

Pentecost 2022

The feast of Pentecost is often called the “birthday of our Church.” That is a good description and also a bad one. It is and it isn’t. Why?

Because it carries with it certain assumptions and distortions.

By that I mean to say that when we think of Pentecost as the birthday of our Church we most likely unconsciously think of our Church as we know her today.

But look at this way if you will; when Pentecost happened and our Church was born, there WAS no Church as we know it today. There was no St. Peter’s Square, that would come some sixteen centuries later.

There was no such thing as the Vatican. That would come some eighteen centuries later. There was no pope donning armor like Julius II and going to war against his enemies to defend papal territory because there was no papal territory. All of that would come later.

There were no encyclicals. That first one was written in 1730. There were no cardinals that rank was created in the eleventh century. There was no canon law until the twelfth century. There were no church buildings or basilicas or cathedrals until the fourth century. There were no brothers, sisters or monks.

There were no Jesuits - they were founded only 400 years ago. The Benedictine order was founded 1500 years ago. But they weren't there at the beginning of our Church.

None of them were. All – or some – of the organizational growth of the succeeding centuries was certainly necessary, but it had the unfortunate effect of making everyone identify our Church with her real estate, her bureaucracy, her titles, and offices and laws instead of with the PEOPLE themselves.

But remember, the Holy Spirit fell on people that first Pentecost, and our church – composed of those inspired people was born.

The Spirit didn't fall on the structures or the externals for as we have seen, there were none. The Spirit fell on fisherman, carpenters, housewives, tax collectors, and some rather seedy marginal people and joined and attached and bonded them together by three things; baptism, the breaking of the bread, and by their witness.

Baptism, the breaking of the bread and witness. These were the basics of being Church. The presumption was that each one upon whom the Spirit fell had gifts to use to spread the Gospel.

That is why St Paul could write to the people of Corinth so forcefully about what it meant to be church. Again, he said:

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service, but the same Lord; there are different workings by the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.

That is church. So you see, when you come right down to it, the miracle of Pentecost was not the disciples speaking in different languages and the people around them understanding what they were saying.

The miracle was that they were saying it in the first place. The miracle was that ordinary people who recently had been hiding in fear suddenly were church and going around telling other people all about it.

Here is a little story: When Sally was in the third grade her family moved to Oregon and every day the bus would pick her up, like it did all the other kids, and then drop her off at the end of the day.

In her case, when the bus came back from school in the afternoon, her brother was almost always waiting for her by the fence that surrounded their house. He was a couple years older than Sally but didn't go to her school.

Some of the other kids on the bus used to look for him and when they saw him they would laugh. They laughed at him because somehow they recognized that he was different. He looked and acted differently from the other kids.

They didn't know why and some of them on the bus didn't understand, so they laughed. They would wave at him and they would shout at him and he would get excited and wave back only to make them laugh all the more.

When Sally got off the bus her brother would jump up and down and run to meet her. And to the others kids surprise, Sally didn't seem at all embarrassed, though she knew behind her the kids on the bus were having a great time making fun of him.

She would greet her brother with a hug him and every so often she would drop her books on the ground and throw both arms around him. And then, hand in hand, the two of them would march into the house.

Again Sally was only in the third grade, but she had already learned the very important lesson of Christian love – at her church - in her religious education classes.

It took time – the rest of the school year, as a matter of act, but toward the end the kids on the bus gradually seemed to understand more and that somehow it was not right to be mocking Jimmy and the mocking began to subside.

When any of them would ask Sally about her brother, she would simply say that he was “special” and would never be like the other kids, but that didn't matter - he was her brother and she loved him.

And you know, by the end of the school year the kids on the bus were still waving and shouting at Jimmy but it wasn't in mockery; it was with kindness and compassion - and he would wave back.

Sally rode that bus for five more years until she went to High School. But the image of those daily visits of Sally embracing her brother and the evolving reaction of the kids on the bus remained with those kids for much much longer.

Else you would not have heard this story which was shared with me by a now forty-year-old woman who was one of those kids on the bus.

And do you not suppose that remembrance of little Sally and her brother Jimmy in any way influenced those kids who are now all adults? Did it perhaps make them even a tad more sensitive and compassionate – a little more Christian? And what have they taught their kids?

And please note: The Vatican, the titles of priest, bishop, cardinal and pope, or neither the real estate or all the buildings were ever mentioned or thought of at all. No, it was the witness of Sally and her brother that made the difference – showed them church.

And that, in fact, is why the vast majority of people convert – join our church. Not because of lofty doctrines and loftier buildings but because they see our Church in the actions and in the lives of people who make up our Church.

Let me put it this way; if we could transport ourselves from this building and set down in the middle of the desert – we would still be church. If we would gather in a cave to celebrate a Eucharist, if we would meet in a barn to baptize our babies, and if we bear witness to others we would be church.

We have been baptized, we celebrate the Eucharist, and we witness, that makes us church. Baptism, Eucharist and witness still are our defining identities as they were on that first Pentecost, when our Church was born.

Everything else - the Vatican, canon law, this church building - is very helpful and I love those parts of our Church as well, but they are basically secondary and supplementary support to our primal identity of the PEOPLE as the church of Jesus Christ.

So finally, if someone should ask you, “Tell me, what is the Church of St. Philip like? “ You might be tempted to describe this lovely building and the beautiful grounds. But of course, you would be wrong.

The building is merely where our church meets to worship, just as your work place or school or store, our park or wherever is where our church meets to witness, or the home where our church gathers to grow, or our neighborhood where our church helps her neighbors.

The more appropriate response is “the Church at St Philip is made up of warm, caring and gifted people,” and then as an afterthought. Oh yes, and the buildings are nice too.