

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Lent - Cycle C

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

If asked to name a favorite parable of Jesus, many people would pick the one we have just heard. The story of the prodigal son and his forgiving father has touched many people's hearts since it was first told by Jesus. Anyone who has experienced family disputes and misunderstandings and their accompanying alienation knows this perfectly well and understands this parable. It goes way beyond hurt feelings. It describes severing the bonds of love that should remain unbroken.

We easily visualize the father scanning the horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of his wayward son until the day he does see a familiar silhouette approaching. This sight sets off unbridled joy in the household as the hurts of the past are forgiven and forgotten. But there is one who balks at joining in the festivities: the elder son. He is offended and utters a version of that familiar adolescent complaint: "It's not fair."

We owe Saint Luke a great debt of gratitude. He alone among evangelists tells this parable. Every Christian can identify with the younger son, whose willfulness set him against his family. Gratefully, that was not the end of the story. The father waits as his younger son acts out his foolishness. Because, in a sense, we have all been there in one way or another, we are grateful for God's mercy and forgiveness. Because we are all forgiven sinners, we must not repeat the objections of the elder brother in the face of God's bountiful mercy that touches every sinner who repents.

The Lenten season is our opportunity to imitate the prodigal son and say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you" (v 18). God sees you, and God is waiting for you to offer His forgiveness to you through the ministry of His priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Like the wandering son who listens to the call in his heart, "comes to his senses" (v 17), and makes the decision to come home, we are embraced by our loving Father as we partake of the Eucharist and receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of His dearly beloved Son, Jesus Christ, into our hearts.

In our previous reflections on the Nicene Creed during this year marking the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, we looked at what it means to say, "I believe," and what we believe specifically about God the

Father and about the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Today I would like to offer some brief reflections on the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

There are two references to the Holy Spirit in the Nicene Creed. The first is in the section about Jesus Christ, when we say that “*by the Holy Spirit [Jesus] was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man.*” The second reference is more specifically about the Holy Spirit when we say, “*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.*” There is a lot of theological substance packed into that one sentence.

God is at times referred to as “Lord” in the Old Testament and Jesus is called “Lord” in the New Testament, so when we say that we “believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,” we affirm that the Holy Spirit is divine and is consubstantial with the Father and the Son as the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. As we read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “The One whom the Father has sent into our hearts, the Spirit of His Son, is truly God. Consubstantial with the Father and the Son, the Spirit is inseparable from them, in both the inner life of the Trinity and His gift of love for the world.

In adoring the Holy Trinity, life-giving, consubstantial, and indivisible, the Church's faith also professes the distinction of persons. When the Father sends his Word, He always sends his Breath. In their joint mission, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct but inseparable. To be sure, it is Christ who is seen, the visible image of the invisible God, but it is the Spirit who reveals him" (CCC 689).

Because the Spirit is invisible, some may question His existence. When I speak to candidates for Confirmation, I tell them that there are things that we cannot see that are quite real, like the air we breathe. We also cannot see wi-fi, so our cell phones and computers use bars to show when a signal is present and how strong it is. Similarly, the Holy Spirit uses different symbols to signify His presence. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit appears as cloud and light. "At the end of the flood, whose symbolism refers to Baptism, a dove released by Noah returns with a fresh olive-tree branch in its beak as a sign that the earth was again habitable. When Christ comes up from the water of his baptism, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, comes down upon Him and remains with Him" (CCC 701).

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes down upon the Apostles as tongues of fire. The Holy Spirit's action in the Sacrament of Baptism is

signified by water. The symbolism of anointing with consecrated oil, called Sacred Chrism, also signifies the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation and in the Ordination of Priests and Bishops. The Holy Spirit is also given through the imposition or laying on of hands.

The phrase professing that the Holy Spirit "*proceeds from the Father and the Son*" has been the source of much controversy and division in the Church. In Latin, the phrase "*and the Son*" is translated as "*filioque*." The affirmation of the *filioque* did not appear in the original version of the Creed. Pope St. Leo I, following an ancient Latin and Alexandrian tradition, proclaimed it dogmatically in 447. The use of this formula in the Creed was gradually admitted into the Latin liturgy between the eighth and eleventh centuries. The introduction of the *filioque* into the Nicene Creed by the Latin liturgy constitutes a point of disagreement with the Orthodox Churches that persists to this day. "At the outset, the Eastern tradition expresses the Father's character as the first origin of the Spirit. By confessing the Spirit as He 'who proceeds from the Father,' it affirms that He comes from the Father through the Son. The Western tradition expresses first the consubstantial communion between Father and Son, by saying that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*).

When we say that the Holy Spirit “*has spoken through the prophets,*” the faith of the Church here understands “all whom the Holy Spirit inspired in the composition of the sacred books, both of the Old and the New Testaments” (CCC 702).

Since we are all baptized “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” our very identity as Christians is rooted in our faith in the Holy Trinity and so we look to the grace of the Holy Trinity to keep us united in faith.

May God give us this grace. Amen.