

Spirit

“And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were...And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit...” (Acts 2:1-5)

During the Great Depression of the 1930's, a room was filled with applicants seeking a job opening for telegraph operator. The noise of the applicants talking among themselves competed with the persistent sound of dots and dashes, Morse code, coming from a telegraph key. The outer door opened and another applicant joined those waiting to be interviewed.

Suddenly the newly arrived applicant's eyes lit up. She walked to a door marked “Private” and went inside. A minute later the employer came out and dismissed the other applicants. They were furious. One of them shouted, “I demand an explanation. I've been waiting all morning to be interviewed. Then this upstart jumps the line and gets the job.”

The employer replied, “Listen to the dots and dashes; they contain your explanation.” Everyone listened for the first time. The dots and dashes were repeating over and over again this message: “if you hear this; come in, the job is yours. If you hear this, come in, the job is yours.”

The employer had been repeating that message all morning long, but no one, with one exception, was listening.

The same is true of the spiritual dimension. God though the Spirit is constantly communicating with us, within the ordinary circumstances of our lives, but sadly, many of us aren't listening. Many of us aren't paying attention. Referring to the physical dimension, Henri Bergson, a 20th century French philosopher, once said: “The eye sees

only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.” Spiritually speaking, -- The ear hears only what the heart is prepared to understand.

Today we celebrate *the* quintessential spiritual event of human history. Fifty days after Easter, during the ancient Jewish festival called Pentecost, the risen Christ fulfilled the promise he made to his disciples before ascending to his Father in heaven. “*John baptized with water,*” He said, “*but within a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*”

Ten days later in the same Upper Room where the Last Supper took place, Mary, his mother, the apostles and various disciples, confused and fearful over what had happened on Good Friday, waited and prayed for the promised outpouring of the Spirit. Their prayers were answered in spectacular fashion, as described in the first reading from **Acts**. A mighty wind swept through the room shaking the rafters; tongues of fire appeared, parted and came to rest on each of their heads. “*And they were filled with the Holy Spirit.*” What the author of **John** in today’s gospel refers to as the “*Spirit of truth.*”

What resulted from that tremendous outpouring of the Spirit? Believers, even those who spoke different languages, began to understand each other in a *new* language of love. Along with understanding came empowerment to continue Jesus’ ministry on earth. Soon disciples began to spread the *good news*, engaging in an evangelism which refused to be silenced despite threats, imprisonment and martyrdom. They shared their possessions with one another. They healed the sick. Stephen, the first deacon and martyr, forgave those who were stoning him to death. Saul, the persecutor, was transformed into Paul, preeminent proselytizer to the Gentiles. Peter, the coward who denied him three times, found his courage and assumed leadership of the fledgling Jesus community.

Women and men alike began to serve one another selflessly, especially the poorest and least among them. The Holy Land was ablaze with new fire, a new spirit that impelled people to treat one another with kindness, regardless of race, religion, nationality or social status.

In the wind and fire of that momentous occasion descended gifts of the Spirit, gifts we all learned about during our preparation for Confirmation – **wisdom, understanding, counsel, courage, knowledge, piety, and reverence**. And down through the centuries countless good has resulted within the Church and worldwide from those who allowed their behavior to be influenced by the Spirit.

That same Spirit bearing the same gifts comes to each of us in the waters of baptism, remaining at work in all the everyday experiences of our lives, consoling, comforting, inspiring – in the word of a loved one, the hug of a friend, the smile of an infant, the beauty of a flower, the flight of a bird. But to experience the Spirit, like the successful job applicant, we have to be open to it, attuned to it, aware of God's presence around us. What happens when we live *in the Spirit*? We show it. Our lives become expressions of divinity. We radiate love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faith, humility and self control – qualities of the one whose promise was so spectacularly fulfilled on that historic Pentecost.

Not surprisingly, a recent trip to the Holy Land, walking in the very footsteps of Jesus, for me was filled with spiritual moments. Two of them occurred at the ruins of Caesarea Maritima, ancient Roman seaport built by Herod the Great on the Mediterranean. One was encountering a statue of Jesus the Good Shepherd, knowing that that was to be the subject of my next homily upon returning home. The second was

viewing a rainbow in a brilliantly beautiful blue sky, though it hadn't rained in months. On Mt. Tabor, site of the Transfiguration, as you might imagine, the Spirit was particularly active.

Three plus years before the opening of Vatican II in October, 1962, Blessed Pope John XXIII began referring to the coming council as "a new Pentecost," that is, a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit that would renew and reorient the Church. In his remarks at the opening session, Pope John stressed his desire that the council be pastoral in nature, an unprecedented departure from past conclaves. What was needed, in his view, was "*aggiornamento*," updating, to bring about in the Church a long overdue accommodation to the modern world. Though the gospel message remains the same, he said, the way it is presented may need to change.

The council concluded four years later in the fall of 1965 and a number of momentous changes ensued. Among them, Catholics the world over began to worship actively and meaningfully in their own languages with a new emphasis on Scripture. The laity took on new emphasis and importance. The Church affirmed religious liberty, condemned anti-Semitism, highlighted common ground with other Christians, recognized godly elements in non-Christian religions and abandoned a centuries-old antagonism toward modernity for one emphasizing dialogue and shared struggle for human dignity.

The Spirit can, indeed, accomplish wondrous things both in the Church and worldwide, *if* we are receptive and responsive to its power.

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Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12: 3b-7, 12-13; John 15:26-27; 12-15.

Pentecost Sunday. May 31, 2009. (Cycle B)