

Spirit-filled Community, Communion, Commission

Pentecost Sunday – May 23, 2021

Readings: Acts 2:1-11; 1 Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13 (or Gal 5:16-25); Jn 20:19-23 or (Jn 15:26-27; 16:12-15)

“Jesus breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (Jn 20:22)

Prologue: The feast of Pentecost marks the end of the Easter Season and the birth of Christ’s Mystical Body, the Church. Celebrating Pentecost in the midst of the raging second wave of the Covid pandemic makes us aware of our common humanity and our connectedness across manmade boundaries of countries, cultures, castes, creeds, classes and so on. The Pentecostal Spirit invites us to break all barriers so as to create community, deepen communion, and cooperate with God’s Spirit in a divine mission of global reconciliation. Community, Communion, Commission are most appropriate words to reflect upon the three readings of Pentecost Sunday.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. A New COMMUNITY at Pentecost: The word ‘Pentecost’—meaning ‘fiftieth’—was the second most important Jewish feast after the Passover. Coming seven weeks after the Passover, it was primarily a harvest festival to thank God for the wheat crop and to offer up the first fruits to God. Later, the giving of God’s Law to Moses on Mount Sinai was also commemorated on this day. People believed that when the Law was being given to Moses, God sent out a mighty wind which turned into fire (see Ex 19:18). All the believers were expected to assemble at the temple of Jerusalem to express their gratitude as community. Moreover, hundreds also came from outside of Palestine, creating a great multitude of peoples from very diverse regional and linguistic backgrounds. The disciples had been instructed by Jesus to wait in Jerusalem until they “have been clothed with power from on high” (Lk 24:49), referring to God’s promise of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the miracle of the ‘tongues’ takes place. Tongues can mean two things: (a) the flames that rested upon the disciples in the shape of tongues, and, (b) the ‘gift of tongues’ referring to the languages that they began to speak. From being frightened disciples behind locked doors, they become fearless preachers of the good news. It’s important to note the birth of a *new community*, the church, marked by the following characteristics: [i] The Holy Spirit is not just given to individuals but to the whole community, the Church; [ii] a unity is being formed since those proclaiming the good news are simple folk from Galilee with little education, and yet they are speaking in tongues, which are understood by diverse peoples in their own languages; [iii] the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11:1-9) is being retold in new light. From human arrogance and pride, leading to “God confusing the language of all the earth” at Babel (Gen 11:9), at Pentecost, inhabitants from all over the Roman Empire, Jews and Gentiles (vv.9-11) attest upon hearing the disciples: “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” (v.11). Indeed, at Pentecost, we see the Spirit birthing a new universal community, a unity-in-diversity.
2. COMMUNION beyond Community: In the second reading, Paul explains to the Corinthians the importance of ‘spiritual gifts’ or ‘charisms’. Some of the believers who were blessed with these gifts began to boast and prided themselves over the others. Thus, Paul tells them to remember that: (a) these gifts were the fruit of the Christ-event and thus anyone refusing to accept “Jesus is Lord” did not possess any genuine gift [v.3]; (b) all charisms and services, though varied, come from God through the one same Spirit and Lord [vv.4-6]; and (c) charisms are gifted to people not for self-glorification but “for the common good” [v.7]. In fact, since many yearned to get the ‘gift of tongues’, which they considered superior to the other gifts, Paul puts things

in perspective, saying, “Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves ...” (1 Cor 14:4) and exhorts them to “strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way” (1 Cor 12:31). In the very next, well-known chapter (1 Cor 13), Paul speaks about “the gift of love” being the “greatest” (1 Cor 13:13). The main point in this passage, however, is the metaphor that Paul provides to the community: the human body with many members [vv.12-13]. Just as blood flows through the whole body and keeps it alive, so does the Holy Spirit flow through the whole Church ensuring that each member, each one “baptized into one body” (Church) remains united to all the other members and the Head, Christ, to function smoothly. Thus, from experiencing ‘community togetherness’ the Church must strive to be Christ’s Body of ‘intimate *communion*’ savouring and sustaining their inner, spiritual unity-in-diversity. In fact, the word ‘communion’ can also be broken up into its’ Latin roots ‘*cum + munia/orum*’ (literally, functions done together). Only when each member performs his/her duty and uses her/his charism to the full with others will the Church thrive.

3. *A Trinitarian COM-MISSION*: While the first reading from Acts—of the Lucan gospel Tradition—describes the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, i.e., on the fiftieth day *after* Jesus’ resurrection, Jesus, in the gospel according to John, breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples on Easter Sunday evening. Thus, rather than record that the Spirit was given to the disciples at one particular point of time, the evangelists stress that the Spirit is the outcome of the incarnation and mission of the crucified-risen Christ. Furthermore, while ‘Acts’ stresses the preaching ministry (kerygma) as the outcome of the Spirit, in today’s gospel passage, John focusses on the ‘*commission* of reconciliation’: forgiving and retaining of sins [v.23]. However, the latter should not be understood as a legalistic, judgmental stance towards sinners—for that is never the thrust in John’s gospel—but rather leading believers to recognize the light, life and love which Christ brings. Here, rather than the Spirit appearing as tongues of fire, Jesus *breathed* on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” [v.22]. At creation, God breathed into Adam “the breath of life” (Gen 2:7); now, Christ breathes life into a new entity, the Church. Christ gives his disciples the Holy Spirit for a ‘com-mission’: a ‘*cum + missio*’ — literally, ‘sending together with’ — for, Jesus says, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so *I send you*.” [v.21]. With the gift of peace and the firm assurance that they are on a God-given mission that is primarily Christ’s, and only secondarily theirs, the disciples will work wonders. One sees a Trinitarian pattern of com-mission because it is God who is at the heart of mission.

Notes on Alternative Readings: Rather than focus on the ‘*charisms*’ as he does with the Corinthians, Paul’s passage to the Galatians cautions about the perennial struggle between ‘life in the Spirit’ and ‘works of the flesh’. He exhorts his people to bear the ‘*fruit*’ of the Spirit. While gifts/charisms are initial endowments at baptism or ordination, fruits are qualities that believers cultivate in full freedom through cooperating with God’s Spirit. The alternative gospel reading from John gives the Spirit a face, so to say: Advocate or Helper. One can also see the Spirit as Comforter, Consoler, Defender, Teacher and Guide, who journeys with us.

Covid Concern: Images of God’s Spirit as breath (wind, oxygen), fire and water, in particular can help us during the pandemic when victims are gasping for breath, drinking warm water, and washing or sanitizing hands. Let’s pray, “Come, Holy Spirit, renew the face of the earth!”

Caution about Tongues: I once met an intelligent Jesuit who loved visiting countries and spoke some ten languages. When I said to his colleague, “I admire his brilliance for speaking so many languages,” his friend replied wryly, “But he speaks nonsense in all of them!” May God’s Spirit inspire us to speak sense, and to sense when to be silent, letting the Spirit speak.
