

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

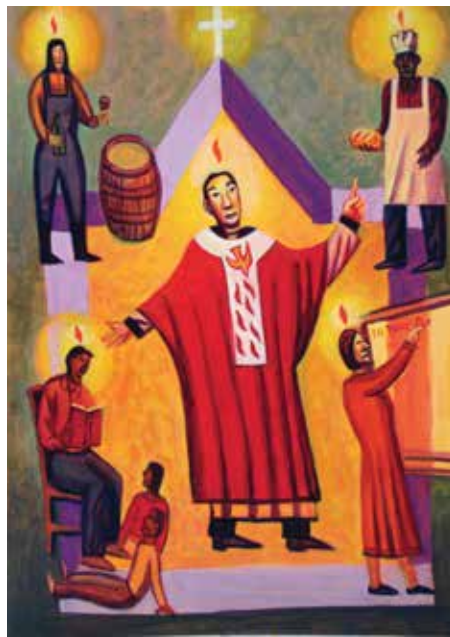
Kristopher W. Seaman

The professor in a medieval art history course asked her students, “How does one depict theological concepts in the medium of visual images, particularly paintings?”

She made the point that it is often easier to write or speak about theological concepts than to portray them through art. Yet, throughout Church history, creative individuals rose to the challenge of depicting theological concepts. We see, for example, theology and art meeting in portrayals of the Annunciation.

In certain medieval paintings of the Annunciation—the day when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary she would carry Jesus Christ—there is, at the top of the painting, an opening in the sky, with God the Father peering out, and a line leading from God the Father to Mary (on earth). Halfway down this line between Mary and the Father, is a kneeling Jesus, and in between Mary and Jesus is a dove representing the Holy Spirit. In this way, artists depicted theologically the scriptural account of Mary’s acceptance to carry Jesus Christ. Mary bears the Father’s gift of Christ through the power of the Spirit and becomes the first New Testament figure to receive the gift of the Spirit. This feast foreshadows a wider giving of the Spirit at Pentecost.

During the Fifty Days of Easter, we celebrate not only Jesus’ rising from the dead, but after forty days, his Ascension and promise to send the gift of the Spirit to the Apostles. Easter Time ends with Pentecost, a word that means fiftieth day. We can glean the importance of this day as we consider the significance of the numbers that comprise the Fifty Days. In the Old Testament, the number seven represents the universal number, and quite literally, from the creation story in the Book of Genesis, the day of completion—the day when all was “good,” and creation was complete. This day of completion, moreover, also has a symbolic quality of goodness, or more precisely, holiness—when God’s gift of salvation will be complete, when creation will be restored, and death/sin will no longer have sway. The Easter season contains not only seven days, but seven weeks, with each week, of course, containing seven days, and



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those weeks coming to forty-nine days. On the fiftieth day, Pentecost is celebrated. The multiplication of the number seven symbolizes a deep and prolonged time of celebrating Christ’s saving victory over sin and death.

If the Annunciation was the Father’s specific gift of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit to Mary, then Pentecost is the celebration that recognizes that, in Baptism, we were given Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit. We can see also that, in Sunday Eucharist, through the power of the Spirit, we receive Christ Jesus to strengthen, heal, and to continue to save us until the final completion at the end of time.

In some ways, Baptism and Eucharist are mini Pentecosts, days/events when we are gifted with the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit. This is why paintings and icons of Pentecost show Mary in the center (the perfect model of discipleship), with the Apostles, and a dove descending from above to the Church—a Church now formed, sustained and strengthened through its participation first in Baptism and subsequently every week as she hears Christ’s Word and shares his Body and Blood.

The Spirit, first given to Mary at the Annunciation, and later given to the Apostles, and subsequently given to Christian disciples, is a gift of God’s very self to transform us according to God’s will and divine love. Because of Pentecost, we too can share in God’s divine gift of victory through Jesus Christ.

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