

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!
By Al Mansfield
PENTECOST SUNDAY

Acts 2:1-11
Psalm 104
1 Cor. 12:3-7, 12-13
Sequence
John 20: 19-23

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

Most Catholics would probably identify Christmas and Easter as great feasts of the Church. Perhaps not as many would think of Pentecost in that way. But indeed it is! Pentecost is called the “birthday of the Church.”

Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and was born of the womb of the Virgin Mary, his mother. Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit and was “born” into a resurrected life from the womb of the tomb. So the Church, the Body of Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, was born on Pentecost Sunday from the womb of the Upper Room of prayer. We celebrate that birthday today!

ACTS

In chapter 1 of Acts, St. Luke describes how Jesus ascended into heaven after appearing to his followers for forty days after his resurrection. Luke tells us that the apostles and “the company” (about 120) gathered in the Upper Room and devoted themselves to prayer, “together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.”

On Pentecost Sunday, after nine days of prayerful waiting, the group experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit, accompanied with the “noise like a strong, driving wind,” and “tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them.”

Scripture is clear that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues.” A crowd gathered and those from different countries who spoke various languages were amazed as they understood what the Galileans were proclaiming - “the mighty acts of God.” The Responsorial, Psalm 104, asks the Lord to “send out your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.”

FIRST CORINTHIANS

The second reading from First Corinthians concerns the charisms or spiritual gifts. St. Paul stresses the diversity of gifts but unity of service and purpose. Someone has counted 27 different charismatic gifts mentioned throughout the New Testament. Oddly enough, this reading skips over mentioning any of them.

St. Paul emphasizes that “to each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.” Everyone should be prepared to receive and exercise the gifts of the Spirit to build the kingdom of God.

SEQUENCE

The Pentecost Sequence, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, (“Come Holy Spirit”), is sometimes called the Golden Sequence. Unfortunately, it sometimes goes “the way of all sequences,” and gets omitted, either by intention or neglect.

The titles and invocations of the Holy Spirit are beautiful and masterful. Two especially expressive strophes are as follows:

Heal our wounds, our strength renew;

On our dryness, pour Thy dew;

Wash the stains of guilt away.

Bend the stubborn heart and will

Melt the frozen, warm the chill;

Guide the steps that go astray.

I find this one of the most beautiful and powerful prayers in the liturgy, not only for Pentecost but for any day and every day. My wife and I started praying it daily during our engagement and still continue doing so after more than 50 years of marriage.

GOSPEL

The gospel presents Jesus imparting the Holy Spirit to the apostles on Easter Sunday evening. Jesus “breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.’”

Whereas this impartation of the Holy Spirit is to the apostles alone and has to do specifically with the power to forgive sins, the outpouring described in Acts is a public manifestation of the Spirit with external and extraordinary phenomena. The Holy Spirit is given for interior sanctification and for sacramental ministry, as well as for evangelistic mission and charismatic activity.

STILL A GREAT FEAST

For the Israelites, Pentecost originally marked the beginning of the wheat harvest. Later, it became associated with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. It was always celebrated fifty days after Passover. It was, and still is, a great feast for the Jewish people.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit – the promise of the Father, power from on high, the New Law – was the culmination of Jesus’ ministry. Pope Benedict XVI said, “The entire mission of the Messiah could be summarized in this: to baptize mankind in the Holy Spirit.” So the next time you’re asked to name the greatest Christian feasts – be sure to include Pentecost!