

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Sometimes the wisdom of kids is far greater than that of adults. As many of you know I was out of town last week, presiding at a wedding in Austin. A parishioner, accompanied by his young daughter, told me that the Mass last Sunday was awesome. The visiting priest gave a dynamite sermon and the music ministry was fantastic. I asked the little girl what she thought. She said, “Yeah, it really was great. I just thought it was amazing that the whole family got in and saw and heard the whole show for just \$5.00.”

Then there was the young boy who went home and proclaimed that he was going to become a priest. His Mom said, “That’s great! What made you decide that?” The boy said, “Well, it just seems that it’s a lot more fun standing up there hollerin’ and shoutin’ than sitting in the pew doing nothing for an hour.”

Ah! Out of the mouths of babes!

Today is Pentecost! It’s the Birthday of the Church, we say. So, Happy Birthday, Church! It is the day that we celebrate the promised gift of the Holy Spirit given to those first disciples of Jesus and empowered them to do amazing things.

First of all it is important to note that in this first verse of chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles it states, “When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together.” The word Pentecost simply refers to the 50th day after Jesus’ resurrection, or more correctly, the 50th day after the Jewish Feast of Passover, which continues to be celebrated in Judaism as the Feast of Shavuot, when the gift of the first fruits of the harvest are presented in the Temple, in gratitude for God’s faithfulness in keeping His promise to the patriarchs.

The other thing worthy of note in this first verse is, “they were all in one place together”. In other translations that word “together” is often rendered as “being of one accord”. This is really important to understand because, apparently, that one accord of the disciples was necessary before the Holy Spirit could or would manifest herself.

What comes next would really need the imagination of a Hollywood special effects producer to fully comprehend—“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 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.”

The disciples couldn’t contain themselves. They spilled out of that place where they were into the streets, where there were people from all over the world, coming together to celebrate the Shavuot, of which I spoke earlier. And the people were amazed that this bunch of “Rednecks” from Galilee could be understood by all in their various languages from all over the world.

Not only was this a miracle of tongues, but as the poet W.H. Auden suggested, “The miracle of Pentecost was not only the gift of tongues, but was it not equally the gift of ears?” Of course, it was because each heard and understood in his or her own language.

At first, people think that the disciples are a bunch of rowdy drunks. So Peter, the same, once-frightened man who denied even knowing Jesus, boldly proclaims, “Fellow Jews, and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you: listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only 9:00 in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet, Joel:

I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh: Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; even upon the servants and the handmaids, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.”

Did you notice that even going back to the days of Joel, the Prophet, 400 years before Christ, in what is still the male-dominated Middle East, God is proclaiming he is pouring out his Spirit on all flesh—sons and daughters, servants and handmaids—breaking down all our phony divisions in the human family.

Peter goes on telling the story of Jesus, and the Sacred Writer of Acts tells us that 3,000 people were baptized and added to their number that day alone. Imagine God used that sorry group of Redneck Galileans on that day of Pentecost to start a movement that is still at work more than 2,000 later, proclaiming the same message.

What effect does all this have in our own lives? Perhaps this story by the late Jesuit spiritual author, Fr. Anthony De Mello, can give us a sense of what Pentecost means for us—or not.

De Mello tells the story of a man who invented the art of making fire. The man took his tools and went to a tribe in the north, where it was very cold, bitterly cold. He taught the people there to make fire. The people were amazed. He showed them the uses to which they could put fire—they could cook, could keep themselves warm, and so on.

The tribe was so grateful that they had learned the art of making fire. But before they could express their gratitude to the man, he disappeared. He wasn't concerned with getting their recognition or gratitude; he was concerned about their well-being. He went to another tribe; and another; and another. In each he again showed the value of making fire.

But in one village the people were a bit too interested for the peace of mind of their leaders, who began to notice that this man was drawing crowds and they were losing their popularity. So they decided to do away with him. Secretly, they put him to death. But they were afraid the people might find out and turn against them. So, they very wisely, even wily, had a portrait made of the man and mounted it on the main altar of the temple. The instruments for making fire were placed in front of the portrait, and the people were taught to revere the portrait and to pay reverence to the instruments of fire, which they dutifully did for centuries. The veneration and the worship went on, but there was no fire.

Fr. De Mello's point was that this could be a picture of many churches today. The veneration and the worship go on, but there is no fire. Is this a picture of our church?

Do we simply come here week after week to pay our respects to the crucified and risen Christ, and then go home doing the same old things; living the same old way, with no change, no fire within us? Or do we gather here each week, filled with the expectation that we will encounter Christ, be filled with his Spirit, overflowing with love, that we might go forth from this place feeling like there's fire shut up in our bones that makes us want to do great things in Jesus' Name that God might be glorified in us.

Pentecost is a God-thing! It's God entering powerfully into each and every one of us in the person of His Holy Spirit to continue the work of lifting the church to a new level of service in the world. Today the Holy Spirit poured out on that first Pentecost is in us. Is the fire still burning? Is the wind of the Spirit still blowing? Are the waters still being parted?

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me...on us...Veni, Sancte Spiritus...on all.