

Solemnity of Pentecost, C – June 9, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 900 words

For the Jewish people, the yearly celebration of Pentecost was the memorial of the great event of Mount Sinai, when God made an everlasting covenant with his people, separating them from the other nations and making them his own. The Lord did this amidst a great show of power: the 19th chapter of Exodus tells us how the whole mountain shook, how there was a great storm and the Lord himself came down to speak to Moses in fire – while the people shook with fear. Then Moses went back down to them and gave them the Commandments of God’s law.

But one year, many centuries later, Pentecost was different. The Lord Jesus had just ascended into heaven. Now, several days later, his disciples were gathered in prayer together with Mary in an upper room. And they, too, were fearful: afraid of the people outside; afraid of what the future might hold. Even though Christ had accompanied them for 40 days after his resurrection, that still had not been enough to overcome their fear. But then a strong wind blew – calling to mind that storm on Sinai. And suddenly, God descended once again in fire.

As the Holy Spirit came down on them in the form of tongues of fire, their fear was finally overcome. The peace that Christ had wished them repeatedly following his resurrection finally took hold of their hearts. And more than peace, they had a newfound confidence and boldness: so much so, they were impelled to go out and face the people – not with fear, but with love. On Mount Sinai God made a covenant with just one nation out of many; at the first Christian Pentecost, we see his covenant being extended to people of every nation.

Yes, God had arranged it so that there should be people from many nations gathered outside that upper room – not only from the neighboring lands but even from as far away as Rome, the end of the known world at that time. The gift of the Spirit enabled the disciples to speak to all in a way they could understand, communicating the one faith of Jesus Christ to a diverse multitude, leading them to the font of baptism. And at that font, those who were baptized received the gift of the Spirit also, enabling them to go out and make disciples too.

In our time, some two millennia later, there has been a persistent desire for a “new Pentecost” that might give new life to the Church. Properly understood, this is a holy wish. The Christian Pentecost was a one-time event that set the Church in motion till the end of time; therefore, if by “new Pentecost” we mean a renewal and reinvigoration of the first Pentecost, then we desire rightly. We do not look for a new Church or some new revelation; rather we simply wish to rediscover what perhaps had slipped from our grasp.

But have we sought this “new Pentecost” in the right way? There is no shortage of plans and programs in the Church today. How many forests have been liquidated to produce the books that tell us how to have the most dynamic parish or the best program of evangelization! We have risked re-creating the ancient Tower of Babel, where men, filled with pride, tried to reach heaven through their own devices and resources – but ended up confounded. The words of Psalm 127 still ring true: “If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labor...”

No, an attentive look at the Mount Sinai event and a careful reading of the Christian Pentecost teach us a salutary lesson. Moses went up the mountain to speak to God and listen to him; that is, he went up to pray! The disciples gathered with Mary in the upper room to pray. Prayer – not feverish planning – is the pre-condition for the Spirit’s coming in a way that is effective and truly saves. The Lord often takes us a very different way than we might have gone ourselves – that is certainly what he did at Pentecost. Prayer made that way possible.

If the Church will be renewed and reinvigorated in our time – and how desperately she needs it! – it will not be because we finally found the right strategy, but because we finally opened ourselves up to the One who alone can save us. With seemingly never-ending scandals

and corruption, where do we even begin? Oh, but God knows. He does not need our clever plans; no, he wants our hearts. One heart and soul at a time, he will cause a new Pentecost – not by reinventing the Church or revealing something new, but by leading us back to our true self.

But are we not sometimes afraid of really giving our hearts to God? What will he do with us? What will he ask? Yes, we may indeed be afraid at times. And this is also why we need to start with prayer – not with planning. We must join Mary and the disciples – with all the saints who have gone before us – in the upper room and there await the “promise of the Father”, the Holy Spirit. She will intercede and obtain for us the gift of the Spirit that will overcome fear and make us free truly to give our hearts to God. And that is how he will renew his Church.