

PENTECOST SUNDAY

June 9, 2019

First Reading - Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11

Responsorial Psalm - Psalm 104

Second Reading - 1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13

Gospel Reading - John 20:19-23

My dear people of God:

Please allow me to greet you “Happy Birthday”. Today we are celebrating the birthday of the Church. The church was born or began to exist when, upon receiving power and wisdom from the Holy spirit, the apostles immediately began to preach and to baptize.

We know that right after His resurrection, Jesus gave His apostles the power to forgive sins by breathing unto them the Holy Spirit. Because of His death and resurrection, the sins of mankind could be erased. The apostles were empowered to become instruments of Christ’s forgiveness.

Today’s feast is about the beginning of the new church which existed due to the teaching and preaching done by the apostles about the reality of the Risen Christ and His Mission of saving the world. This is certainly a fulfilment of the great mandate/commission that Jesus gave at the end of Matthew’s gospel. It would be beneficial for us to understand that in the gospel of Matthew, as told to us in chapter 28, verses 19-20, Jesus commissioned His disciples to:

- (1) go**
- (2) make disciples of all nations;**
- (3) baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**
- (4) teach them to observe all things that He has commanded them**

In the great commissioning that Jesus did in Matthew's gospel and in the Pentecost narrative, there was no mention of repentance and forgiveness of sins; only going, making disciples, baptizing, and teaching. Why? Because the power to forgive was already given during His first appearance after rising from the dead at the locked room in the evening of Easter.

Today's feast is about empowering His apostles to teach and make disciples; thus renewing the face of the earth. That makes our Responsorial Psalm today very strong: *"Lord send us your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth"* It happened during the celebration of an existing feast: the Pentecost or the feast of Seven Weeks. That explains the huge number of pilgrims in the city; it was an existing feast.

The Jewish people were to observe a harvest festival called *"the feast of harvest"* (Exodus 23:16). This was repeated in chapter 34, verse 22 of the same book: *"the feast of weeks"* (Exodus 34:22). Again in the Book of Deuteronomy (chapter 16, verse 9) and in the Book of Numbers (chapter 28, verse 26), this was mandated by Yahweh.

The term "Pentecost" was never used by the Jews. The term was just a convenient way of early Christians to describe the feast after the Feast of Weeks: *"You shall count from the next day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven Sabbaths shall be completed"* (Leviticus 23:15). The seven weeks plus one day (the day after the Sabbath) constitute the "pente" or fifty days associated with "First Fruits" rather than fifty days after Passover. Our Catholic Celebration of the Pentecost seems to suggest that Pentecost "must" be celebrated 50 days after the Passover. No! it need not be as far as following the Jewish tradition and the early Christian Liturgy are concerned. That is done just to make the celebration fall on a Sunday. The Passover and Pentecost has nothing to do with each other. But the feast of the harvest has something to do with Pentecost and vice-versa.

The instructions in Deuteronomy are essentially the same, specifying that the Feast of Weeks is *"from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain you shall begin to number seven weeks"* (Deuteronomy 16:9).

By looking at today's feast with the eyes of the evangelist Luke who wrote the first part of the ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, we can say that this story (*about the infant church which was born from the preaching of the apostles*), is the continuation of the ACTS OF JESUS (gospel). We deduce this from the

fact that the Acts of the Apostles starts where the Gospel of Luke ends. Jesus began His ministry *“filled by the Spirit”* (Luke 4:1), the *church began her ministry filled with the Spirit”* (Acts 2:4 and 38).

There are points that we might reflect on today:

(1) the coming of the Holy Spirit is not limited to today’s feast; He came already to Mary: *“the angel to Mary, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”* (Luke 1:35). The Holy Spirit who was instrumental in the birth of Jesus is also instrumental in the birth of the church.

(2) the coming of the Holy Spirit in our first reading fulfills the prophecy of John the Baptist in Luke’s Gospel, *“He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire”* (Luke 3:16). Jesus Himself instructed His disciples to *“wait in the city of Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from on high”* (Luke 24:49). Such instruction was repeated in Acts of the Apostles 1:5: *“wait in the city and you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit not many days from now”* (Acts 1:5).

The first reading teaches us that just as the actor of the birth of the Messiah is the Holy Spirit; likewise, the Holy Spirit is the actor of the birth of the church.

Now, let us go to our Second Reading.

It is interesting to realize how Paul thought of writing this treatise/essay about gifts. This was actually a solution to a current problem. Certainly, the young Christian community of Corinth was teeming with new members who came from different social backgrounds which were not spiritual at all. Their former pagan practices and rituals still came to the surface every now and then. And this always was accompanied with former beliefs. This is easy to understand if we know that the pagans believed that various gifts were thought of to be coming from different gods. Some thought they had gifts which were superior to those of others; hence there was envy, division, and mistrust.

In Corinth one could find the cults of the gods of Egypt, Rome and Greece. While it is true that the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, stood atop the Acrocorinth, there were many other gods and goddesses. Corinth was famous for its commercial prosperity, and for its drunkenness and immoral debauchery.

Of equal fame in Corinth was the temple of Poseidon, ruler of the sea (on which Corinth's commercial life depended) and maker of earthquakes (a frequent danger in the area).

Numerous other temples in Corinth include those which were dedicated to Apollo, Hermes, Venus-Fortuna, Isis, and one dedicated to "All The Gods" (Pantheon). On the slopes of the Acrocorinth was the sanctuary of Demeter, which dates from the 6th and 7th centuries B.C.

In Corinth, as often found in other parts of ancient Greece, there was a shrine dedicated to Asklepios, the god of healing, and his daughter, Hygieia.

The temple of Apollo stood on the hill overlooking the Roman city's main forum stood the temple of Apollo with a bronze statue of Apollo inside.

The problem of the Corinthian community seemed to have been that there were too many people claiming the special value of their own particular gifts, too many people wanting to be involved and participate in the life of the community, and thinking that their involvement was better than that of their neighbor. Paul needed to level the playing field and bring unity where there was division. To prevent the young Corinthian community to commit a similar absurdity regarding the gifts bestowed on them, St. Paul taught them that:

(1) while there were diversities of graces, they all proceed from the same Holy Spirit;

(2) while there are diversities of ministries, and different ministers, such as apostles, bishops, priests, deacons in the young Church, they all emanate from the same Lord, who is the Head of the Church.

(c) while there are diversities of marvelous results, such as cures and conversions produced by the different ecclesiastical ministers according to their varied gifts, all these are caused by the same ONE GOD.

Paul involved the SPIRIT as he began his teaching in verse 3: *"no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit"*.

What the church offers us in the second reading is that there should be no dichotomy between the source of the gift and the intended use of the gift. Everything redounds to God's glory.

Now, let us go to the gospel.

We previously heard today's Gospel on the second Sunday of Easter or Divine Mercy Sunday. That was John's gospel, chapter 20, verses 19 to 31 which told us about the gift of Jesus, the Holy Spirit which He gave to His Apostles and their empowerment to forgive sins. The gospel on that Divine Mercy Sunday told

us more than that. It also told us about the doubting Thomas and later on, about the believing Thomas. Thomas who was not present when the Risen Lord appeared to the eleven became the believing Thomas who exclaimed: *“my Lord and my God”* when the Lord appeared again a week after.

Today’s gospel ends on verse 23. I invite you to open your hearts and your minds to the readings of today on the connection between the Holy Spirit and on the forgiveness of sins. Jesus teaches us about the salvific fruits related to the gifts of peace and forgiveness and the action of the Holy Spirit. Jesus greets His disciples with the gift of peace and commissions His disciples to continue the work that He has begun, *“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”* As He breathes the Holy Spirit upon them, Jesus sends His disciples to continue His work of reconciliation through the forgiveness of sins. This dramatic scene provides the content for John's last reference to the Spirit in his gospel. Jesus bestows the Holy Spirit who will help the disciples in many ways. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit as The Helper to His disciples. Jesus breathed on the disciples and said (verse 22), *“Receive the Holy Spirit.”* During the days leading up to Christ's death and resurrection, He promised to send the Spirit as Helper to the disciples. The Holy Spirit is our Helper today. The Helper is the great teacher who illuminates the message of Christ to our hearts. He will support the life of the church. The Holy Spirit (the Helper) enables us to become witnesses.

Jesus assures us in verse 21 that He is the One sending us: *“Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”* Once again, Jesus uses the common Peace greeting. Again, He uses it with deeper meaning. This time, Jesus is preparing us to continue the work of the disciples as witnesses by our own life of witness to God who changed us into better children of His. Amen