is truly amazing is the fact that Jesus turns to each one of us – he's saying it at this very moment - and declares that he has the same love for you and for me, even though we are mere creatures, and sinful ones at that. In other words in his mercy he loves us as if we were divine with every perfection of divinity. In Romans 5:7-8 St Paul stated that,

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"Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

In other words, Jesus loves us unconditionally.

In Romans 5:5 St Paul states that the love of God is "*poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.*" Speaking about the reliability of the love of Jesus St Paul said in Romans 8:38-39:

"I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, (may I say including the pandemic) will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Conclusion

During these four talks, we will be praying that each person tuning in will either **establish or deepen their personal relationship with Jesus as a result of a new outpouring of God's Holy Spirit of love.** This outpouring is sometimes referred to as baptism in the Spirit. Fr. Peter Hocken, who died just four years ago and who was a wonderful English theologian, described this grace in these words:

"Baptism in the Spirit is a life transforming experience of the love of God the Father poured into one's heart by the Holy Spirit, received through a total surrender to the lordship of Jesus Christ."

So, brothers and sisters, that's what the seminars are all about, not just knowing about the love of Jesus, but experiencing it in a liberating and life-transforming way through a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit into our hearts. When that happens, we wake up as never before to the person of Jesus and the love that he has for us.

Discussion starters

Begin by telling your sharing group:

Your name ... Where you are from ... Any other relevant detail you want to share to get to know one another.

Then I would invite you to keep these questions in mind:

1. What are you hoping to get from the seminars? Why so?
2. Have you ever wept for joy as a result of experiencing the love of Jesus?
3. Do you identify with the man who was pressing in to get closer to Jesus?

When you are in your group, it is better to talk in **personal** rather than in theoretical terms. As we open up to one another in trust, we are also opening up to the Lord, in preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

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The Coming Week

During the coming week we would ask you to spend **a short time each day reading and praying about the daily meditation point** either

- From the *New Life in the Spirit* booklet if you have one (The scan of Week 1's scriptures and prayers were sent to you with the Zoom code. I attach them again, so you can locate them easily with your notes of this 1st session)
- From the Reflection booklet which Sr Jane Forde already sent to you, with instructions for printing off the pages, in the same Zoom Code email.

I want to end with an image that came to me during prayer this morning of water beginning to flow in a dry river bed and how it was confirmed when I opened the scriptures at random at Isaiah 43:20,

"I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people."

Surely this is a symbol of the outpouring of the Spirit.