

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, 2026

Jesus Christ, anointed by the Holy Spirit to be Great High Priest and Universal King, anoints His Faithful with the same Holy Spirit to be Priests and Kings with Him and under Him. As Priests with Jesus Christ, we are enabled to join ourselves to His perfect Sacrifice of Himself. Particularly when we join in the perfect Sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving that is the Holy Mass, we unite ourselves to Christ as a living sacrifice to the Father, not just for our salvation but for the salvation of the entire world. As Kings with Jesus Christ, we are able to wield in this world the best of all swords of justice, the living and effective word of God, able to slice away the cobwebs of sin and open the way to true joy and eternal life.

The first reading, taken from chapter eight of the Acts of the Apostles, testifies to the Catholic tradition that the Sacrament of Confirmation, while closely related to Baptism, is a distinct Sacrament in its own right. The Apostles Peter and John visited a congregation in Samaria that had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, but had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Peter and John laid hands on these new Christians, and they received the Holy Spirit. Baptism and Confirmation are so closely related that the Eastern Christian tradition, from a very early date, always conferred both sacraments during the same Liturgy. From an equally early date, the Roman Christian tradition has given them during the same Liturgy only if the bishop were present. If he were not, the priest would baptize, but Confirmation would wait until the bishop came to town or near the village. The bishop is the link between the local congregation and the worldwide Church. What the Roman tradition has emphasized is that the Holy Spirit is given not only for the individual Christian's or local congregation's good, but for the upbuilding and renewal of the mystical Body of Christ throughout the world.

When I was a bookish youngster, I was enormously impressed and slightly irritated with the great British diplomat and historian Arnold J. Toynbee's huge work, "A Study of History." That big and sprawling book describes the rise and fall of several civilizations and institutions, and claims to discern a pattern in those rises and falls. This pattern might be summarized as a cycle in which hardship and struggle produce good judgement, good judgement produces success, success produces overconfidence, overconfidence produces bad judgement, and bad judgement produces disaster. If the people aren't destroyed by the disaster, the cycle begins again, with hardship and struggle producing good judgement. In the course of that book, Toynbee used the Catholic Church's Papacy as an example of rising and falling more than once. He argued that one fall of the Papacy was consummated on 20 December 1046, with the humiliation of the Germano-Roman Emperor having to choose a new pope for a dysfunctional Roman Church. Out of that humiliation arose the determination and good judgement that produced a new cycle, one that saw the Papacy reach great heights but that ended on 20 September 1870, with Pius IX losing Rome and locking himself in the Vatican. Out of that humiliation arose the determination and good judgement that launched a new cycle.

As the pope and every member of the Church are human beings, they have the same sorts of patterns that all human beings have, including that cycle of hardship-good judgement-success-overconfidence-bad judgement-disaster. As the Spirit of Jesus is at work in them, they are always bearing fruit for eternal life even in the middle of disaster; and, even if they seem to be dead, they don't stay dead for, as the great G.K. Chesterton observed, the Church and the popes have a Lord Who knows His way out of a tomb.

As the Spirit of the Lord Jesus pulls His Church out of disaster and even the tomb, the Holy Spirit does not work only through popes. Indeed, often the Holy Spirit does not work mainly through popes. They are always important, but quite often the Church comes to life again, not starting from the center and then radiating out to local congregations. but from local congregations and then flowing into the center.

Consider that during the 19th Century, even while the Papacy was being humiliated in Rome and Italy, the Catholic Church was coming back to life in Europe. One of the biggest surprises of the 19th Century was the Catholic revival in Europe. This revival was not planned by the men at the Vatican. Humanly speaking, it was unplanned, though the Holy Spirit certainly had a plan. Suddenly, in the remote French village of Ars, there was a parish priest, Jean-Baptiste Vianney, whose personal holiness was, by the work of the Holy Spirit, so great and evident that it set fire to the clergy and people of an entire national church. Suddenly, in another remote French village, named Lourdes, there was a girl, Bernadette Soubirous, who was touched by the Holy Spirit in such a way that the Lord used her as His Mother's messenger of repentance and hope for the industrial age. Suddenly, in the slums of the Italian city of Turin, there was a parish priest, John Bosco, who was touched by the Spirit to begin a working men's program of Christian education and formation that brought hope and enthusiasm into the slums that seem somehow inseparable from all of the benefits of the industrial age. Suddenly, in the halls of Oxford University, an Anglican clergyman named John Henry Newman was touched by the Holy Spirit not just to become Catholic but to become the instrument through whom a generation of intellectuals learned that Catholicism is not unintelligent, and has much to offer those among the wise of the world who are willing to lesson, and also through whom a Protestant nation was enabled to rediscover its Catholic roots. Suddenly, the long quiet and meek German Catholics of a thousand congregations were moved by the Spirit to discover that they had courage and a voice, such that they rose up non violently, and non violently forced the militant bureaucracy of the New Germany to back down from its attack on the Church, which was revealed to be not even mostly dead, but increasingly alive.

I think that you can see what I am trying to say. Don't ask so much what the Pope, God bless him, will do to revive the Church. Ask what the Holy Spirit is calling and empowering you to do. As priest, mothers, (happy Mother's Day!), fathers, children, students, workers, farmers, teachers, and prayers, what is the Spirit of Jesus Christ, received in Baptism and Confirmation, calling and empowering us to do? From one saint and from one congregation can come a spark of Spirit enkindled fire to enlighten a nation and warm up a Church.

Over the past few years, more than a few places in Europe and North America have seen an unexpected surge in Catholic activity and conversion, especially among young people. With all due respect to Rome, this is not the result of a cleverly conceived and centrally directed plan. Like all truly Catholic movements, it respects the Papacy as the visible center of the Church's unity, but also doesn't just wait for orders from headquarters. Touched by the Holy Spirit, it sees what must be done and, guided by Scripture and nourished by the Sacraments, goes to work at doing what must be done.

Let that be so with us. There are those who talk as though everything today is sin and shame, and there is sin and shame enough. Such, it seems to me, is often the moment when the Spirit of Jesus Christ shows us the way out of the tomb, and enables us to say to a startled world, "Why do you seek the Living One among the dead?"

