

PENTECOST SUNDAY, YEAR A, 2020

1. The beginning of the Church

Today we hear of the humble beginnings of the Church, where the 12 apostles of Jesus are gathered in one room, probably still frightened and unsure of what they are meant to do after the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. And yet, in the miraculous sign of the Holy Spirit descending upon them and giving them the gift of tongues, they are given the grace and courage necessary to proclaim the Truth of Jesus Christ to the entire world. In that miracle of the “people from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) hearing the apostles speak in their own language while the apostles all speak with one voice, we see foreshadowed the spread of the Catholic Church to all nations, speaking every tongue but proclaiming in unity the same Truth of Christ’s message.

We hear it beautifully expressed by a sixth century Christian writer who says, “And so if anyone says to one of us: ‘You have received the Holy Spirit; why do you not speak in tongues?’, he should reply: ‘I do speak in every tongue. For I am in the Body of Christ, the Church, which speaks in every tongue. For what did God signify by the presence of the Holy Spirit if it was not that His Church would speak in every tongue?’”¹

2. The Spirit – unity of faith, practice and worship.

And so for us, as throughout the entire history of the Church, although there is a variety of gifts of the Spirit, the fundamental gift of the Spirit is unity in the love and truth of Christ. It is the gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Blessed Trinity, guiding the Church through time and keeping her faithful to the teachings of her Lord and Master, so that we can be sure that when She does solemnly teach something in His name, it is the divine truth of Jesus Christ and is free from error. It is not a gift she claims for herself. No human being could make such a claim unless they were divine.

But Jesus is divine and he did make such a claim. It is Jesus who claims that he will send the Holy Spirit from the Father and that “everything he tells you will be taken from what is mine” (John 16:15). But there is more to it than just a one-off gift. It is the perpetual presence of God in His Church, gently leading her to the fullness of truth. As Jesus says, “I still have many things to say to you but they would be too much for you now. But when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth” (John 16:13).

It is here, from the words of Jesus, that we begin to see the meaning of the *magisterium* of the Church and its claim to teach on faith and morals with the authority of Christ. It is the claim that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in such

¹ Office of readings, Saturday 7th Sunday of the year.

decisions so that as new problems and situations arise, the Church can apply the teachings of Christ to new situations in continuity with the words of Christ and the teaching of the Scriptures.

And that stands to reason, because in 33 AD, or thereabouts, when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, there did not exist the same moral or theological problems as there do today. There was no threat from, say, nuclear weapons; there was no theory of evolution to grapple with; the meaning of marriage was probably more readily understood and accepted, and so on. But these are all problems of faith and morals in our day that must be addressed and answered by a God who is love, because true love can never be separated from the truth. Indeed, it is often the case that the most loving thing to do is to tell the truth - with compassion, yes, of course (there was no one more compassionate than Jesus) - but not compassion divorced from the truth. Such compassion is a false love which does not seek the true good of the other. True love of the other is itself directed by the truth and towards the truth (namely, Jesus Christ); and it is a truth that liberates us from the sins of our own "self-indulgence", as St Paul says in the second reading, and instead gives us a very different experience of "joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control"

That, unfortunately, does not mean that the Church will be free from scandal brought about by the actions of her members, be they priests, nuns, laity or even Popes – as we are all sadly too aware. The gift of the Holy Spirit was not a promise that her members would be impeccable; it was ultimately a promise that the Church would have the authority to teach infallibly.

3. Pastoral Exhortation

This Feast of Pentecost, at the very end of Eastertide, we are encouraged to rejoice in the birth of the Church. And so we should! Because our rejoicing is not in our own merits; it is in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ by calling us to be members of His one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Let us pray to the Lord, that he may give us the Spirit of Truth to discern in our own lives what is truly from God and what is the fruit of self-indulgence; so that others may more readily see us as faithful members His Body, which speaks different languages but proclaims the one, true faith by the gift of the Holy Spirit.