

Pentecost
(Acts 2:1-11; Gal 5:16-23)

Pentecost was one of the three great festivals in the Jewish religious (liturgical) calendar. It took place 50 days after Passover (a “week” of “weeks”, i.e., 7x7 days) and for this reason it is sometimes called the Feast of Weeks. It is a festival that celebrates the first-fruits of the wheat harvest, as well as the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai.

For 40 days after his Resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples, both in Jerusalem and in Galilee, but by the time of the Ascension they returned again to Jerusalem where Jesus commanded them to stay in the city and wait for the “promise of the Father,” the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). Jesus’ followers gravitated around the home in the suburb of Mt. Zion where Jesus celebrated the Last Supper.

For 10 days the tiny congregation of about 120 (Acts 1:15) prayed for the coming of the Holy Spirit, both in the Temple (Lk 24:52) and in the upper room (Acts 1:13), and with them was the Blessed Mother (Acts 1:14). It is the first “Novena” in the Church.

On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down upon them and filled them with power to go forth in the name of Jesus. He came as wind and fire. At the dawn of time, God’s Spirit (Heb. “Ruah” “Breath”) went out as a mighty wind over the waters to bring forth creation out of the dark chaos (Gn 1:2). At the time of the Exodus, God’s Spirit went forth as a mighty wind over the Red Sea, to bring his new nation to birth in the desert (Ex 14:21). The Holy Spirit now comes down upon the disciples as a mighty wind to form a New Creation, which is the Church. The Church began its existence (its “conception”) in the death and Resurrection of Jesus, from his opened side and the fountain of his Sacred Heart; but Pentecost is the *birthday* of the Church, when it came forth from secrecy into the public square, and went forth confidently to all the nations of the world.

Pentecost is also the reason we call the Church “Catholic.” “Katholikos” (Gk) means universal. On the first day of her public life, the Holy Spirit gave a dramatic sign to the people of Jerusalem: the unification of all tongues in one language. There were Jewish pilgrims from all over the world in Jerusalem that day for the great festival. And yet when the apostles preached to them in the plaza, even though they spoke with their native Galilean accent, the foreigners all heard them speak in their own languages (Acts 2:5-13). So impressed were the people by this sign, as well as the power of Peter’s message, that 3000 were baptized (Acts 2:41).

What began at the tower of Babel when mankind was divided and scattered through the fragmentation of different languages, due to sin, comes to an end on

Pentecost, when God reunites all the nations of the world into one common human family.

This miraculous sign of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost continues to be the sign today of the true Church: it is “catholic,” embracing all the languages of man. When you are able to attend Mass that is celebrated in a different language from your own, you realize what it means to be Catholic: our common faith, and the bonds of charity we share in the Holy Spirit, transcend the cultural or historical divisions that exist among people.

Besides the mighty wind that shook the house in which they were gathered, the Holy Spirit appeared to the Church as tongues of fire falling down from heaven. Just as the Holy Spirit fell upon Jesus in the form of a dove at the time of his baptism when he came up out of the Jordan, the Holy Spirit came as a divine anointing upon each member of the Church on Pentecost.

And since that day the Holy Spirit continues to be poured out upon each new member of the Church in the Sacrament of Confirmation, following Baptism. Just as the wind of the Holy Spirit is not exactly like the wind that blows through the trees, the fire of the Holy Spirit is not the same as earthly fire. It is heavenly fire, like the flames which Moses saw in the burning bush: burning without destroying. Instead of combustion, these flames bring purification: the only thing that is consumed by the fire of the Holy Spirit is sin.

With the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the apostles of the Church began their public mission, as Jesus did following his anointing in the Jordan. The Holy Spirit today sends the Church on her public mission to the whole world.

Of all the many lessons we could draw from the feast of Pentecost, I would like to focus on one, and that is prayer. In order for the Holy Spirit to come down, Jesus commanded the apostles to pray, and this they did for 10 days in the Upper Room, gathered in the company of Mary. This house with its spacious hall became the first church of the new dispensation, and those 120 disciples became the first parish. Today there are thousands of parish churches around the world, but Pentecost remains the model to imitate. If we want the Holy Spirit to come upon us today, it means we need to pray intensely.

Not just as a parish, through our liturgical schedule of Mass and devotions, but personally and in our homes, we must pray always, in company with Mary and the saints, for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

All of us received the Holy Spirit in baptism and confirmation, but unless we pray, His gifts stay chained up and remain useless in our lives, and for the Kingdom. Only with prayer does the Holy Spirit start to move powerfully like the

mighty wind, and become a strong fire. We must pray, and we must all do this to the greatest degree possible.

There are many trials we have to face. Whether it is illness, or family problems, or work. All these things bring fear and uncertainty. Prayer and the Holy Spirit bring faith, hope, and love, and with these we can conquer anything, because we no longer have fear, and we no longer see things in a “fleshly” way. The Holy Spirit makes us one with Christ, and allows us to see things from a supernatural “spiritual” perspective. The apostles were completely changed by Pentecost; we can be too.

St. Paul tells the Galatians, “*live by the Spirit, and not by the desires of the flesh*” (Gal 5:16). Without the Holy Spirit, we sink down into the sinful desires of the flesh: “*immorality, impurity, and lust; idolatry and [superstitious false worship]; hatreds [and malicious gossip]; rivalries and jealousies; furious outbursts of anger and selfish acts; dissensions and factions [which cause disunity]; envy [and resentment]; drinking bouts and orgies*” (Gal 5:19-21). If these things are in our life, we do not have the Holy Spirit, and we will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

St. Paul also describes the Fruits of the Holy Spirit – what our lives look like when the Holy Spirit is poured out on us. The fruits of the Spirit are “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, [goodness], faithfulness, gentleness, [modesty], self-control, [chastity]*” (Gal 5:22-23). These were the qualities people could see in the first disciples, and this must become our reality as well: as individuals, and as a parish community. But it will only happen when we imbue our lives with prayer.

“Come, Holy Spirit, and fill the hearts of your faithful. Kindle in them the fire of your Divine Love. Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth.”