What difference can the Holy Spirit make in our life?

Well, let’s look at St. Paul’s life. With Paul, the Holy Spirit helped him spread the Gospel, build up communities in the earliest days of the church, pastor some very challenging young churches at a critical time, and helped him whip off some amazingly insightful, spiritually rich letters. And that is just a sample of the impact of the Holy Spirit.

You see, Paul didn’t take a long time to write letters, planning for them to be read centuries later. As soon as he heard about problems in one of his churches, his love for that community, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit would lead him fire off a letter to try to get the community back on track. Today’s second reading provides a good example.

There were some serious problems in Corinth. I won’t try to catalog them all. Let me just mention that there were factions, divided loyalties, pride, and all in all, a real need for lots of spiritual growth and maturity in community life. One specific problem revolved around charismatic, or ecstatic gifts, like speaking in tongues, prophecy, and ‘spiritual wisdom’. It seems some folks valued these gifts too highly, as the be all, end all, and looked down on people who didn’t have those gifts. That’s why last week, in section of the letter before this one, Paul taught how God gives many different gifts, and all are important. He even suggested that those gifts viewed as lesser may need to be afforded higher dignity. He was also clear: God gives gifts for the common good, not so that some folks can feel superior to others.

Well, last week’s passage laid the foundation, this week we hear Paul take on the problem head on. “If speak in human and angelic tongues, but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or clashing cymbal; and if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and knowledge but do not have love, I am nothing.” So much for special gifts, and looking down on others!

He continues a beautiful reflection on the virtue of love: what it looks like, sounds like, feels like, and acts like, while also making it clear what love isn’t: pompous, inflated, rude.

He wraps up with a final shot to correct spiritual elitism -- prophecies, tongues and knowledge will all pass away when we come into the presence of God. You see, the folks Paul is trying to steer back on track thought that through their special gifts, they had already arrived, that they were in a special union with God.

So back what the Holy Spirit can do.

The Holy Spirit helped him recognize a danger that could divide the community Jesus brought together, while giving a correct understanding of spiritual gifts.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit helped Paul see that the way to pastor a community in danger was to bring everyone back to love and humility.

The Holy Spirit even grounded Paul and deepened his confidence by giving him a glimpse of life beyond this one: we will, only then, know as we are known, we will experience God face to face.

We pray that insight in the Eucharistic prayer when we pray for those who have died, asking God: “Welcome them into the light of your face.” Truly, the Holy Spirit did show Paul a better
way! Notice too, Paul intended his letter for a specific situation, but through the Holy Spirit, the letter ended up providing guidance for centuries, and many different situations that Paul would never have imagined!

Love that is humble, other centered, always looking for what to praise is so much better than pride, competition, looking down on others, and disunity.

Just as the Holy Spirit helped Paul recognize dangers to the relationships in the community in Corinth, the Holy Spirit can help us recognize dangers that can damage our relationships.

The Holy Spirit can help us build up our relationships, and community, by constantly bringing us back to love, to humility, to seeking what is best for others.

The Holy Spirit may not make us the greatest evangelizer of all time, but it can help us announce the Gospel by the way we live, and by sharing with others what our faith does for us.

And the Holy Spirit can lead us to the truth that while we may not fully understand ourselves and what makes us tick now, one day it will all come together, when we will know as we are known, we will see God face to face, see the one in whose image we were made, without all the bumps and bruises caused by sin.

Put another way, The Holy Spirit can help us to take the wisdom, the insight into love given to St. Paul, and make it our own, apply it to our relationships and our life.

Here is one application: In preparing our young ones for 1st penance, I wanted them to understand that confession isn’t a once in a lifetime thing: we all need the sacrament, children, adults. So I asked: What do you think is the most common thing parents confess? They did figure out in their own words it had to do with patience, and that sometimes being patient with them might be pretty tough. Everyone struggles with patience. But that shouldn’t be a cause for despair; it can be a path to humility, and an invitation to turn to God for forgiveness, and continually pray for more patience.

Our second reading isn’t just for Corinth, it is for families too!

It even gives some wisdom for the world stage. How many conflicts raging around the world right now have roots in brooding over injuries? Sometimes, injuries that happened generations ago. The brooding doesn’t help a thing. How often is the total focus on putting the spotlight on wrong doing, rather than looking for truth to rejoice in? Wouldn’t this world be a better place if nations, and people in power and those who follow applied Paul’s wisdom to the world stage?

To wrap up, perhaps we can ask St. Paul to intercede, to pray for us. St. Paul, pray that we can find that connection to the Holy Spirit that made you such an incredible force for good.

Pray that we may not just hear what you teach about love, but that we can apply it well to our life each day.

Pray for us, that some of your love for Christ will rub off on us, that Christ might live in us, as Christ lived in you.