I. Introduction

If you know anything about the history of college football, and especially if you’re a Michigan Wolverines fan, you’ve probably heard of Tom Harmon. Over seventy years ago, he was a star running back at the University of Michigan, winning honors as an All-American in 1939 and 1940. A few years after this, however, he showed himself to be a hero or star performer in a much more important spiritual sense. During World War II he enlisted in the Army Air Corps and was trained as a pilot. Sometimes unarmed bombers were flown down to South America, and from there over to the war zone in North Africa. While piloting one of these planes, Harmon and his crew were forced to bail out over the Brazilian jungle. He was the only one who survived the jump, but his long-term chances didn’t look good. He had no water or supplies, and the jungle was a hot, steamy, dangerous place. Using his compass, Harmon set off in what he hoped was the right direction, carefully picking his way through a maze of vines, trees, and brush; he waded through swamps up to his hips, drank rain water that had pooled in plant leaves, and kept alert for possible threats from wild animals. Throughout this long and difficult ordeal, Harmon prayed almost constantly. Finally he spotted a path through the thick underbrush, and followed it to a native hut, where a tribesman showed him the way back to civilization. After his rescue, Harmon was asked how he had survived, when most people in a similar situation would have died. He responded, “The Holy Spirit dwells in my soul. He was given to me when the bishop confirmed me. I kept praying to the Holy Spirit to lead me. I also prayed my rosary continually. I must have said a million Hail Marys. I was sure the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Mother would lead me back to safety” (Tonne, Five-Minute Homilies, p. 29). This is a wonderful story of heroic trust and determination, and also an important reminder to us. Life is sometimes described as a jungle, fraught with challenges, confusion, and danger—but if we actively seek the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit, in the end we have nothing to fear.

II. Development

What the apostles did after Pentecost was nothing short of amazing; this tiny band of men with no worldly power or influence set into motion a religious revolution that converted millions, transformed ancient societies—and continues to do so today—and changed the course of history. The miracle of simultaneous translation described in the 1st Reading from the Acts of the Apostles was merely the beginning of many wonderful and unprecedented events associated with the earliest followers of Jesus—and none of this would have been possible without the Holy Spirit. As St. Paul tells us in the 2nd Reading, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit,” and it’s through the Holy Spirit we receive many different gifts and abilities. Each of these is intended to build up the Body of Christ, and to help bring about a spiritual unity and freedom beyond anything this world can understand or offer. In the Gospel, Jesus not only appeared to His apostles on Easter Sunday to
prove to them He was alive; He commissioned them to go forth in His Name, and He gave them the power to forgive sins—something no mere earthly authority can ever do. All humanity is trapped in sin, surrounded by temptation, and unable to find the way to eternal life—but through His Holy Spirit, present and active in the Church, Jesus offers us a way out, a sure path leading to the Kingdom of Heaven.

III. Conclusion

St. John Vianney, the famous 19th century parish priest in France, once preached a sermon titled “Children of the Holy Spirit and Children of the World.” He said that while children of this world live sinful, shallow lives—leaving them disastrously unready for death and judgment—children of the Holy Spirit live in a quite different manner. They show three characteristics in particular. First, they avoid committing serious sins, because these make it impossible for the Holy Spirit to live within us—and if such sins are committed, they are immediately confessed in the Sacrament of Penance, which today we call Reconciliation. Secondly, children of the Holy Spirit practice virtue. As St. John Vianney noted, “Just as the oil keeps the light [of an oil lamp] burning, and the flame is extinguished when the oil is all used, just so is the Holy Spirit—the light and fire of the soul—preserved within us by virtue and good works.” Thirdly, children of the Holy Spirit are persons of prayer, and in their prayer they often ask for the Spirit’s gifts. St. John quoted a beautiful prayer of St. Augustine from the 5th century, which goes: “Breathe perpetually, O Holy Spirit, Your holy work within me, that I may think upon it; move me, that I may do it; persuade me, that I may love You; strengthen me, that I may hold you fast; keep me, that I may not lose You!”

When we follow St. John Vianney’s advice by avoiding serious sin, by practicing virtue, and by praying for the Spirit’s gifts, we are living reverently and identifying ourselves as God’s children—and in this way, we can be absolutely sure the Holy Spirit will lead us safely through the doubts and difficulties and dangers of life. We’ll probably never find ourselves stranded in a jungle, but all of us are surrounded by turmoil, temptations, and trouble, and we’ll never be able to withstand these trials and find our way through on our own. The good news of Pentecost is that God the Father has not forgotten us, nor has Jesus abandoned us. They have sent the Holy Spirit to help us and protect us and guide us—and as long as we live as faithful members of Christ’s Church, develop a deep devotion to His Mother, and follow the lead of His Spirit in love and humility and trust, our future destiny of holiness and happiness is secure.