

Solemnity of Pentecost, B – May 19, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,200 words

On this great feast of Pentecost, we recall the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Mary and the Apostles, which vivified the Church. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Blessed Trinity, distinct from the Father and the Son, yet, like them, fully God. “Father” and “Son” are concepts that we may understand fairly readily by analogy; moreover, the Son became man in Christ and we even know what he looked like, so we can especially relate to him. But the Holy Spirit is not so easy for us to grasp. The fact that he manifests himself in different forms throughout sacred scripture perhaps adds to our difficulty. At Pentecost he appeared as “tongues of fire” – flames descending upon the heads of all gathered. In the Old Testament – and even again, at Pentecost – the Spirit manifests himself as wind. We know that he showed himself in the form of a dove at Christ’s baptism in the Jordan. And there are many other biblical images for him besides.

Rather than attempting to form a visual analogy for the Spirit, we might instead contemplate what he does in our midst. And from the beginning of time – from the beginning of Creation – we see the Spirit as the bringer or restorer of life and order. Two pivotal scenes from sacred scripture will help to illustrate this concept. First, think about the beginning of the book of Genesis and the story of Creation: initially, there was the “formless void”, a chaotic nothingness – but then the Spirit hovered over the primordial waters and caused Creation to unfold in marvelous order, with a hierarchy of material and spiritual beings. Then think of the very scene we celebrate today: Pentecost is the great reversal of what happened so many centuries before at Babel. Whereas mankind had become divided, with different languages and nations, Pentecost launches the Church, which has as her mission to unite all in God’s one family, overcoming all division and strife.

Well, how do we experience the Holy Spirit’s life-giving and ordering action? Many today look for that experience in their emotions. The Spirit brings warmth, excitement, and otherwise shakes things up – or so they suppose. Now, there is no question: in our relationship with God, we do sometimes have experiences along these lines – moments of consolation, when we palpably sense God’s nearness or perhaps feel his love. Such moments are gifts from him, to be sure. But, beware: the devil can manipulate our feelings, also. Thus the spiritual masters tell us that we must not base our spirituality on how we feel; rather, we must discern the spirits. St. Paul himself teaches us this in his letters. In other words, we must apply a process of reasoning to our spiritual experience – not simply rely on feelings, which at times are absent, exaggerated, completely wrong, or otherwise out of place. When our feelings are dry and flat, the process of discernment helps us to recognize that God is with us not because of how we feel, but because of the state of our soul. But even in times of vibrant and intense feelings, the process of discernment helps us to evaluate if they are valid and really indicative of God’s presence and action. We will most certainly go astray if we rely on our feelings to guide us to God!

The application of reason to our spiritual experience is part of our cooperation with the Holy Spirit’s life-giving and ordering work in us. For it is our rational nature that makes us most like God. I will repeat that, for it is so important for us to digest: it is our rational nature that makes us most like God. That is to say, our passions – with emotions and feelings that wax and wane – are not primarily where the image of God is found in us. God is pure spirit and is unmovable. The scriptures may well portray him as happy or sad or angry at times, but those are the projections of the human writers who struggled to describe the indescribable. In literature, we call that “anthropomorphism” – that is, describing non-human things according to human terms and categories. We do it with animals all the time: we might claim, for example, that our cat has

a sweet personality (although cats are not persons and probably just want to hunt and kill); and we like movies with animals that speak, dance, and sing like human beings. So also with God: in himself, he is so different from us; our human categories fall very short of explaining him. Our intellect and will is where his image is most clearly found in us.

Our worship of God, therefore, involves all of who we are, but is subordinated to our rationality, not to our passions or emotions. St. Paul exhorts us in this regard, in his Letter to the Romans, when he says: “I exhort you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God: offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, *your spiritual worship*. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by *the renewal of your mind*, that you may *discern* what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.” The words that St. Paul uses for “spiritual worship” could also be translated as “logical” or “rational” worship. In fact, this very phrase is included in the First Eucharistic Prayer, the Roman Canon, when the priest invokes the Holy Spirit over all that we have placed upon the altar and says, “Be pleased, O God, we pray, to bless, acknowledge, and approve this *offering* in every respect; make it *spiritual* and acceptable, so that it may become for us the Body and Blood of your most beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.” Again, that word for “spiritual” could also be translated as “logical” or “rational”.

As we call upon the Holy Spirit this Pentecost, then, let us ask him to continue his work of bringing life and order to our souls and our worship. May he, who descends in purifying fire, cleanse us of any inordinate dependence upon feelings or emotions in our spiritual lives. We do not wish to shipwreck our faith on the rocks of fickle emotions, but rather, with a proper use of our higher powers of reasoning applied to our relationship with God, be brought safely to the tranquil waters of eternal life. Our minds are the part of us most like God; guided by reason and aided with the help of his grace, we are able to offer all of who we are – body and soul, intellect and will, emotions and desires – to him. We feel very inadequate for the task, but the Holy Spirit, whom we have received through baptism and confirmation, comes to our aid and promises to make up for our lack. It may, indeed, be difficult to visualize the Holy Spirit and so relate to him through an image, but through discernment we are able to recognize his presence in our souls and give him thanks for being our “Lord and giver of life”, the one who brings the image of God to completion in us.