

FIRST READING: Apostles 2:1-11

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, "Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how does each of us hear them in his native language? We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34

Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD, my God, you are great indeed! How manifold are your works, O LORD! the earth is full of your creatures;

Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD be glad in his works! Pleasing to him be my theme; I will be glad in the LORD.

Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

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.

Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians:

Brothers and sisters: No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so

also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John 20:19-23

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Pentecost

I was confirmed when I was ten years old and in the fifth grade. At the age of ten, I already had years of Catholic formation from my family and by the good teachers who taught religion in grammar school. I listened, as attentively as possible, to the priests' sermons or homilies. Some of us actually have things to say that make good sense while others just ramble. By the time the bishop smeared the chrism on my forehead in the sign of the cross and lightly slapped my face with the words, Pax tecum," This is Latin for, "Peace (be) with you." I was certain that I would feel for sure the presence of the Holy Spirit rush upon me as a mighty wind and as tongues of fire. I knew that, at that moment, I would be ready to go out and witness to my solid, spirit-filled faith and that I was ready to die for Jesus like the apostles.

Do you know what really happened? Nothing! I felt the same as I did before the ritual began. I was the same person who entered and left the parish church that night. I had no great zeal for Jesus and I had no great insight or revelation into my faith. It wasn't until many years later until my early middle twenties, perhaps a dozen or so years later that I noticed the effects of that night. The pieces fell into place in an insight I had while discussing the power of the Sacrament of Confirmation over some coffee in a restaurant on Lincoln between Armitage and Fullerton. I was two years into my graduate studies and a student chaplain at the former Grant and Children's Memorial Hospitals. I was en-route from rounds at one hospital to the other and met a fellow student chaplain on the way. We decided to take a break over some coffee.

She was a Benedictine Sister who, having taught school for many years had chosen to diversify her ministerial skills. We discussed the then new concept of delaying confirming children until they were teenagers. She made the point that people must freely choose the sacrament. Whereas I basically agreed to her position, she stressed that the choice was so critical for the efficacy of the Sacrament. There is, in Catholic Sacramental Theology, two concepts necessary.

One is human choice, the other divine grace. The relationship works like this. Whereas people do make the choice to receive Confirmation, God gives the grace to choose it.

In theology jargon this is called, in Latin, “*ex opere operato*,” and “*ex opere operantis*.” In English this means the effectiveness of the sacrament is “out of the work worked,” and out of the work as it works.” Let me explain what fell into place for me. When I was ten years old, I became an altarboy. In 1963, only boys could serve mass. Twenty years later we would adopt the title mass servers when girls could first serve mass. It was the same year that I received the Sacrament of Confirmation. Without that single event of the Chrism smeared on my forehead and being hit in the face by the bishop, would my life be set on priesthood? As an altarboy I had my first taste of ministry, serving mass. Here I was, a student of theology at the major archdiocesan seminary and having coffee with this nun on a break in my chaplain’s round. Would that have happened without Confirmation? In a year, I was ordained a deacon and a year later I was a priest. It was at that moment, over coffee and in conversation that the spirit rushed on me. I had received the Holy Spirit when I was ten years old. The Spirit took root and guided the course of my life. The Spirit grew deeper into me over the intervening years. At that moment, I was blown away. As the pieces fell into place, I felt on fire. The Spirit works in the Spirit’s way.

As a ten year old boy, did I make much of a choice to become confirmed? Let me ask this another way. Did the disciples choose to have Jesus appear in their midst, breathe on them and send them out as apostles, evangelists and ministers? Did the disciples choose to receive the Holy Spirit on Pentecost? They went out immediately to preach and witness to faith. The change that happened to them as a result of what seems to be serendipity is the true act of God. They chose to continue the mission as have I and so have you. What kind of a choice has it been? Was it more like an offer we can’t refuse? Saying no to God is sin! Yet there is no threat from God; just the offer to remain with us on our journey. There, in the end, is only one, viable choice. Seek and follow the path the Spirit has chosen for us; to do God’s will and to seek God’s Kingdom. The witness to faith that they gave and we give is the true sign of the Holy Spirit among us.

Why did I start with my being confirmed? In Baptism, most of us were baptized as babies. We believe that we are baptized with water and the Holy Spirit. For an infant, that notion is irrelevant. As Catholics we are raised in the context of our families and parish and grow into faith over time as we grow into adults. The Sacrament of Confirmation confirms what happened at baptism but it is much more. It is Baptism into the Holy Spirit. It is one of the three sacraments of initiation, Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Originally they were administered to people in that order. Pope Pious X mandated frequent communion for adults and wanted to expand its reception to children who have reached the age of reason. The Catholic Church declared that children who have reached the age of seven to be reasonable. Since the 1860s, children could then fully participate at mass and receive the Body and blood of Jesus.

That’s a good thing. My paternal grandmother was born in 1893. She was confirmed at about seven or eight and made her first communion at thirteen. Her ages of reception are the reverse of today’s practice. It took at least a generation before Pious’ mandate became universally

accepted and put into practice. However, this made a change in the Church's sacramental order. The original order of Catholic Initiation is still maintained when older children and adults are baptized at the Easter Vigil. Confirmation had been a requirement to receive any of the other six sacraments. Today it is not. Baptism is the only sacrament necessary to receive the other seven.

I always want to go beyond and beneath the obvious special effects in scripture. I like to ground the narrative within the context of how we live and experience faith. At the time I was ten there was no wind or fire. In my twenties I finally felt the rush as my experiences fell into place. I have always struggled with languages other than my first one. Yet, as I sit and reflect a bit more, I have learned some of the basic dialogues we use at mass in Laotian. Once in a while I celebrated mass for a Laotian community. De sah pranam prahbedah, le prah bood, le prah chiet, Amen. These are the opening words and gestures with which we begin mass, phonetically. I have also been able to preach in Spanish with much preparation, Google Translate and a good dictionary. I have to read my homily too for I lack true fluency. I have done and do my best; the Spirit does the rest. Looking back over the course of my life, the effects of the Spirit have not been much different from the Apostles. It has been in the normal course of my life sans the special effects. With just a little reflection, I have known the connection between us. It is the same Spirit.

The Spirit is not the wind and tongues like fire. The Spirit is the slow and relentless movement forward through life with and in faith. The Spirit works within, through and among us as we give witness to Jesus. None of us is St. Peter, Billy Graham or the pope. We are people of faith who live the best way we can. We all fail a lot for we are human. It is God who forgives our sin and works through us, despite us. For in the end, as in the witness of the apostles, the next generation of believers will believe, by the grace of God and in part because of us.

Jesus, at the end of today's gospel, spoke of forgiving and retaining someone's sins. What does this mean? Didn't Jesus die on the cross to forgive sin? Jesus told the disciples that forgiveness or retaining was part of their purview. Doesn't forgiveness of sin come from God? Jesus did a number of things. He first entered, unbidden, into their midst. He bid them peace. He made sure they knew it was truly he. Upon their recognition he bid them peace again. He then commissioned them. The mission the Father gave to Jesus, Jesus in turn gave to them. To do this with continuity he breathed on them putting the Holy Spirit within them. The mission of salvation was from then on theirs. This is the mission of the Church and our mission. I see Jesus' statement about forgiveness in light of Jesus' prayer, the Our Father. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In other words, forgive and be forgiven. God will forgive sinners; can we?

I have always found it easier to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in my life in retrospect. It's harder to know the Spirit working now. I can look back and remember the events, people, choices and decisions that revealed the Spirit's guidance. Reflection is a good way to discern the Spirit's presence. It's also possible, with practice to know the Spirit in real time. I have been writing three of these reflections a week for over a year. Never has the Spirit left me without insight. I know the Spirit's movement as soon as I have thoughts to put on paper. There are times of inspiration when it all comes together. Thoughts of God can enter our awareness.

Feelings can also reveal the Spirit's presence. Our joy, sorrow, fear and delight can be windows through which the Spirit will enter. If we know these kinds of moments to be the ways of God into us, we know where to look. God is as near as our thoughts. The Spirit is near now.

With every breath we share Jesus' Spirit.

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