

Homily Pentecost B 27 May 2012

Those who know a little of my personality would readily agree that I could never be confused with a Pentecostal; at least, not w/ the stereotype we Catholics have of Pentecostals; to be fair, I find that the stereotype isn't all that accurate, sort of like the stereotypes attached to Catholics. Nonetheless, the stereotypical image of an exuberant, free-spirited worshiper given to loud unpredictable acclamations at church--gesticulating and dancing and singing in unfamiliar languages--does not exactly fit my profile. So I suppose that the Almighty chuckled a bit when he so arranged the liturgical calendar that the entry of this dry, analytical, reserved fellow into the ministerial priesthood occurred on Pentecost weekend: and so Pentecost will always have a funny but special place in my heart.

As mentioned, we Catholics have all kinds of ideas about Pentecostals, many of them unfair and inaccurate, which may make us suspicious of Pentecost itself. So we lose out on the chance to imbibe the Spirit of Pentecost and feast on the rich graces of this celebration. For Pentecost is the birthday of our Church. And on this special day all the graces necessary for the life and mission of the Christian community rushed upon the assembly of believers like a cyclone. There are a few aspects of the Holy Spirit's activity in the Church which merit attention. First, the Holy Spirit is the principle of life. Second, the Holy Spirit is the agent of healing. Third, the Holy Spirit is unifying force that keeps the Church together.

The HS is the principle of life. On the day of Pentecost the Church was created with a tremendous explosion of grace, a kind of spiritual Big Bang. There was a strong driving wind, there were tongues of fire from on high, and then there was inspirational preaching that compelled thousands to believe. I'm afraid that some Catholics forget the Church is a living reality, in fact, she is supposed to be the most vibrant reality on this earth, for she's filled with the Spirit of the living God. But our negligence of this fundamental fact leads to a bizarre attitude to the faith, a kind of deadening passivity. I fear that some folks' ideal of the Church is a sort of museum whose salient feature is a monotonous weekly rhythm which requires minimal participation by the attendees; they reduce discipleship to taking their designated seats in designated pews at a designated weekly time week after week from cradle to grave; so please don't move the furniture and don't you dare change the schedule. I think this explains why some Catholic liturgies can be rather lifeless. By contrast, a living reality makes its voice heard and its presence felt on the outside world. So Catholics should SING at Mass, as well as listen, observe, and respond, and do all these things wholeheartedly. And Catholics should also let their faith shape and drive engagement with the world outside the four walls of the church building. This includes active evangelization of the non-practicing and the unchurched, as well as dedicated efforts toward a more just and humane society through means of the political process and charitable assistance to the needy.

The HS is the agent of healing. And that makes the Church a kind of hospital for sinners. One fact that pastoral ministry has impressed upon me is that the magnitude of some people's pains is so great that they can't be fixed or cured by any human means, be it psychology or medicine or group therapy or positive thinking: words and hugs and pills just don't bind up the deepest wounds of the human heart. We need God's help to forgive and be forgiven, to find peace and healing, to exorcize the demons--figurative as well as literal--that bedevil the human spirit. We would do well to reach out more often for the Holy Spirit's healing touch, esp. in the sacraments of healing instituted for this very purpose, namely Penance and Anointing. We also must pray more intentionally and more zealously for those who are hurting among us.

Finally, the HS is the unifying force that keeps the Church together. On Pentecost, the disciples spoke in various tongues to people from every nation under the sun, but this spectacular demonstration of the Spirit's power was not an end in itself: the polyglot proclamation got people's attention so they would listen to Peter's inspired sermon, a faith-filled homily which then brought these diversified throngs from the furthest reaches of the world into a unified communion. At Pentecost the diversity of the human race coalesced into the variegated unity of the Church. As mentioned above, the Church is alive, and that implies she is a unified being. For healthy organisms are marked by unity of purpose which coordinates the activity of their assorted members. Dying organisms, by contrast, are indicated by the disordered and disorganized operations of the various parts--cells grow uncontrollably and form tumors, the heart beats out of rhythm, the nervous system loses control of the limbs--which process of decline culminates in the total disintegration of the body after death. The divisions and discord that have too often marked ecclesial life the past few decades are symptoms of spiritual and moral disease infecting the Body of Christ. A healthy Church should be characterized by a spirit of concord, mutual respect, and genuine fraternal affection; when the Catholic Church is vibrant, she is a wildly diversified communion that embraces every race, language, and walk of life and unites this bewildering variety of individuals into the one flock of Christ under the pastoral guidance of Peter. And so all the faithful should strive for a unified Church. In this way, our community can become a sanctuary for peace for those within her walls and a more effective instrument of evangelization in the world. But if this noble goal is to be achieved, we're going to require help from on high. Let's beseech the Spirit of Pentecost to pour forth anew the gift of peace upon our divided house, that a reconciled Church can once more become a force for reconciling the fractured human family.

On this glorious feast of Pentecost, I encourage everyone to pray that the Spirit will descend again on our Church. Let's ask the Lord to open our hearts to receive him, so that our community may be filled to overflowing with his gifts of life, healing, and mutual love.