Homily for Mass of the Holy Spirit

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ABSTRACT:
This year, the monks of Saint John’s Abbey, the sponsoring religious order of the Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary, convened to elect a new abbot, after the retirement of the previous, who had served for twenty years. This homily was given by Father Dale Launderville, OSB at the Mass of the Holy Spirit, which both opened the official election process and was the culmination of a year-long process of discernment and prayer that enable the monks to enter the voting confident of the aid of the Holy Spirit.

Homily for Mass of the Holy Spirit
by Dale Launderville, OSB

As we begin in a more focused way our discernment of who our next abbot will be, we are instructed and nourished by the readings not only from the prophet Ezekiel but also from Paul’s Letter to the Romans and the Gospel of John. The richness of these readings brings us to realize that such discernment is a movement, a quest towards putting on “the mind of Christ.” This “mind of Christ” is the opposite of “the mind of the flesh,” which means that Christ
stands for reaching out and prioritizing the good of the other and turning away from self-centered concerns, which is the focus of the “mind of the flesh.” This mind of Christ is a reality that we hope for, but it clearly is something that we can never achieve simply by cleverness or willpower or whatever. It is a gift that is handed on to us. Our task is to receive it.

How then do we listen to God? How do we clear out the noise of our self-centered striving? One tactic that the Rule of Benedict encourages in chapter 72 deals with good zeal: monks should each try to be the first to show honor to the other. This putting on the mind of Christ demands that we listen to God in the reading of Sacred Scripture, in our times of silent meditation, in attentiveness to the wisdom that others speak to us. We are called to always be listening to the ways that God is speaking to us.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul emphasizes that all of creation is in groaning and travail as it awaits with eager longing the revealing of the children of God. Those of us who are baptized are called to realize how our lives are interconnected with all of creation in ways of which we are often forgetful or not mindful. When I hear of this groaning of all creation, I am reminded of that Song of the Three Young Men who have been delivered from the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar. In the book of Daniel, chapter 3, they cry out to the whole of creation and go through a litany of the various animate and inanimate beings and call upon them to give praise and thanks to God. This movement towards gratitude—a gratitude expressing itself in praise of God, of God’s glory and God’s goodness is a profound way of living in the truth. This activity of praising and giving thanks to God is a counterpoint to self-centered existence. In common preface IV to the eucharistic prayer is the line: “Our thanksgiving is itself your gift” and makes us grow in goodness. When we wonder what the future holds for us, we might embrace this call to give thanks and praise to God as a way that the future has been breaking into our daily lives. To participate in this great song of creation: the way, and the truth, and the life – it is Christ present within and around us.
Such a way of living is under assault by so many forces of self-centered striving. But God is there to rescue us even in the most dire of situations. Such trouble and travail is highlighted in our first reading from the well-known dry bones passage. The image that sets the stage is dry bones lying on the surface of a battlefield. As the vision gives way to an interpretation, the exiled Israelite people are quoted as saying that our bones are dried up, our hope is gone. This great number of bones that lie in a fragmented, desolate state highlights the despair of the exiles who give voice to their traumatized situation apart from their homeland. In the vision though, the Lord has placed his hand upon Ezekiel and imparted to him a picture of what is in store for the exiled Israelites. Miraculously, their bones will all reassemble by the power of the Spirit that is appealed to by the prophetic word. This prophetic word does not stop with the reassembling of the bones into mannequin-like bodies but also summons the life-giving wind/spirit that blows from four directions simultaneously. Such a transcendent power brings new life into the exilic community. This community of exiles will be returned to the land of Israel where they can reestablish their life.

This privilege of speaking life-giving words to one another is something that we all have—perhaps not as powerfully as was affected by Ezekiel, but a rejuvenating power that we probably underestimate. As we gather here to celebrate a Eucharist dedicated to the Holy Spirit, we are acknowledging the privileged status that we have of being children of God who can speak life-giving words to one another. We can do this only if we have this living water, or presence of the Spirit, flowing out from within us. When Jesus went up to the temple in Jerusalem at the fall festival of the Feast of Tabernacles, he taught in the temple and made the statement: “Whoever believes in me, as scripture says, ‘rivers of living water will flow from within him’” (NABRE). Or alternatively, “Let the one who believes in me drink. And as Scripture has said, ‘out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’” (NRSV).

The Spirit then is that invisible reality that becomes very much a part of our person and residing in our depths and quietly suffusing our person. Sometimes we sense that this invisible reality of God is working upon
our hearts and minds. At other times we do not really recognize this, but we should not give way to despair and allow our vitality to be dried up but rather we should stay with it and persist. In this continual looking towards God, the Spirit works within us in ways that we do not imagine and clearly do not control.

As we move into our discernment sessions this week, we should have as our prayer the Lord’s Prayer in which we cry out to the Father: “hallowed be Thy name; Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” These petitions are very familiar to us but ones that we cannot afford to lose sight of. It is not my will that I am hoping for and wanting to be realized; rather, I am stating that it is God’s will – the way that we can call: the way and the truth and the life. It takes every fiber of our being to be attentive to this divine life. But if we have the mind of Christ, we are on the pathway towards a very hopeful future one that can be a source of nourishment for all around us, for all of creation. Let us pray then that in this coming week we may have this mind of Christ in all our deliberations so that all of creation might give praise and thanks to God for what is happening here in our community.