

The Holy Spirit in the Church

June 8, 2014

Readings: Acts 2.1-11;
1 Corinthians 12.3-7, 12-13;
John 20.19-23By **Kenneth D. Whitehead**

The New Testament account in the Acts of the Apostles of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus at Pentecost is deservedly very well known, describing as it does the “noise like a strong driving wind” which announced the advent of the Spirit and the “tongues as of fire” which accompanied the Spirit’s descent. All in all, it was a pretty dramatic happening, and it is understandably celebrated, not only by the members of the Catholic Church, but by Evangelicals and other Christians as well. It is surely one of the foundational texts of Holy Scripture.

For Catholics, this text is designated as the first reading for the solemnity of Pentecost, and it is especially familiar because it includes the phenomenon of “speaking in tongues.” Galilean disciples of Jesus, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are understood in the native languages of more than a dozen of the other peoples of the ancient Near East who happened to be present in Jerusalem on this occasion.

For many Bible believers, the significance of this account seems to lie mainly in the dramatic self-manifestation of the Holy Spirit and in the accompanying miracle of the speaking in tongues. This is not wrong, of course, but it would be interesting to ask and to know more: Precisely what was the particular message that was conveyed by that speech? The reading does not state exactly what was said when the speaking in tongues occurred. The text speaks of “the mighty acts of God,” but what precisely does that mean?

Sending Them Out

Considerably more than a hint of what this message might well have been may be found in the Church’s gospel reading for this same Pentecost Sunday. In this reading Saint John describes one of the post-resurrection appearances of the risen Jesus to his chosen band, who out of fear are at this moment hiding behind closed doors. Yet it is not perhaps the miraculous appearance of Jesus before them that is the most important element here. This is startling and amazing, surely, but it is not the main thing. Rather, it is what Jesus does and says to the apostles that counts most.

For on this occasion, prior to Pentecost itself, Jesus first tells them that he is sending them out, just as the Father has sent him, the disciples thereby becoming in the full sense “apostles,” or those “sent out.” He then imparts to them the Holy Spirit by “breathing” on them – as God first breathed life into Adam, the first man (cf. Gen 2:7). At the same time, Jesus specifies that this gift to them of the Holy Spirit is for a definite and specific purpose, namely, to enable them to forgive sins, or not to forgive them if in their judgment such forgiveness is not warranted.

In other words, in imparting to them this gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus makes clear that he is giving them a specific power, and quite a power it is. This power enables them to act in his name and with the help of the Holy Spirit in order to effect, the gospel says, the very thing that, when Jesus himself claimed to be able to do it in the course of his own earthly ministry – that is, when he claimed to be able to forgive sins – he actually provoked the scribes and the Pharisees and the chief priests, and motivated them to seek to eliminate him altogether by arranging for his trial, condemnation, and crucifixion. In their view, Jesus was presumably arrogating to himself a power that belongs to God alone. (Today Catholic priests in the confessional on Saturday afternoons routinely perform this same act – forgiving sins – which, when he claimed to do it, got Jesus crucified!)

Yet this remarkable power that Jesus conferred on the apostles was not limited to forgiving sins. The implication is clear that the apostles were also given sacramental powers generally, including the power to change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. This grant of power to them was surely intended to apply across the board, to all the tasks which the apostles were to carry out in the course of the ministry with which Jesus was charging them.

These apostles on whom Jesus first breathed the Holy Spirit, then – the same Holy Spirit who would later descend upon the whole body of the followers of Jesus at Pentecost – were the original hierarchy of Christ's body, the Church; and they were precisely granted by this infusion of the Spirit all the sacramental powers – extending beyond the mere forgiveness of sins alone – that would enable them and their successors, the priests and bishops of the Church, to continue to confer the benefits of the Spirit on the faithful generally.

For the Souls of the Faithful of All Times

It is exceedingly important for us to understand this. The great gift of the Holy Spirit infused into the souls of the Christian faithful at Pentecost was not just a gift granted on or for that occasion alone. Nor was it meant that this descent of the Holy Spirit should be limited to the diffusion of the grace of the Holy Spirit in the souls of the Christian faithful of that time alone. Rather, this infusion was obviously meant for the souls of the faithful of all times. But it also represented the carrying through and completion of a process begun by Jesus when he called the apostles in the first place, and formed and groomed them for the tasks which he intended to leave to them to do when he himself had departed from the scene.

All along Jesus intended to found a Church on those same apostles; and all along those same apostles and their successors, the bishops of the Church – and their helpers the priests, whom from the beginning they ordained, according to the clear testimony of the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of Paul – were always intended to possess sacramental powers in order to be able to impart the graces of the Holy Spirit to the faithful on a continuing basis. This was accomplished through the sacraments that Jesus also established as an integral part of the functioning of his Church.

In other words, yes, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost certainly did mean the infusion of the grace and truth of God into the souls of Christian believers. This is a constant of Church teaching. But at the same time, Jesus had already also provided for the regular *continuation* of the imparting of that same grace and truth of the Holy Spirit through sacramental means by the power that he conferred on the apostles. The apostles were granted this sacramental power, and it was intended to be exercised by them and their successors in the Church down to the present day.

The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, then, was assuredly intended for all Christian believers for all time, but it was also a gift that, as the gospel clearly testifies, was intended to be regularly continued by sacramental means in the Church that Christ founded and endowed with leaders given the necessary power to insure this continuation.

Jesus' commissioning the apostles was thus the completion of his establishing the Church for the sanctification and salvation of all mankind. This is confirmed by Saint Paul in the Church's second reading for Pentecost Sunday. Saint Paul declares that "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit." But from these readings it seems quite clear that the grace of the Holy Spirit, which enables the Christian believer to make this declaration of faith, should necessarily include faith in the means established by Jesus to carry on his work and his words in the world. Jesus did this by commissioning his chosen apostles to form and lead a Church made up of his followers, meanwhile granting them the power to extend the diffusion of the grace and truth of the Holy Spirit by the means inherent in the sacraments which he also established.

Saint Paul amply confirms this when he notes that "in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body," the Church.

As Catholics we need constantly to remind ourselves that the authentic truth and practice of the Catholic faith quite definitely does include the great gift of the diffusion of the Holy Spirit in the souls of Christian believers, a diffusion which began at Pentecost; but it also, and necessarily, includes the continuation of this imparting of divine grace through the Spirit by means of the sacraments dispensed in the Church. The Holy Spirit operates, typically and regularly, *in* the Church. This is the clear testimony of these readings for Pentecost Sunday.

One of the Mighty Acts of God

So what, then, was the nature of the actual message conveyed by the speaking in tongues that accompanied the descent of the Holy Spirit on the faithful at Pentecost? The text of this reading, as we noted, says that what was spoken about were "the mighty acts of God." Can we not say that Christ's foundation of the Church, endowing her with the sacramental means to perpetuate the life of the Holy Spirit in the souls of the faithful, surely qualifies as one of those "mighty acts"?

The meaning and importance of this great solemnity of Pentecost is abundantly summed up and capped by the excerpts from Psalm 104 that the Church assigns to this same Sunday along with the readings we have just examined:

*How manifold are your works, O Lord!
The earth is full of your creatures.*

*If you 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.*

*May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord be glad in his works!*

About the Author

Kenneth D. Whitehead is the author, among other books, of One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic: The Early Church Was the Catholic Church (Ignatius Press, 2000).

FOR FURTHER READING

Jimmy Akin, "8 Things to Know and Share about Pentecost," National Catholic Register (May 18, 2013), available at: <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/jimmy-akin/8-things-to-know-and-share-about-pentecost>

Rev. Bevil Bramwell, O.M.I., "O Guide Our Minds with Thy Blest Light," The Catholic Thing (May 19, 2013), available at: <http://www.thecatholicthing.org/columns/2013/o-guide-our-minds-with-thy-blest-light.html>

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##731-747.

Francis, "Homily for the Solemnity of Pentecost" (May 19, 2013), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/>

"Novena to the Holy Spirit for the Seven Gifts," available at: <https://www.ewtn.com/devotionals/pentecost/seven.htm>

Rev. James V. Schall, S.J., "The Pope on Pentecost and True Unity," Catholic World Report (May 29, 2012), available at: http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/1383/the_pope_on_pentecost_and_true_unity.aspx

IN SHORT . . .

- ***The infusion of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was not just a gift granted for that occasion alone; it was meant for the souls of the faithful of all times.***
- ***The Christian believer's faith should include faith in the means established by Jesus to carry on his work and his words in the world.***
- ***The apostles were granted sacramental powers which were intended to be exercised by them and their successors in the Church down to the present day.***
- ***The Holy Spirit operates, typically and regularly, in the Church.***
- ***Christ's foundation of the Church, endowing her with the sacramental means to perpetuate the life of the Holy Spirit in the souls of the faithful, is one of "the mighty acts of God."***