

Homily for Pentecost Sunday

May 28, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11 (Descent of the Holy Spirit.)

Responsory: Psalm 104 (Lord, send out your spirit, and renew the face of the earth.)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 (Many gifts, but the same Spirit.)

Sequence: Veni, Sancte Spiritus (Come, Holy Spirit)

Gospel: John 20:19-23 (Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into his disciples.)

When we Christians think of the Holy Spirit, our minds often turn immediately to the memorable scene in the Upper Room described in today's first reading. We remember the noise like a strong driving wind, the tongues as of fire, and the Apostles speaking in tongues. But, that dramatic spectacle captures only a small part of the Mystery that we celebrate at Pentecost. The entire Liturgy of the Word today probes that mystery in a variety of ways, leading us to a richer understanding of the Holy Spirit.

The most ancient biblical text commonly used on Pentecost Sunday is Psalm 104: "Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth." If you ponder that for just a moment, you might wonder how a *pre-Christian* text could possibly refer to the Holy Spirit. At the time of the psalm's composition, there was no concept of a Divine Person called "the Holy Spirit." The "spirit of God" of which the Psalmist speaks was understood not as a *being*, but rather, as a *life force* that emanates from God to create and sustain all life on earth. The same Hebrew word is translated in different verses as "spirit" and "breath," for it's the breath of life on which all living things depend for their existence. Hence, the Psalmist says of all living creatures, "If you (God) take away *their breath*, they perish and return to their dust. When you send forth *your spirit*, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth."

By the latter part of the first century A.D., when all of today's readings were composed, Christians had come to believe in a *Holy Spirit*, an "Advocate" sent by the Father to dwell within every baptized Christian. They recognized that this Spirit played an essential role in the Christian life, although the divine nature of the Holy Spirit would not be clarified until roughly *300 years later*! Still, even at this early stage of the Church's theological development, the Gospel of John, the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians all illuminate various aspects of the Holy Spirit.

All of these works were composed in Greek, in which the word for "spirit" also translates as "wind," as opposed to the Hebrew "breath." The concept of a "Holy Wind" lends itself to a more active interpretation. Rather than just creating and sustaining life, this Spirit empowers, encourages, and even impels people to action. Greek speaking Christians of the first century understood the Holy Spirit to be like a wind at their backs, pushing them forward to proclaim Christ and live the Gospel, often in the face of fierce opposition.

Although the Gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles both show the Apostles receiving the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, they portray that first encounter in very different ways. John shows the Risen Jesus literally *breathing* the Holy Spirit into his

disciples as he encourages them to go out and reconcile the whole world to the Father through their ministry. The famous Pentecost scene in the Acts of the Apostles is not nearly as peaceful and intimate. With Jesus already ascended into heaven days earlier, the Holy Spirit suddenly bursts onto the scene and takes possession of the Apostles, moving them to leave their place of safety and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to the large crowd of Jewish pilgrims gathered outside.

That's when we see another vital aspect of the Holy Spirit emerge. While the Spirit is clearly a very powerful force, it is not chaotic or random in its effects. As Jesus stressed repeatedly to his disciples, *the Spirit does the Father's will*, which is to *unite* peoples, to bring about *harmony and communion*, that all may be one. Thus, all the pilgrims in Jerusalem, though they come from many different nations and speak many different languages, all hear the Gospel proclaimed to them *in their own native language*. So, even though the Apostles are speaking in tongues, nobody hears it as meaningless noise. Quite the opposite! The Holy Spirit breaks down the barriers to communication, so that all may be united by *one faith* and *one proclamation of the Gospel*.

St. Paul also stresses that unifying power of the Holy Spirit in his letter to the Corinthians, who were known for their prideful boasting about their spiritual gifts. While acknowledging the great variety of spiritual gifts that the community possesses, Paul also reminds them of the true nature and *purpose* of those gifts. All of them derive from the same source, and all are given in service of *the common good*. Hence, these gifts should never be a cause for boasting, nor should they be employed for selfish pursuits. Rather, all who belong to the Body of Christ should use their *individual* gifts to build up the *whole Body*. As Paul says so eloquently: "For in *one Spirit* we were all baptized into *one body*, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of the *one Spirit*."

Today, in addition to the readings and the Psalm, we also heard the words of a hymn from the Middle Ages, entitled *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* (Come, Holy Spirit). Sequences like this used to be a frequent feature of medieval liturgies, but now they're limited to only a few special feast days, like Pentecost. Not surprisingly, this *much later text* contains a more developed theology of the Holy Spirit than we can find anywhere in the Bible. The hymn portrays the Holy Spirit as a comforter, a healer and a guide. The emphasis is not so much on how the Spirit acts on a person *from outside* as how it *enters into* a person to fill the believer with its "sevenfold gifts." The Spirit is called "the soul's most welcome guest." It provides both "sweet refreshment" and "solace in the midst of woe." It heals our wounds, renews our strength, and washes away the guilt of our sins. But, the Spirit also moves us to repentance and conversion, "bending the stubborn heart and will" and "guiding the steps that go astray." Ultimately, the Spirit leads us to "virtue's sure reward" – eternal salvation.

On this great Feast of Pentecost, let us ponder ever more deeply this powerful yet gentle divine force that abides within us, the great Mystery that we call the "Holy Spirit." We revel in the gifts that it imparts, and we find comfort and solace in its constant presence. We listen for its often subtle promptings, and we discern the truths that it reveals. It is our breath of life, our greatest source of strength and encouragement, and our surest guide. *Veni, Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!