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June 5, 2022

Solemnity of Pentecost

"Out of sight, out of mind." We all know this proverb, and we all know what it means. When something is not visibly present before us, we can forget its reality. This is often not a good thing. When we do not see the water leakage in our basement, it only postpones dealing with the problem. When a dear friend who lives out of town is not with us, we can begin to forget the joy and the power of that relationship. This loss that comes from not seeing is only intensified when it comes to the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is God's invisible presence to us. Because we cannot see the Holy Spirit, there is always the risk that we put the presence of God out of our minds and thereby rob ourselves of the comfort and power of God's love.

So, what can we do to remember God's invisible presence? What steps can we take to assure that we realize that God is with us? Today's first reading from the Book of Acts offers us a way forward. In that reading the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples in visible form, in tongues of fire. Now I realize, the Holy Spirit doesn't come to us in our lives in tongues of fire. But there are concrete qualities to fire that can serve as signs of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives.

Fire is warmth, light, and burning. When we find ourselves in a cold and empty place, perhaps resulting from the death of someone that we love, or a special relationship that has broken up, or a mistake that we have made which has tremendously impacted our families, we feel hollow and numb. Then our 5-year-old climbs on our lap and gives us a hug. A friend makes us laugh. Our spouse finds just the right words to say. And for the first time in weeks, we can take a deep breath and feel the blood move again within us. Those moments of humanity and hope that occur to us in the cold are the warmth of the Holy Spirit's fire. Sometimes things are confusing and dark. We have problems that will not yield to us: how to resolve a negative financial situation, how to speak to a teenage son or daughter who is acting out, how to deal with an aging parent. In such confusion we are paralyzed. Then we see a step we can take, a conversation that we can begin. That insight, that path through the darkness, is the light of the Holy Spirit's fire.

Sometimes we know things are wrong in our family, in our church, or in our world. We realize that we have been ignoring and facilitating drug or alcohol abuse by a member of our family. We are scandalized by the way that our bishops have mishandled child sexual abuse. We look at the political scene, and instead of service we see self-promotion. In place of honesty, there are lies. An anger grows within us, and we say, "This is not right. This needs to change. I must do something." That powerful force within us moving us to do what is right is the burning of the Holy Spirit's fire.

The Holy Spirit is invisible but real. That is why it is important to be attentive to the way that the Spirit touches us with warmth, light, and burning. Now, on this Pentecost Day, let us pray: Come Holy Spirit, give us your fire. Warm us, enlighten us, and if necessary, singe us, so that we might know that you are with us and might believe that you will never let us go.