

## Roots

### **“Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:22)**

Beginning in January 1977, some thirty three plus years ago, before the days of cable television and the internet, much of the nation, including yours truly, was captivated by an eight part mini-series broadcast on ABC network television entitled “Roots,” which depicted the origin and early history of an African-American family. How many of you, willing to admit you’re over 40, remember watching? “Roots,” the mini-series, dramatized the book of the same name by author Alex Haley about his family’s lineage from ancestor Kunta Kinte's enslavement in Africa to his descendants’ liberation after the American Civil War.

Besides providing riveting entertainment, the mini-series enabled viewers, many for the first time, to see African-Americans as a people with a noble heritage who had endured the horrible sufferings of slavery and racial hatred. In addition, the program fostered renewed interest in the study of genealogy and family origins. By studying our roots we can learn where we began, what we have become, and, most importantly, what we should be.

The story of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the subsequent story of the growth and spread of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean world place us at the roots of our faith. Throughout her history the Church has recalled the “*vita apostolica*,” the life of the early community, as a model for Christian living. On this Pentecost Sunday, as the Easter season concludes and we approach “ordinary time,” memories of our faith community’s beginnings once again provide us with a standard

against which to measure the quality of our discipleship, both as an institutional church and as individual Catholics. It's one of several times during the liturgical year that we're encouraged to do a kind of *spiritual* performance review.

Prior to his ascension, the risen Jesus promises the disciples that they will soon “*receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them*” so that they can become witnesses to the gospel “*in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.*” Pentecost fulfills Jesus' promise in a most spectacular way as those gathered are infused with the Holy Spirit, enabling them to live and preach the Good News far beyond Jerusalem.

The coming of the Spirit with wind and fire, depicted in the first reading, as we well know, is not a one time event. The Spirit is still alive and active in the world, now descending less spectacularly but no less powerfully on every believer, initially at baptism. The **Book of Acts** (also known as “The Acts of the Holy Spirit”), relates the many spirit-driven accomplishments of the first disciples, especially during and after Paul's missionary journeys.

In the **Book of Acts**, the Holy Spirit inspires God's people to do God's will. Not only does the Spirit inspire believers to spread the gospel by word and example, converting many to the faith, but it inspires them to form a community characterized by *inclusivity*. All people regardless of status are welcomed into the group. Gathered at Pentecost, for example, together with the Twelve are numerous women, including those who followed Jesus in Galilee, who were present at his death and who first received the resurrection proclamation. The author of Acts purposely includes women among the company of believers and points out that women of means provided their homes as

“house” churches, even presiding at Eucharist, and that women like Priscilla, a *deaconess*, were among the leaders of the Pauline communities. Likewise, Paul in his letters mentions various women as co-workers in ministry, including Phoebe, also a *deaconess*.

The Spirit shapes the life of the early church. Believers live joyfully, gather together in worship, forgive one another’s failings, pursue justice, and unselfishly share their possessions and resources among themselves. Treating one another with kindness, which in itself attracts many to the faith, they ignore distinctions like race, gender, nationality, social or economic position. And when they encounter persecution, it’s the Spirit that provides consolation and encouragement to persevere.

The word “inspire” means, literally, to “breathe upon,” which is precisely what the risen Jesus does in today’s gospel from **John**, when he appears on Easter Sunday evening to the Twelve, minus Thomas, huddled together in the locked room. *"Peace be with you,"* he says. *"As the Father sent me, so I am sending you."* Then Jesus breathes on them and says *"Receive the Holy Spirit."*

At the opening session of Vatican Council II in 1963, almost 2000 years after that momentous day in Jerusalem, Blessed Pope John XXIII prayed that the Spirit would evoke a “*new Pentecost*,” renewing and reorienting the Church, a “pilgrim” church always in need of purification and reformation, more closely toward her founder’s mission. Modern events do, indeed, manifest the presence of the Spirit, such as Christianity’s remarkable spread in Africa and other Third World countries. Paradoxically, the fastest growing Christian groups today are Pentecostals, whose theology and life reflect, often literally, the roots of our faith as described in Acts. Unfortunately, however, as we all know too well, modern events also manifest plenty of instances in the world of the Spirit’s absence.

Notwithstanding the obvious dark side of reality, however, we believe that God's very life, breath and energy lives in, with and among us and that we experience this life through Jesus whose example fully manifests the Spirit. But the Spirit’s work is not self actualizing; it requires receptive, cooperative and active collaborators. The words of today’s gospel continue to echo down through the centuries... *“As the*

*Father sent me, so I am sending you.*” It short, you and I and every believer are required to *be* agents of the Father who, like Jesus, are called to *do* the Father’s will.

Jesus’ example of how to love and serve others is there to *inspire* us, as it inspired our ancestors in faith, but it also *challenges* us as well. It challenges us to look back to our earliest days and to answer this provocative question. Is what we’re doing today, as an institutional church and as individual Catholics, true to our roots?

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Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12: 3-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23.

Pentecost Sunday. May 23, 2010. (Cycle C)