

Homily of Pentecost Sunday of Year A, 2023

Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104:1, 29-34; 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23

The Church was conceived when Jesus said to Peter, "You are the rock, upon you I will build my Church" (Matthew 16:18). But the Church was born on Pentecost Sunday with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles and empowered them to witness Christ.

Among the Jews in the Old Testament, the feast of Pentecost was when Jewish pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem from various parts of the world: Europe, Asia, and Africa to celebrate the festival of thanksgiving for the first fruits of their harvest (Numbers 28:26). While the crowds were celebrating, the apostles were in the upper room and stayed in prayer.

We read in the first reading, "Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, 'Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans?'" The miracle is that God transmitted the message of the apostles in Aramaic to the understanding of those who spoke other languages. In Genesis, God used language to disperse the builders of the Tower of Babel (Genesis: 11:1-9). During the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, God used language to unite all peoples. Jesus Christ is not only the name; he is also the language that unites humanity. St. Paul writes that Jesus came to break down barriers of disunity and hostilities to create "one new humanity" (Ephesians 2:16). Among the gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to St. Paul (1 Corinthians 12:9-10, 28) are varieties of tongues and interpretation of tongues. The Catholic Church has the fullness of these gifts and is able to speak every tongue and interpret every tongue in the world.

One of the lessons of the events of the Tower of Babel and Pentecost Sunday is that what we communicate has the power to build or destroy, unite or scatter, and give life or take life. The gift of tongue is at its fullness when the tongue utters what builds, unites, and gives life. What is the effect of your tongue?

The Holy Spirit in some people is either inactive or minimally active. Some people, although have received the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Holy Communion, and may have received some other Sacraments, are like the believers in Ephesus whom Paul asked, "'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They answered him, 'We have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit'" (Acts 19:2). The celebration of Pentecost Sunday is a prayer for our individual Pentecost experience, to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. St. Paul urges us, "I invite you to fan into flame the gift of God you received through the laying on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6).

Unfortunately, some people have driven the Holy Spirit completely away from themselves and from their environment by their works of darkness. We pray that such people may come to conversion.

It is important to reflect on why the Church, on Pentecost Sunday, presents to us the appearance of Jesus to his disciples, as recorded in St. John's Gospel. The disciples locked themselves up in a room for fear of the Jews. But Jesus passed through the locked doors, stood in their midst, and blessed them with peace and the power of the Holy Spirit. He replaced their fear with peace and empowered them with the Holy Spirit to free them from self-imprisonment. Fear, or guilt, or shame, or self-pity, or anger, or unforgiveness, or failure, or inadequacy, or sin, or despair may have driven someone to lock himself or herself up. Someone may have been locked up by spiritual or physical forces beyond his or her control. May our celebration today bring Pentecost experience to everyone. May every chain and every lock be broken by the power of the Holy Spirit! Amen. St. Paul declares, for you and for me, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). May we receive the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding to guard our hearts and our minds in Jesus Christ. Amen. (Philippians 4:7).

Jesus, in today's gospel, addresses one of the locks that keeps the Holy Spirit away, and that is unforgiveness. Jesus says, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." This means, if I refuse to forgive, the sin is retained in me. A retained sin is cancerous to the soul of the retainer. Let us conclude with this story:

A teacher asked her students to bring some tomatoes to class. The teacher gathered all the tomatoes and distributed the tomatoes to the students according to the number of students each student hates. Some got two, some three, some five, some ten, and some got more. The teacher told them to take the tomatoes with them everywhere they went for two weeks. Within a few days, the tomatoes began to rot and smell. After a week, the teacher asked the students how the assignment was going. The children complained of the inconvenience, the awful smell, and the weight, especially the students who got several tomatoes. The teacher said, "This is very similar to what hatred does to our hearts. Hatred poisons the heart. If you cannot bear the smell of rotten tomatoes for a week, how much more the impact of bitterness of hatred on our hearts which we carry for longer periods?"

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