

APOSTOLIC NUNTIO'S
HOMILY ON THE OCCASION
OF THE GATHERING OF APOSTLESHIP OF PRAYER
(MBAGALA, 20 MAY 2009)

The liturgy of the Word today presents us the action of the Holy Spirit within the community of believers under a double aspect.

The first characteristic can be drawn from the reading of the Acts of the Apostles: the episode reported in today's first reading is precisely the consequence, even if not so successful, of an inspiration of the Spirit. It had been the Holy Spirit, in fact, who led Paul to preach the gospel in different places. The first encounter in Athens, as we have heard, was not a success: the high hierarchy of one of the most important cultural centres in the ancient world, the Aeropagus remained stranger to the meaning of Paul's preaching. But the seed was sown: the harvest would know its reaping in due time. And once more the refusal of the greater ones opened the gates of the faith to so many among the poor and the needy.

The Spirit, thus, is the leader, the guide, the inward motion of Church's missionary steps; even if in our short-sightedness we think that He is leading us in a shadow land. The Spirit is God; the God who makes the good seed grow, according to his inscrutable plan, in order to reap a better harvest in due course.

In today's Gospel passage Jesus points to another function of the Spirit. While in the Act of the Apostles the Spirit broadens the Church's boundaries, here Jesus seems to show a deepening role of the same Spirit: *"the Spirit of truth will lead you to complete truth"*.

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It is not a new truth. Jesus is the truth, the faithful fulfillment of God's ancient promises. He is the new man, created in Holiness and Truth. The Holy Spirit, Jesus says, will tell only what he had learnt from Him, as being the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. He eternally witnesses the Love between the Father and the Son. And we as well are here to witness this unceasing work of the Spirit within the life of the Church: the mystery of Christ, the mystery which Christ himself is, has been rendered clearer and its richness continuously offered to all human beings. As various peoples with their own different existential questions and needs came in contact with the gospel, the Spirit guided, sometimes through crises and even struggles, the minds and hearts of the community of believers to a deeper and wider understanding of the incommensurable richness of Christ. And certainly the same Spirit will continue this vivifying work among all the generations of believers.

Among these abundant fruits of the work of the Spirit, we are happy to highlight the harvest of spiritual graces that the Apostleship of the Prayer has meant in the life of the Church both in the missionary field and in the spiritual life of the faithful.

There is no need here to go through the history of this praiseworthy institution, since I know you are better well-versed on the subject, but it is helpful to recall its birth in an ardent missionary context. The call to prayer, the call to intimacy with the heart of Jesus led innumerable people to develop their sentiments of a personal and deep relationship with Jesus, Head of the Mystical Body, the Church, enhancing a deeper comprehension of Jesus' divine-human nature, and of the mission he received from his Father.

nothing else than the perfect obedience to his Father's will. This for us means the redemption the Eternal Father has established for the entire humanity. This burning centre of love, this source of every grace which Jesus' own humanity is for all of us, became once more conspicuous and the object of renewed consideration. God, whose majesty and highness could have frightened us, compelling us to set Him aside from our life, chose the familiar image of His beloved Son's Heart to reveal once more his loving passion for us, poor and weak human beings. The otherwise mysterious divine love expressed Himself through the beats of a human heart, passionate for our salvation, wounded by our indifference, and still offering every suffering to grant us the chance for eternal salvation.

And from this burning centre, we can understand the importance of the Christian prayer, of which you are the apostles. A Christian prayer is the prayer in accordance with Jesus' own heart. And of course only the working of the Spirit can conform our prayer to that of Jesus.

And in this context there is another truth, which is envisaged in your devotion. A truth that has assumed its proper light especially in the doctrine about the common priesthood of the faithful so magisterially depicted in the second Vatican council. The ordination of the earthly realities to God through the daily offering of our own life as the enhancing of the Kingdom is in fact the proper mission we all received the day of our baptism. And as well, in a totally peculiar way, for us, who share in Jesus' ministerial priesthood in favour of the Mystical Body, the prayer is and remains the principal means to ensure the efficacy and authenticity of our commitment to the Lord's work, (and it is here befitting to thankfully acknowledge the Holy Father's gift of a Year of Priests, starting most aptly on 19th June next, solemnity of the Sacred Heart).

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Allow me to stress, finally, one more thing. The apostolic work of Saint Paul, and on his footsteps of every missionary in the Church's history, can often meet disillusionment and refusal, even to the point of violence and martyrdom. The Holy Father in his last Encyclical, *Spe salvi*, indicated the prayer as a "setting for learning and practicing hope". Especially for us in mission territories the importance of this indication is easy to understand. One of the most important aspects of the Apostleship of Prayer is of course to share the zeal for all the churches which the Common Father of the Christians nourishes, hence the habit to have the general intention monthly dictated by the Holy Father. We can understand that on the prayer, on your own prayers the Pope counts for the most important hopes he cherishes in his heart. And of course, considering the upcoming Synod of the Bishops for Africa, it is only hope, the hope springing from the prayer, that can lead us on the roads of reconciliation, justice and peace?

In fact, as the Pope emphasizes, "we must learn that we cannot pray against the other," and later on "we must learn to purify our desires and our hopes" and again "we must free ourselves from the hidden lies with which we deceive ourselves" in order that the prayer, far from being a simple reflection on oneself becomes "a capacity for listening to the Good itself" which is God [cfr. *Spe Salvi* 33]. Cherishing our life of prayer, offering to God the entire world, keeping it always "open to God" [*S.S.* 34], the believers do not step out of the common struggle, taking refuge in a idyllic life of spiritual pleasure and self complacency. On the contrary from this profound relationship of one's intimate self with the presence of God, Christian hope becomes a "hope for others [...] an active hope, in which we struggle to prevent things moving towards the perverse end. It is an

active hope also in the sense that we keep the world open to God" [S.S.34].

Let us keep ourselves always close to Jesus' heart, open to the Spirit, and God, the hope who never fails shall grant us his continuous assistance. Let us keep, thus, Africa, always open to God, in order to achieve as a gift coming from His Heart as well as springing from the deep commitment of every one of us a land where reconciliation, justice and peace shall flourish.