

Sixth Sunday of Easter, C – May 26, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 700 words

As we continue through Easter toward Pentecost, our focus shifts from Christ's Resurrection to his Ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit, whom he promises to us in today's gospel. Jesus describes him, the third person of the Trinity, in a most interesting way: he calls him the "advocate". The Greek word is "paraclete"; "advocate" is the Latin variation, and both forms of course mean the same thing. Surely we have all noticed the word "advocate" or "paraclete" for the Holy Spirit in traditional prayers. For example, in the Divine Praises we say, "Blessed be the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete". But what does this title mean?

"The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything", Jesus says. Then he bids us peace. But there is another spirit who comes to us, who seeks to steal our peace and confound us: the devil, in fact, is called the "accuser" in the scriptures. Those who are being accused need an advocate to defend them. An advocate aids those whose own voice is insufficient. Against the devil, who is also known as the destroyer, we do not have the strength to vindicate ourselves. The devil is the prince of this world, as Christ teaches us, and without God's help, the devil will pull us down with him.

Of what does the devil accuse us? First and foremost, of our sin. He puts a magnifying glass on it. He encourages discouragement. He wants us to see our sin – but not the God who can save us from it. He wants us to identify with our sin, thinking that it is who we really are. And then, having accused us so skillfully, he brings new temptations, such as of thinking that perhaps our sin is not so bad. After all: look at all the others who do similar things! And they are "basically good" – look at their success in life! Maybe I can keep sinning also! Then he may lead us to think presumptively that God will forgive us in the end, even if we do not repent.

Such accusations disorient and ultimately confound us. They distort our self-understanding. But the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, is the antidote, who saves us from this terrible fate. He is the Spirit of adoption who, as St. Paul teaches, comes into our hearts and helps us to perceive God as our "Abba" – our loving Father. The Spirit makes us at home with God, who truly comes to dwell within us. He does convict us of sin, showing us the truth about ourselves – but not in a way that obscures hope or robs us of peace. Much to the contrary, the Spirit himself is the one whose work makes the forgiveness of that sin possible.

The revelation of the Holy Spirit is thus a revelation that God himself is on our side. He wants to save us. He has not abandoned us in our spiritual battle, waiting to see who will win; rather, he himself comes to our aid. But his help is not purely external and technical, akin to giving us a bigger gun and better aim. No, it is profoundly interior, building us up from within. He teaches us everything, as our Lord says: he establishes us in the truth – the truth about ourselves, the truth about the world, the truth about God. And that truth, as Christ also says, is what makes us free. The devil – the accuser – only offers lies and deception.

As the prayer of absolution says, God has "sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins". That is why it is a wise idea to pray specifically to God the Holy Spirit while examining one's conscience before confession, to know better what one must confess. Then, in confession, we accuse ourselves of our sins – but the Lord forgives us. The devil does accuse us of our sins – but then he has nothing more to offer, other than discouragement and despair. How good God is, to give us his Holy Spirit and so not abandon us in the struggle. May we more keenly sense his presence – and more fervently depend upon him.