

So Who's a Pentecostal Now?

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In an important article in *Gregorianum*, now reprinted separately,¹ Fr Francis Sullivan has invited us to take yet another look at the Pentecostal doctrine of 'baptism in the Holy Spirit', suggesting a new avenue of approach, using St Thomas's teaching on the mission of the Holy Spirit in Ia q. 43.

At the outset, let me confess to a growing conviction that, in the long run, the Catholic Pentecostal Movement (under whatever name it may wish to be known) will be seen to have contributed most to the Church by goading a surprising number of Christians, and even some theologians, into taking a renewed interest in the various traditions we have in the Church concerning the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Whatever reservations one may (or, perhaps, should) have about Catholic Pentecostalism, this, at least, is surely a good thing.

Sullivan subtitles his essay, 'A Catholic Interpretation of the Pentecostal Experience'. He begins by offering a working definition of 'the Pentecostal experience' as 'a religious experience which initiates a decisively new sense of the powerful presence and working of God in one's life, which working usually involves one or more charismatic gifts'. Members of Pentecostal Churches, he reminds us, would add 'experience marked by the recipient's speaking in tongues'.

He then describes, briefly, the classical Pentecostal interpretation of such an experience, and the by now fairly standard scriptural arguments against it, or at least against the use of the phrase 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' in the way the Pentecostal Churches use it.

He then discusses, sympathetically, the various Catholic interpretations of Pentecostal experience, noting how they are all characterised by a desire to anchor such experience in the doctrine of the sacraments, especially baptism and confirmation: Pentecostal experience can thus be seen in terms of the activation into full experience of gifts given secretly in a sacrament.

While acknowledging the value of this approach, he now proposes a new one, based on St Thomas. St Thomas, he says, 'concludes that we can speak of the Holy Spirit's being sent to us, and given to us, when we begin to have a new relationship with Him as to a Person intimately present to us through the love which He pours into our hearts. And since we cannot love someone we do not know, this must involve a new way of our knowing Him, too—and Thomas insists

¹*Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, by Francis A. Sullivan SJ. Reprinted from *Gregorianum* Vol. 55. Rome. 1974. pp. 20. 30p. (Distributed in U.K. by Redemptorist Publications).

that this cannot be a merely speculative knowledge, but must be a kind of experiential knowledge’.

The two key words in St Thomas’s doctrine here are *inhabitatio* and *innovatio*: ‘the Holy Spirit comes to *dwell* in us, and does so in such a way as to “*make us new*”’. This happens initially when we are ‘born anew of water and the Spirit’. But the Holy Spirit can still be sent to us again, as in confirmation and ordination. But such further sendings of the Spirit are not confined to sacraments: ‘there is an invisible sending (of the Divine Person) also with respect to an advance in virtue or an increase of grace. . . . Such an invisible sending is especially to be seen in that kind of increase of grace whereby a person moves forward into some new act or some new state of grace: as, for example, when a person moves forward into the grace of working miracles, or of prophecy, or out of the burning love of God offers his life as a martyr, or renounces all his possessions, or undertakes some other such heroic act’ (Summa I, q. 43, a. 6, ad. 2).

Sullivan points out that all the instances here mentioned ‘fall under the heading of “charismatic” rather than “sacramental” graces’. ‘The Holy Spirit is not a thing, like a source of energy, stored up in us and merely needing to be released. The Holy Spirit is a Divine Person, the Lord of His gifts, sovereignly free to give them to whom He chooses, and in the measure of His choosing’.

But ‘if we follow the lead of St Thomas, we cannot interpret the pentecostal experience simply as the conferring of a charismatic gift. A new sending of the Holy Spirit must involve a new way of the Spirit’s indwelling in the soul, and this has to mean a real *innovatio* of that person’s relationship with the indwelling Spirit’.

I think we can be very grateful to Sullivan for this timely reminder of the teaching of St Thomas, warning us not to forget that ‘the Spirit is the Lord’, always intensely active in the operation of His own gifts, not a quasi-material Gift given once and then left to us to make use of. And we can also find inspiration here to seek more of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, more of the gift of Himself, that we may be capable of more heroic and generous following of Christ.

But I am not convinced that it actually helps us very much vis à vis Catholic Pentecostalism.

There are two major assumptions underlying the whole of Sullivan’s article. First, that there is such a thing as ‘*the Pentecostal experience*’. So long as we are dealing simply with the Pentecostal Churches, there is no problem: their doctrine of ‘baptism in the Holy Spirit’ is an interpretation of the specific experience of speaking in tongues, in a certain kind of context. But it is, to me, far from clear that there is any such consistency to be found amongst neo-Pentecostals.

Secondly, Sullivan assumes that one can peel off interpretations to leave an ‘experience’ bare, like a tailor’s dummy, waiting for a new and preferred interpretation to be fitted on. ‘This does not mean’, he says, ‘that the Pentecostal experience, as such, is unacceptable. It

means simply that a particular way of speaking of it (and the interpretation implied by that way of speaking) are unacceptable'. What he has undertaken to do is to propose 'what I think would be a more satisfactory way for Catholics to understand and speak about the pentecostal experience'. This is surely a highly questionable procedure. The way we think and talk is an integral element in our whole experience of life.

So, rather than try to interpret some putative kind of experience which is '*the pentecostal experience*', let us look, with Sullivan, at what St Thomas is saying to us. He certainly bids us look to the Holy Spirit for more than an initial fillip to get us moving in the first place. The Holy Spirit keeps on coming to us, so that we may go on growing in grace. Such growth, St Thomas says, may be looked at in two ways: first, there is the steady growth which is the unfolding of the supernatural powers given to us in the first place by the grace that set us on the way to God through justification. And St Thomas sees no particular difficulty in referring this whole process of growth to new sendings of the Holy Spirit, though he clearly cannot see much point in talking that way (in Sent I, d. 15, q. 5, a. 1). He prefers to use the phrase 'a sending of the Holy Spirit' to refer to much more evidently *new* developments in one's life: 'the second way in which there is an increase of grace is that by which a man comes to a new use or act of grace (*in novum usum vel actum gratiae*). . . . When the power of love grows, so that, on the strength of that love, some different use of grace is granted to a man, such as the working of miracles, or overcoming all temptations without any difficulty, or something of that kind, that is when we say that there has been a new sending of the Holy Spirit' (*ibid.*).

The corresponding passage in the Summa follows basically the same direction. Talk of a new sending of the Holy Spirit is most appropriate 'when someone advances to some new act or state of grace (*in aliquem novum actum vel novum statum gratiae*)'. St Thomas instances working miracles, prophecy, martyrdom, giving away all one's possessions, *aut quodcumque opus arduum*.

In St Thomas's view, then, although one can refer every conceivable kind of spiritual development to a new sending of the Holy Spirit (what evidence could there be, after all, to stop one so talking?), nevertheless it is preferable to use such language only where there is clear evidence of some new departure in one's life, either in the form of some specific act, such as martyrdom, or in the form of some definite 'status', such as that of prophecy.

Now St Thomas knows full well that all such exterior acts are, in themselves, ambiguous. One can prophesy and be in a state of sin; one can give one's body to be burned, and not have charity.

For there to be a sending of the Holy Spirit, it is not enough simply for there to be some external manifestation: it must be a case of a real growth in charity, evidencing itself in miracles or whatever.

But the difficulty is that one can never actually ascertain, except in

the unlikely event of a private revelation, whether or not the externals do in fact proceed from an increase in charity. If it is true, as St Thomas maintains, that one cannot actually know for certain that one is in a state of grace at all (Ia. IIae. q. 112, a. 5), much less could one know for certain that what is going on is an increase of grace!

Less still could one hope to catch a sending of the Holy Spirit at work denuded of its external manifestation.

In St Thomas's opinion, then, there are indeed experiential situations in which it is appropriate to talk of a new sending of the Holy Spirit; but the experience is not, precisely, of the Holy Spirit as such, but an experience of some effect of the Holy Spirit, taken, in faith and hope, to be truly founded on a real presence of the Holy Spirit.

St Thomas does not, then, encourage us to suppose that there will be any *one* experience that we can call *the* experience of renewal in the Holy Spirit (or whatever). There will be a diversity of experiences, all rooted in the basic initial reality of conversion and baptism, but thereafter diverging in accordance with the capacity and calling of each individual.

It is not clear how we could meaningfully abstract from this some category of the specially 'pentecostal'. If we take the classic Pentecostal doctrine, I think St Thomas does shed light on that. Classic Pentecostal doctrine, in almost all cases, refuses to envisage a 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' which is not evidenced in the person's speaking in tongues. Just as in the view of St Thomas, the supposed new sending of the Holy Spirit comes in question only because of a very evidently new Christian *act*, which is believed (but this is clearly a matter of faith, not of experience) to proceed from the indwelling of the Spirit in the person's soul. St Thomas would not go along with the Pentecostals' conviction that speaking in tongues is a privileged manifestation of the Spirit; but he would approve of the concreteness of the doctrine.

The neo-Pentecostals, by and large, have given up the insistence on tongues as the evidence of 'baptism in the Holy Spirit'. But it is far from clear that any coherent doctrine remains. The tendency in Catholic Pentecostalism, at least, seems to have been a move away from any such specificity, so that more and more phenomena, and more and more elusive 'experiences' are allowed to count as 'baptism in the Spirit'. Eventually it seems likely that absolutely any kind of Christian experience will count. And that is, in itself, not unfitting: after all, if it is the basic theological characteristic of Christian behaviour that it proceeds from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, then 'pentecostal' does simply equal 'Christian'.

But then, where is the specificity of the '*pentecostal*' as distinct from the 'Christian'?

I rather fear that there is only one answer to that question which can, in the long run, hold water: the only specificity of the 'pentecostal' is social; an experience is 'pentecostal' because it happens in a 'pentecostal' (or 'charismatic') group. The more any group identifies

itself simply with the characteristics of 'mere Christianity', the more inevitably will it have to tend towards becoming a sect. This is the common element in the genesis of almost all sects. As an institution comes to have fewer and fewer real distinguishing features, it has to rely more and more on mere institutional separation to preserve its *raison d'être*.

This is, of course, not a new or an isolated problem within Catholicism. When St Thomas mentions a new *status gratiae* as a situation legitimising talk of a new sending of the Holy Spirit, it is difficult not to think of religious life as a possible instance, the more so as St Thomas actually mentions giving away all one's possessions. In the theological world of St Thomas, it is quite possible to say that becoming a religious involves a new *state* of grace, a state of perfection, in fact, which will have to be evidenced, not in one specific act, but in a multitude of acts befitting the religious state.

Could we similarly, perhaps, say that a new sending of the Holy Spirit might be evidenced in the *state* of a person entering a 'charismatic' community (or group)?

The difficulty, in either case, would be that the ambiguity inherent in any manifestation of the Spirit is much more acute here than, say, in the case of martyrdom. It is impossible to quantify this, but surely it is true that one is much less likely to be martyred or to give away all one's possessions for the wrong reason, than one is to join a religious (or a charismatic) community. And this factor will become more and more important, as the religious (or charismatic) communities become more and more desirable in what are, strictly, irrelevant ways—as havens of security in a troubled world, for instance, or as respectable places of refuge for those who can neither inherit nor earn a living.

If St Thomas's language cannot help making us think of religious life in connexion with real innovations in our spiritual growth, it is perhaps significant that St Thomas does not, after all, use it as an instance of a sending of the Holy Spirit.

However much one tinkers with the doctrine of 'baptism in the Holy Spirit', whether by trimming off unacceptable bits like tongues, or by dressing it up in new words and new interpretations, it seems to me we are bound to be left with something unacceptable. If there is to be anything for us to theologise about at all in it, it must have some principle of specificity. If we remove tongues, as most neo-Pentecostals do, we are left, it seems, with only two alternatives: either the specificity of the Pentecostal simply lapses back into the specificity of the Christian, in which case the only defining characteristic of a 'pentecostal movement' (under whatever name) will be its desire to maintain itself as a distinct entity. Or we shall have to posit some ontological new gift of the Spirit prior to any particular manifestation, and, as we have seen, this is just what St Thomas refuses to do. Classic Pentecostal doctrine does indeed claim such an ontological

status for 'baptism in the Holy Spirit', but Catholics have rightly been hesitant in following this.

The main tendency in Catholic thought on the subject, as Sullivan points out, has been to connect 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' with the sacraments of initiation: these provide the ontological basis for the subsequent experience.

Now I think it is important to maintain this ontological basis in the sacraments for all Christian experience. But I do not think that one can really justify the attempt to make a direct link between a sacrament and a particular kind of experience, such that one could say 'this is *the* experience of baptism.' The *experience* which should flow from baptism is the whole experience of being Christian, with all its bumps and its bangs, and its tedious, imperceptible, modes of growth, not to mention its falls and failures. The sacraments are pregnant with no end of meaning, no end of 'experiential' realisation.

Once again, then, it seems that neo-Pentecostalism is chasing a non-existent hare. We can and should be profoundly grateful to it for forcing all of us to look with greater concern, and more practical concern, at the traditions concerning the Holy Spirit and the difference he should make to our whole experience of life. But beyond that, I am not convinced that they can help us—not qua neo-Pentecostals; many of them have a lot to say to us, which they may have discovered in the course of being neo-Pentecostals, but I think we may reserve our right to thank *them*, rather than their neo-Pentecostalism for it.

But that does not mean that we can wash our hands of Pentecostalism. The oecumenical venture still remains largely untapped in this field. I think that the full classical Pentecostal doctrine of baptism in the Spirit, complete with speaking in tongues, may stimulate much valuable theological thought.² In particular, speaking in tongues, as a *gratia gratis data*, whose primary beneficiary is nevertheless the practitioner himself, draws our attention to the possibility, mentioned by St Thomas, but rather dwarfed by his schematic treatment of the different kinds of grace, that the charismatic gifts may in fact be involved in our growth in holiness. St Thomas's Master General for a time, B1 Humbert of Romans, says that one of the perks of being a preacher is that one gains understanding from it (*De Vita Reg.* ii, p. 385). Rather than wasting time trying to create a version of 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' which could be acceptable to Catholics, we could surely profit from an examination of the ways in which what is given to us for the benefit of others in fact forms us too in the life of grace.

²See my article 'The Speech-Giving Spirit' in *New Heaven? New Earth?*, ed. Peter Hocken (Darton Longman & Todd, 1976).