

## **DON'T BE A 'STARCHED CHRISTIAN'**

I was amused recently when I read a homily in which Pope Francis cautioned us not to become “starched Christians,” but rather “courageous” ones. During the Pentecost Vigil he admonished, “We cannot become starched Christians, those overeducated Christians who speak of theological matters as they calmly sip their tea. No! We must become courageous Christians and go in search of the people who are the very flesh of Christ, those who are the flesh of Christ!”(1)

Starched Christians who discuss theology calmly sipping their tea... What a picture. And courageous Christians who go in search of people who are the body of Christ... What a contrast. I have been delighting in both the imagery and spontaneity of Pope Francis’ refreshing way of calling Catholics to live the Gospel today.

Pope Francis’ imagery was equally as vivid when he was discussing the actions of the Holy Spirit in our lives and church in light of the Second Vatican Council.(2) During a homily at a mass in honor of Benedict XVI’s birthday, he described a struggle between the Spirit who annoys us and our attempts to tame it.

“The council was a beautiful work of the Holy Spirit,” he said. “But after 50 years, have we done everything the Holy Spirit in the council told us to do?” His answer was a strong, “No!”

“To speak plainly: The Holy Spirit annoys us,” he said. The Spirit “moves us, makes us walk, pushes the church to move forward.” But he said we are too often like the apostles at the transfiguration. They say, “Oh, how nice it is to be here all together,” but “don’t bother us.” “We want the Holy Spirit to sleep,” he said. “We want to domesticate the Holy Spirit, and that just won’t do because he is God and he is that breeze that comes and goes, and you don’t know from where.”

And he used the image of “building a monument” as the way many want to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the council rather than by changing anything. Pope Francis cautioned, “... there are voices saying we should go back. This is called being hard-headed, this is called wanting to domesticate the Holy Spirit, this is called becoming ‘foolish and slow of heart,’” like the disappointed disciples on the road to Emmaus.

The same phenomenon can be at work in Christians’ personal lives, he said. “The Holy Spirit pushes us” to live the Gospel more seriously, but resistance is often our reply.

Aside from the breeze, Pope Francis’ expressions aren’t words or actions usually connected with the Holy Trinity in a whole new light.

They also invited me to reflect not only on resistance to the implementation of the council, but also on whether I am a “starched Christian” or a courageous one in my response to the Spirit today.

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1 Pope Francis, Pentecost Vigil, May 18, 2013

2 Pope Francis, April 16, 2013 homily in Domus Sanctae Marthae chapel