

Solemnity of Pentecost, A – May 31, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 7:15, 8:30, and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 915 words

The Feast of Pentecost is traditionally referred to as the “birthday of the Church”, for it was on this day that the Church, which had already been conceived and created by Christ, made her debut and was set in motion. The Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles, who were gathered in prayer together with the Blessed Mother, and they were animated; from there, they went out to the ends of the earth preaching and teaching the faith of Jesus Christ. Since that day, the Church has continued to grow and is now found in every part of the world, even while in every place there is still great potential for growth.

The first reading puts us at the very moment of the Church’s birthing. No sooner had the Holy Spirit descended, than the apostles received power and charismatic gifts that enabled them to go out confidently and fearlessly to touch the hearts of all men regardless of race, language, or background: yes, the faith of Jesus Christ was and remains capable of speaking to the hearts of all people everywhere, answering their deepest questions and longings. And this happens through the preaching of the Church’s ministers, with the Holy Spirit’s power both preceding that preaching and working through it – and even, sometimes, I should add, in spite of it.

In reflecting more deeply on this, we see that the Spirit’s mission is to unify all peoples of the world within the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church founded by Jesus Christ. His mission was to save the world, and having accomplished that salvation through his passion, death, and resurrection, he ascended into heaven. Since Pentecost, the Spirit’s mission is to apply that gift of Christ’s salvation to every human soul who will receive it. We should always give thanks for our Catholic faith and never take it for granted or otherwise presume upon it; we should always pray for the gift of perseverance in it – especially final perseverance.

But true unity within Christ’s one Church is impossible, unless we are also reconciled: with one another and with God. In the gospel Christ said twice, “Peace be with you”. He wants us all to have his gift of peace, which can only happen when things are set right within our souls. So he gave us the means to do that, saying to his apostles, “Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you forgive are forgiven them...”. Now we see another part of the Spirit’s mission to unify all peoples within Christ’s Church: by forgiving their sins, to reconcile them with God and each other, so that they can have not merely an exterior unity but a profoundly spiritual one.

But could it be that the Holy Spirit has abandoned us? Besides the fact that parts of our country are literally going up in flames at present, as senseless violence is met with senseless violence, our society as a whole is now so greatly fractured. The world is not at all at peace. And – we must say it – our Church is not at peace. We have all witnessed a great deal of turbulence throughout our lives; the last few centuries have been characterized by general instability and conflict. But doesn’t it seem like it has reached a new level and that it is now beyond remedy? Maybe – at least at times. Has the Holy Spirit perhaps left us?

Well, let’s be careful not to be too myopic. If we step back and look at history, there have been many other times of great tribulation. And besides, God’s promises do not and cannot fail. The Holy Spirit has not left us! Maybe we have left him. Our failure at times to make good use of the sacrament of confession and remain reconciled to God surely has borne its fruit. Our failure at times to live out our confirmation and stand up for our faith has not served us well. And we have not always been agents of reconciliation; yes, we must recognize the ways that we may have contributed to division, which by now is at pandemic levels, also.

Short of a miraculous intervention by God, for which we can always hope and pray, we cannot expect healing and unity to take place unless we undertake the hard work of seeking it out first and foremost for ourselves and our families. As the apostles, animated by the Spirit, went

out and started preaching, their message was always the same: repent – be reconciled to God and one another! That must be our starting point also. We ask the Holy Spirit to guide us in this needed work of reform, as we pursue that holiness and righteousness to which we are called. With divisions and rancor that run so deep, it can certainly be difficult work.

And so we turn to prayer. The beautiful ancient sequence for this feast is worth copying down in a prayer journal and returning to many times. For example, the central passage: “O most blessed Light divine, Shine within these hearts of thine, And our inmost being fill! Where you are not, we have naught, Nothing good in deed or thought, Nothing free from taint of ill. Heal our wounds, our strength renew; On our dryness pour your dew; Wash the stains of guilt away...”. He has not abandoned us, but perhaps we had not been so faithful to him. Yet, because he has not abandoned us, we still have a chance – we still have hope.