

MASS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT  
THE CENTER FOR PASTORAL LEADERSHIP  
AUGUST 23, 2025

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READINGS:  
Isaiah 42:1-3 [#764-2]  
Psalm 104  
Ephesians 4:1-4 [#765-12]  
Mark 1:9-11 [#768-4]

Good morning, everyone!

This past week I had the privilege of being on retreat at the Jesuit Retreat Center with the Saint Mary seminarians. At breakfast on Wednesday morning, Joe Rohan asked me if I had done any “fun” reading over the summer. The first book that came to mind was an audio book that I listened to while driving around the diocese in early June. It was a history book. (A little shout out to Fr. Pat Manning and the value of knowing our history!) The book was about the Vatican’s intelligence gathering and espionage network during World War II – *Church of Spies: The Pope’s Secret War Against Hitler* by Mark Riebling.

It was a “fun” read. Joe’s question led to a lively discussion on other books that some of the seminarians at table had read during their summer break.

Joe’s question and today’s Scripture readings – yes, there is a connection hopefully between that Wednesday morning discussion and today’s liturgy. So, Joe’s question and today’s Scripture readings led me to reflect upon some other “fun” reading that I did during the summer months. One book came to mind. It’s entitled: *The Ideal Bishop: Aquinas’ Commentaries on the Pastoral Epistles* by Dr. Michael G. Sirilla, who is on the faculty at Franciscan University in Steubenville. It’s a version of his doctoral dissertation.

And yes, it was a “fun” read – daunting, thought provoking, challenging, overwhelming, frightening – and “fun.”

According to Dr. Sirilla, in his mature period as a theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas personally founded a *studium* – a school – in Rome. From 1265 to 1268, during his three-year regency in Rome, Thomas delivered 360 lectures on Saint Paul’s letters. These included Aquinas’ reflections on Saint Paul’s first and second letters to Timothy and his letter to Titus. The focus of these specific lectures was the episcopacy – the foundation for the bishop’s ecclesial life, his role in the Church, the purpose of his ministry, the virtues he needs to develop, and the vices he needs to avoid.

In Saint Paul's Pastoral Epistles, Aquinas discerned that a bishop must first be a man living in mystical union with Christ, only then can he expect to fulfill his office of leading others to live lives originating from an intimate relationship with Jesus. Aquinas highlights the call to conversion and commitment to holiness as essential features of the episcopal office. In Thomas' estimation, the bishop must not only be converted to Christ but also quite advanced in living in intimate friendship with Christ. The bishop must be dedicated to conforming his thinking to the mind of Christ and having his desires converted and conformed to the will of Christ. Again, if the role of the bishop is to assist the members of his flock to grow in holiness, then he himself must be living a holy life.

Aquinas notes that this is impossible without the gift of the Holy Spirit. God always gives the grace, the gifts, and the guidance needed to fulfill one's ministry within the Church. Let me say that again: *God always gives the grace, the gifts, and the guidance needed to fulfill one's ministry within the Church.* However, Aquinas also insists that while God provides what is needed, the bishop must be faithful in his response to and cultivation of the grace and gifts that are given – even if it means embracing criticism, rejection, and martyrdom in his ministry.

Conversion, holiness, and fidelity to the gift of the Holy Spirit. Intimate friendship with Jesus. Mystical union. Ministry, mission, and martyrdom. All for the sake of dedicating one's life to leading others to intimate friendship with Christ by loving God and neighbor in a holy life and selfless service.

Daunting, thought provoking, challenging, overwhelming, frightening – and my summary doesn't even scratch the surface of how Aquinas suggests that this be practically and concretely lived out daily in the bishop's life.

Now before you start thinking: Better you than me, brother! Consider this – and here's the connection to today's Scripture readings – finally! Saint Paul wrote to Timothy, who was the bishop of Ephesus. In today's second reading, Paul is writing to Timothy's flock, the Ephesians.

“Brothers and sisters, I, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received...”

Our present reading translates the Greek word *parakalō* as “urge.” Other translations use “beseech” or “beg.”

“I beg...” “I beg you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received...”

“...as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism...”

What is Saint Paul telling us? It’s not just the bishop who is responsible for living in a manner worthy of his call. It’s all of us! “I beg you...”

And what does Saint Paul identify as the origin of our call? “...one Lord, one faith, one baptism...” Which brings us to today’s Gospel – the account of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan from the Gospel according to Mark.

Jesus immersed in the waters of the Jordan – an amazing, radical, and mystifying event! The Son of God baptized by John whose preaching centered on the call to conversion and the forgiveness of sins. If baptism is solely about eradicating Original Sin, forgiving all sin, and moving one towards conversion of life, then there would be no need for Jesus to be baptized since none of those things did he need. So, there must be something more to baptism, some deeper meaning and reality, for Christ to submit Himself to John’s baptismal ministry.

“On coming up out of the water [Jesus] saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’”

Identity – not forgiveness of sins, not the invitation to conversion of life. Identity revealed. Jesus is Spirit-filled, Spirit-led, and Spirit-gifted. Jesus is Beloved. Jesus’ life and ministry is founded upon and permeated by His identity, by His intimate relationship with the Father in the Spirit as beloved Son for God’s People – baptized – identified – *for* God’s People, *for* us!

And, He is the origin of our call. “...one Lord, one faith, one baptism...” Through Him, and with Him, and in Him, we are given our identity, baptized as beloved daughters and sons of the same Father in the same Spirit! Jesus calls us to intimate friendship with Him, the Father, and the Spirit. He challenges and supports us in living a life of ongoing conversion, growth in holiness, and fidelity to the gifts the Holy Spirit imparts uniquely upon each of us. Jesus invites us to share in his ministry, mission, and martyrdom – in other words, to live the Paschal Mystery by going out of ourselves and giving of ourselves to others in loving and selfless service.

“I beg you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received...”  
With humility and patience, through love, preserving the unity of the Spirit...  
Not crying out, not shouting, not complaining or gossiping, not bruising the  
other to the point of breaking, or quenching the work of the Spirit even when  
it seems to be smoldering. In gentleness and peace.

Like Aquinas’ understanding of the bishop’s life and ministry, we are all  
called – though distinctively diverse in our vocations and ministerial  
responsibilities – to live in manner worthy of the call we have received.

Daunting, thought provoking, challenging, overwhelming, frightening –  
yes! Yet, not without hope because of who Jesus is, because of the Spirit  
given, and because of Father’s baptismal pronouncement: You are my beloved  
daughter, my beloved son.

Let the heavens be torn open then! That’s what this year of formation  
must be about for each of us. Let the heavens be torn open and the Spirit  
descend. Formation is a time of encounter. It is a willingness to enter into the  
divine and human dialogue that occurs in classrooms, in field ed assignments,  
in chapel, in formation meetings, in spiritual direction, in conversations at  
meals, in community service, in solitude and silence and prayer.

For those of us in ministry and those who aspire to minister in the name  
of the Bishop and the Church, if we are to guide others in the call to  
conversion and growth in holiness of life, then we ourselves must be  
committed, determined, and faithful to walking courageously this way of  
Christ before and with them. With the help of the Holy Spirit then, let the  
heavens be torn open – and our hearts, minds, and lives as well. Let Jesus  
have His way with us this year to form and conform our lives to His.

Daunting, thought provoking, challenging, overwhelming, frightening –  
yes! And so we pray: Come, Holy Spirit! Beg us to live in a manner worthy of  
the call we have received. Come, Holy Spirit, and fill us with the life and grace  
of Jesus so that we may live and die daily for God’s People. Come, Holy Spirit,  
come!