

**FIRE, A SYMBOL OF THE EFFECTS OF THE GRACES OF THE HOLY GHOST.**

*There appeared to them parted tongues as it were of fire, and it sat upon every one of them.—Acts 2: 3.*

We celebrate to-day the feast of Pentecost, on which the Holy Ghost, in the form of fiery tongues, came down upon the Apostles and the other believers. Why did the Holy Ghost choose the form of fire? There certainly is a mystery contained in it, for whatever God does has its reason and significance. St. Luke did not in vain record the fact that on the feast of Pentecost there suddenly came a sound from heaven, as of a mighty wind coming, and that there appeared parted tongues, as it were, of fire, and that it sat upon each of them.—*Acts 2: 2, 3.* Fire symbolizes the effects which the Holy Ghost produced in the first believers on the day of Pentecost, and which he still produces

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in the hearts of Christians. The effects of grace, symbolized by fire, shall be the subject of our meditation to-day. Fire has three effects—

- I. *It illumines;*
- II. *It cleanses;*
- III. *It warms.*

## PART I.

1. The first effect of fire is, *that it gives light*. If we light a candle in a place that is pitch dark, all becomes bright at once. If fire breaks out on a dark night, it diffuses such a brightness that it can be seen for several miles. The brighter the light and the greater the fire, the more luminous becomes the place that was dark before, and the greater the circle of light. That wonderful luminary, the sun, illuminates the whole earth, and gives light even to the moon and many other planets, to dispel the darkness of the night.

2. Herein fire is a symbol of the Holy Ghost; for it is he that banishes darkness, ignorance and error, from the heart, and enlightens men, that they may clearly apprehend the truths and doctrines of divine revelation.

(a.) We perceive this in the Apostles. Our Lord was three years with them, instructing them all the while in the truths of religion; he took great pains to remove their sensual ideas of the kingdom of God, their prejudices and errors, and to make them comprehend the purpose of his mission. But how slightly did he succeed! They resembled ignorant children, who, if you explain to them a truth a dozen times, do not understand it; most of his doctrines were to them obscure, others they did not understand at all. Hence they deserved to be rebuked by Christ for their indocility, and even after his resurrection he said to them: "O foolish, and slow of heart to believe in all things which the prophets have spoken."—*Luke 24: 25*. But how changed they were after they had received the Holy Ghost. Our Lord had told them that the Holy Ghost would teach them all truth; how truly was this promise fulfilled! Then they understood all things whatever Christ taught them; then they remembered all his words; and all doubt, all ignorance, vanished. Then their minds were illumined, not by long studies and researches, but by the Holy Ghost who enlightened and taught them. They who had never learned the art of eloquence, who never before had spoken in public, spoke and wrote like the learned; they were never at a loss for words; they were prepared to reply to every

one. They did not speak in corners, but were seen at Rome, Athens, Corinth; in the most populous and renowned cities they spoke before the high and the low, the learned and unlearned, Jews and Gentiles, and what they said is the essence of wisdom, such as the world had never heard before. So wonderfully did the Holy Ghost enlighten the Apostles!

(b.) As the light of the Holy Ghost was necessary to the Apostles, so it is necessary to all men, if they are to come to the knowledge of the truth. Though they may have understanding and be scientifically educated, there is darkness in their soul in all things concerning everlasting salvation, if they be not enlightened by the Holy Ghost. Even the best religious instruction and the cleverest books, are unable without the light of the Holy Ghost to convince them of the truths of the faith and to move them to embrace it. Hence we see that great and learned men who devote much time and labor to the study of the Catholic Church and her doctrine are not converted, but persevere in their errors; they are destitute of the blessed light of the Holy Ghost because they do not humbly pray for it. Again, there are many Christians who deem that to be right and lawful which is openly contrary to the law of God; for instance, that impurity is only a human weakness, which God does not grievously condemn; that certain tricks and frauds in business are permissible; that lies and even false oaths are no sin, if thereby one can avert injury or damage from one's self or others. Whence these pernicious and culpable errors? Because such Christians lack the light of the Holy Ghost. And why is it wanting to them? Because they purposely shut their eyes to it and are deluded by the spirit of the world. The grace of the Holy Ghost being absolutely necessary for acquiring the knowledge of all that is needed for salvation, we must be most anxious to obtain it. What means must we employ for this end? We must listen to the word of God, read spiritual books, and pray devoutly.

## PART II.

1. Another effect of fire is, *that it purifies*. Rust is consumed and all corroded iron is purified by fire. The precious metals can be purified only by fire; fire is the means by which the dross and extraneous matter are removed. Hence the adage: "Gold is tried in the furnace."

2. The operations of the Holy Ghost are similar to fire. He purifies the hearts of men from the rust of sins; he consumes and burns in them all inordinate desire for the things of this world, purifying them by raising up their hearts to things above.

(a.) The Apostles here furnish us with a proof in point. Before the Holy Ghost came down upon them they had various defects and faults, and our Lord was frequently under the necessity of reproving them severely. They were ambitious and aspired to precedence and distinction; wherefore our Lord placed a child in their midst and said: "Amen I say unto you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."—*Matt.* 18: 3. They possessed as yet but little meekness, were easily excited, and gave room to feelings of revenge."—*Luke* 9: 52-56. Peter sinned grievously for he denied his Lord and Master. The Apostles were imperfect, full of faults, before they had received the Holy Ghost. But how differently they behaved after the Holy Ghost had come down upon them! They became full of humility, full of meekness, of compassion and love; they disdained and despised all earthly things and ardently aspired to heavenly things; in short, they were men of heroic virtue, perfect saints.

(b.) As upon the Apostles, so upon us the Holy Ghost must also operate like a devouring and purifying fire, that we may be cleansed from our sins, and from worldly-minded men be changed into heavenly-minded ones. If the Holy Ghost does not aid us, we cannot make an act of supernatural, perfect contrition, which is an indispensable condition for the cleansing of our conscience and our reconciliation with God. If the Holy Ghost does not come into our heart with his sanctifying grace, we are neither justified nor sanctified, but are and remain sinners and objects of his displeasure. By nature we are afflicted with inclinations to pride, avarice, impurity, anger, envy, slander and detraction, and these, if not bridled and subdued, lead to many sins. Can we bridle these evil inclinations by our own strength? No, for we are not "sufficient to think anything of ourselves, as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God."—*II. Cor.* 3 - 5. If the Holy Ghost does not assist us, we become the sport of our evil inclinations and passions, and fall into grievous sins. The thoughts and affections of most men are fixed upon the goods of this world; how to have a pleasant time and gratify their desires is their principal care; about the service of God and the salvation of their soul they are unconcerned. Who is it that can change this perverse mind of men? Again the Holy Ghost, who, coming with his grace into the hearts of men, totally transforms and renews them, so that they exclaim with St. Paul: "Furthermore I count all things to be but loss for the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ, my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but as dung, that I may gain Christ."—*Phil.* 3: 8.

### PART III.

1. A third effect of fire is, *that it warms*. Whatever you bring in contact with fire, though it be icy cold, will soon become warm, even hot, if otherwise it is not combustible, so that, like a stove in a room, it diffuses heat round about. If you put a piece of iron into the fire, it soon becomes red hot, and so partakes of the qualities of the fire that it seems itself to be only fire, and when struck with a hammer it will send off red-hot particles.

2. The fire of the Holy Ghost has the same effect. It warms the frozen hearts of men and inflames them with holy love, which fears nothing but sin, which courageously surmounts all obstacles in the way of salvation, which cannot be deterred by threats or persecution from what it knows to be its duty, and which is ready to make any and every sacrifice, even that of life, for God's sake.

(a.) The Apostles again furnish proof of this truth. How weak, how timid and hesitating, they were before they had received the Holy Ghost! When Christ was in the hands of his enemies they all fled; Peter denied him, and swore that he knew him not. After his death, their fear increased still more; they dared not appear in public. They locked themselves up in Jerusalem, for they were afraid of being arrested and condemned to death. But how different was their conduct on and after Pentecost! Now they are no longer the weak, timid disciples; they exhibit a courage which shrinks from no obstacle, despises all threats, all dangers, all tribulations, a courage which enables them to go cheerfully and joyfully to martyrdom and death. Peter appears in public on the day of Pentecost and in Jerusalem, the city which had committed deicide, and preaches Christ crucified with such power and eloquence that three thousand Jews are converted to the Christian faith. All the Apostles now begin their painful, thorny career and preach the gospel; they go into all the world, bid defiance to all dangers and persecutions, and, full of invincible courage, exclaim with St. Paul: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation? or distress? or famine? or nakedness? or danger? or persecution? or the sword?"

(b.) Wonderful were the effects which the Holy Ghost produced in the Apostles, and he will produce such in us if we allow our hearts to be inflamed and warmed by the fire of his love. In the cold winter time all nature is benumbed, the earth is desolate and incapable of producing a blade of grass. The fruit trees are

shorn of their luxuriant foliage and have no power to blossom or bear fruit. But, lo, the sun comes again and warms the earth with his rays. What a change! All nature awakens from its death-like slumber and begins a new life; all the plants and trees bud, bloom, grow, and bring forth fruit. So it is with us, according as we are with or without the Holy Ghost. Without him we are spiritually dead, we cannot do the least thing in the business of our salvation. As the body without the soul is dead and can do nothing, so the soul without the vital force, without the Divine Spirit, is dead as regards the kingdom of heaven; it can accomplish nothing that relates to God. As soon as the Holy Ghost comes down upon us with his divine fire we receive life, warmth and strength. Inflamed by the fire of his love, we overcome all temptations, keep God's commandments, fulfil the duties of religion and our state of life, and practise the Christian virtues; in a word, we do everything that is necessary and useful for the salvation of our souls. Very truly and beautifully St. Chrysostom says: "Through the Holy Ghost we have obtained the forgiveness of our sins; through him we have been cleansed from the stains of vice; through his gifts men who gave themselves up to his guidance have become angels, not by changing their nature, but, what is still more wonderful, by remaining men and walking as purely and holily as the angels themselves. By the grace of the Holy Ghost man, who a little while before was defiled by the rust of sin, becomes brighter than the sun."

#### PERORATION.

Such are the great and wonderful effects produced by the Holy Ghost. Just as fire diffuses light round about and banishes darkness, so the Holy Ghost enlightens us so that we may know what is good and pleasing to God. As fire frees iron and other metals from dross and makes them bright, so the Holy Ghost cleanses us from the stains of sin and makes us glorious images of God. And as fire warms whatever comes within its reach, so the Holy Ghost warms the hearts of men by his love, that they may obtain strength to surmount all obstacles to salvation and practise every virtue. Oh, let us shun sin, walk in humility, fervently practise the Christian virtues, and pray with attention, fervor and devotion, that the Holy Ghost may abide with us and bless us, both for time and eternity. Amen.