

Session 6: Growth in the Spirit



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Introduction and Opening Prayer

Welcome to everyone! I am particularly looking forward to the sharing groups and especially the general plenary session so we can hear what has been going on in your lives over the last week, since our Baptism in the Spirit night. Tonight our topic is *Growth in the Spirit*.

Lord Jesus, the good I wish to do, I cannot do, but you are living out the mysteries of your life in me. Enable me, by the same Spirit that animated your life of loving service, to continue and to fulfil your mission in my life. Give me the ability to accomplish whatever you ask me to do, in the knowledge that your power is made perfect in weakness and I thank you, that you will enable me to achieve even more than I can ask, or imagine, through the power of your Spirit at work within me. Amen.

- This prayer is partly based on the spirituality of St John Eudes

FOSTERING SPIRITUAL GROWTH

It has been rightly said that **Baptism in the Spirit is the beginning of a new beginning**. It is a spiritual awakening that leads to Christian discipleship. At this point the person aims to grow to be spiritually mature as a Christian. What I want to point out in this talk is that a number of activities can help in this ongoing process of growth.

1. Daily Scripture Prayer

The first thing to be mentioned – and it is the one that I would probably stress the most - is **the need for daily scripture prayer**. In 1 Corinthians 3:18 St Paul said,

"we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

The best place in which **to contemplate the Lord is in the word of God**, especially the New Testament. As 2 Timothy 3:16 says:

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"All Scripture is God-breathed (or God-inspired) and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

In order to contemplate the Lord in the Scriptures, the Church recommends the importance of regular reading of scripture in a **reflective and prayerful way**, for example, by means of *Lectio Divina* (which is Latin for 'divine reading').

Lectio Divina:

This Benedictine method of prayer (which by the way is the most highly recommended in all the Church documents) consists of four steps where, in the initial steps, the emphasis is on what **you do** and then, in the final stages, on **what God does**:

- ◆ **Read a chosen passage of Scripture.** It might be from the liturgy of the day or the following Sunday. Of course, one is free to choose any passage of Scripture. I would suggest that it should not be too long. It is a good idea to read it out loud or to read it under your breath.
- ◆ **Reflect on the text.** When one is reflecting, two questions are uppermost in one's mind:

- a) ***What did the inspired author intend to say?*** To have a study bible would be a great help in this regard as it would have notes at the end of each page by very good Scripture scholars and they would have information that we would not be aware of and these notes would give us a better idea of what the inspired author was intending to say.

An example I have given before is the lady at the well of Samaria. You will remember that Jesus said to her, 'why do you not go and get your husband?' and the lady says, 'I have no husband at the moment'. Jesus then says to her, 'You are right, you have had five and the man you are living with now is not your husband'. So there are, or have been, six men in her life and, of course, Jesus is the 7th significant man. In Jewish thinking, seven is the perfect number and what John is suggesting is that she is talking to the perfect man. She has been looking for the perfect man – and in vain it would seem over the years – but now she has met him in the person of Jesus.

A lot of people reading the Scripture would not see that, but if there is a note at the end of the page explaining a point, it can be very helpful.

- b) ***What is its relevance today?*** The second question you need to address is what is the relevance of this passage of Scripture for life nowadays?

These are the two areas that you need to reflect on and think about, but then you need to move on to the third point 'prayer', because the thoughts will stir up different desires, reactions and feelings within you.

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- ◆ **Pray and talk to the Lord:** Talk to the Lord about the thoughts, feelings and desires that have been evoked by the text.
- ◆ **Listening in a contemplative way:** Listen to the Lord in a contemplative way. As Ps 37:7 says:

"Be still in the presence of the Lord, and wait patiently for him to act."

At this point the praying person asks for a spirit of wisdom and revelation while saying, *"speak Lord your servant is listening"* (1 Sam 3:10). I think this is the most important part of the prayer. The first three stages of Reading, Reflecting and Praying are simply preparing you to be in this receptive mode of listening to what God would want to say to you.

An important discipline which aids listening is the ability to **quieten the body and mind**. When I am praying I try to sit with my back straight and my arms either folded or resting gently on my knees. Once I have assumed my prayer pose I try to remain completely still during the period of attentiveness without moving a muscle.

This usually lasts for ten to fifteen minutes. I find that if my body is quiet, my mind also tends to become quiet. I also seek to control my thoughts and my imagination, mainly by praying in tongues, so as to be in a state of silent receptivity. Many of you will have received the gift of tongues over the past week and I would encourage you to use it. When praying in tongues, you are not praying with your intellect; you are praying with your heart and your will and while your mind is inactive, you plough the heart with tongues, ready to receive the seed of God's word. So that is the most precious time during prayer, when God can give you an inspiration and reveal something to you that will be very helpful. St Vincent de Paul, who founded the order to which I belong, said that prayer,

"is a dialogue of the spirit, in which God interiorly teaches it what it should know and do, in which the soul says to God what he himself teaches it to ask for."

At this point the emphasis is on **what God does**, that is, by **revealing the divine presence, word and will** in different ways.

How the Lord communicates:

The Lord can communicate with us in many ways:

- ◆ By putting a **scripture text** in your mind – a verse or a story just pops into your mind.
 - ◆ Occasionally, the Lord will ask you to **cut the scriptures at random** and to put your finger on the page . I usually do this with my eyes shut and I do it in the belief that wherever my finger lands the Lord is wanting to say something to me. I don't think you should do that unless the Lord prompts you to do it but if the Lord leads you to do this, you could be amazed that your finger is resting on just the right thing for you to hear at that moment.
- ◆ Other times an **image** or **vision**, with or without words will come into your mind. If the image or the vision is making no sense, ask the Lord what it is about, what

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is the meaning of that image or vision that I have seen in my mind's eye and often you will get an understanding of what the Lord is intending to say.

- ◆ Sometimes you will get a **prompting** to do something while praying. That often happens to me when I am praying, that suddenly it will come into my mind that I should contact somebody, send an email or do some task which would not have occurred to me otherwise.
- ◆ Hearing an **inner voice**: Sometimes in my prayer, it is almost as if I can hear an inner voice speaking to me which is not my own voice and I believe it is actually the voice of the Lord inspiring me.
- ◆ A sudden **intellectual awareness of some spiritual truth**: This occurs where something I have known for years begins to have real spiritual meaning as a result of a touch of the Holy Spirit.
- ◆ A **prophecy for yourself or others**: I could get or you could get in prayer a prophecy for yourself or others. I think if you get a prophecy in prayer, it is a good thing to write it down straight away before you forget the message it contained.
- ◆ A **word of knowledge**: A word of knowledge is really a form of prophecy where you might get knowledge about some future event. The way I would get words of knowledge is that if I was preparing for a healing service, sometimes the Lord will give me an inspiration about who is going to be healed and what they are going to be healed of. It is a mysterious form of inspiration.

Prayer Journal/Diary: Some people find it useful to have a prayer journal or diary where they write down the inspirations they received during their prayer time, so that they can refer to them afterwards. I have a woman friend, whom I have known for well over forty years, a married woman in the North of Ireland, and I know that she has kept a prayer journal all down through the years. She writes down all that occurred to her during prayer and I am sure it makes fascinating reading to look back on it and see all the things that the Lord has said to her over a long period of time.

The Eucharist: Needless to say, the Eucharist, *the* source and summit of all graces in the Christian life, is our most sublime prayer. To attend it frequently is a wonderful way of opening oneself to the manifold graces of God that comes to us in the word and holy communion.

Sacrament of Reconciliation: Regular reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation can also be a great way of experiencing the unmerited gift of Divine Mercy. I find, when I go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation that often the priest will say something helpful to me. I always feel that his voice is the voice of God and I always take anything he says with an unusual amount of seriousness, for I believe that God's grace is touching his heart to say the right thing to me.

2. Fellowship with other Christians

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The next thing we would recommend for growing in the Spirit is that we would try and engage in fellowship with other Christians. While Christianity favours individuality, it does not favour individualism. It is communitarian in nature. It is good therefore, besides going to Mass, to join with other members of the Body of Christ on other occasions. In Hebrews 10:24-25 it says:

"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

Those of us who are members of Christian groups would believe that it is true that our meeting together does *'stir up one another to love and good works'* as the Scripture says.

There are all kinds of parish group one could join. It should be said that while all of them undoubtedly have merit, only some of them provide ongoing formation in the faith. I remember doing a parish mission out in Portmarnock on one occasion and I looked up the website of the parish. I was amazed to see that there were some 38 different groups in the parish, but when I went down through the list, there were only about 4 or 5 of the groups to which you could belong which were giving formation in the faith.

Now, remember what I said at the start of this talk that Baptism in the Spirit is merely the beginning of a new beginning. It is a conversion experience. However, the next stage of the Christian life is becoming a disciple of Christ and **one needs ongoing formation to become the Lord's disciple**, to know his teachings and to practise them as best as one can. If you want to join a group as a result of Baptism in the Spirit, try and choose one where there is some element of ongoing formation in the faith.

Faith Formation Groups

Here are some groups where you should get some faith formation:

1. **Bible Study Group:** A Bible Study group would be excellent. In many parishes they can meet either weekly or once a month.
2. **Faith Development Group:** They organise and run parish-based programmes and seminars to assist the ongoing faith development of adults and young people. In a nearby parish to me, Foxrock, they ran a course for two or three years going through the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Now that would be fantastic faith formation for anyone who has been baptised in the Holy Spirit.
3. **Faith friends:** In some parishes there are groups known as 'faith friends' who are trained to share their faith experience with young parishioners who are preparing for the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion.
4. **Vincent de Paul Society:** There is a spiritual component and the members visit those who are in economic need in twos. The Vincent de Paul are supposed to have a little talk each week at their meetings by the

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spiritual director – I think some groups do not include this to develop the faith of the group.

5. **Legion of Mary:** The Legion of Mary is somewhat similar to the Vincent de Paul Society in that they are supposed to have an 'allocutio' (address/talk) by the presidium's spiritual director at each meeting which is based on their Handbook. There is a great amount of formation in the Handbook which is training lay people in being disciples of Christ in imitation of Mary, who was the perfect disciple. Of course then members participate in the life of the parish through visitation of families, the sick, both in their homes and in hospital, and by helping the parish priest e.g., by assisting in the running of the RCIA programme (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) which is for converts to the Catholic Faith.
6. **Prayer groups:** There is a great variety of different types of prayer groups e.g. Charismatic, Divine Mercy, Padre Pio, etc. I know that John Paul II recommended that all prayer groups provide catechesis, that is teaching about the truths of the faith, both the dogmatic truths and the ethics. I would recommend that if you want to grow in the Spirit, look out for groups that have this formation component.
7. **Parish Cell Groups:** Some parishes have Parish Cell Groups, which would certainly emphasise ongoing formation in the group.

"Parish cells are faith groups of 4 to 12 people, who meet every two weeks in the informal setting of a home. A cell group provides a place where friendships are formed and faith deepens. It enables people to see the relevance of their faith in all that they do."

- <https://www.parishcellsireland.ie/>

Speaking about communities in the parish, Archbishop Martin of Dublin said in an address,

"I believe that the transmission of the faith in the years to come will have to be more and more linked with the creation of faith communities, like the basic ecclesial communities that we speak about in the context of Africa or Latin America. These communities will help people, young and old, to be formed in their faith and to live it out concretely in a cultural context which is less and less supportive of faith."

What you will find in papal documents – and I know Archbishop Martin has referred to this on a number of occasions – is that the modern-day parish should be a **community of communities**. The parishes of the future, the ones that will thrive, are parishes that enable people to join formation communities in the parish.

3. Fostering the Spiritual Gifts

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Another thing that we do after Baptism in the Spirit is that we try to foster the spiritual gifts, which are so useful in evangelisation. In 1 Corinthians 14:1, St Paul said:

"Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."

1. To foster the transforming power of the Spirit, we need to **use the gifts of the Holy Spirit** we have already received e.g., the gift of praying in tongues. If you have received the gift of tongues, do use it in your private prayer.
2. We need to be **discerning and responsible** in the use of the gifts. This requires learning about them by hearing informed teachings, reading books, getting relevant information online, etc., about the gifts of the Spirit.
3. Remembering what was said about individualism, we need to be careful to be united in mind and heart and to **exercise the gifts as part of the work of the whole Body of Christ**, not as individualistic ministries. We need to develop our gifts in union with the larger community.
4. Having developed a mature faith in Jesus we need to **share that faith with others by means of evangelisation**. As Pope Paul VI said in par 24 of *Evangelisation in the Modern World*,

"the person who has been evangelised goes on to evangelise others. Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelisation: it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn."

I find this a powerful statement of St Paul VI. It is saying that if you are truly evangelised through receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which leads you into a personal relationship with Jesus, it is unthinkable that you would not go on to share it with others. You will know whether you have had a genuine spiritual awakening by whether you are willing to evangelise or not.

I know that when I was baptised in the Spirit back in 1974, I was brimming with enthusiasm about the Holy Spirit and I'm afraid I overdid it in telling people what had happened to me. I was telling members of my religious community and members of my family and I am sure I bored them by coming on too strongly. So I think that one has to be judicious, sensible and prudent in what one says and I think it is probably better for people to see the change in your life first and then they might say, 'what has come over you? – you are not the same as you used to be.' Then we can go on to explain about Baptism in the Spirit and relationship with the living Lord.

I will conclude with another quotation which I read many years ago, but it gets across the point I am making:

"A young RAF pilot said to a fervent Christian, don't try to help me or tell me what I ought to think yet. Don't work for my salvation – show me yours, show me it is possible, and the knowledge that something works will give me courage and belief."

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Suggested Discussion Starters

1. How was the prayer for the in-filling of the Spirit answered in your personal experience?
2. If baptism in the Spirit is the beginning of a new beginning, how do you think you could nourish your spiritual life in the future?
3. What resolution could you make which would be single, precise and possible?

Concluding Prayer

Cardinal Mercier (1851-1926) said: "I am going to reveal to you the secret of sanctity and happiness. Every day for five minutes control your imagination and close your eyes to all the noises of the world in order to enter into yourself. Then, in the sanctuary of your baptized soul speak to that Divine Spirit, saying to Him:

O Holy Spirit, beloved of my soul, I adore You. Enlighten me, guide me, strengthen me, console me. Tell me what I should do; give me Your orders. I promise to submit myself to all that You desire of me and to accept all that You permit to happen to me. Let me only know Your Will.

If you do this, your life will flow along happily, serenely, and full of consolation, even in the midst of trials. Grace will be proportioned to the trial, giving you the strength to carry it and you will arrive at the Gate of Paradise, laden with merit. This submission to the Holy Spirit is the secret of sanctity."