

## PENTECOST SUNDAY

MAY 23, 2021

What is Pentecost all about? Let me suggest one approach to this question but you will have to cooperate with me. First put your dominant hand over your heart. The other hand you can place on your knee. Sit up straight. Now slowly inhale the air. Then slowly exhale.

That was easy enough.

I am going to ask you to inhale and exhale again. But, this time, as you exhale, I want you to sigh as loudly as you can, or even groan.

Let's try it. Inhale.... Exhale.....

Did you feel the Holy Spirit? The Spirit is free amongst us. Saint Paul said that we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. (Romans 8.26). Our breath is the very breath of God. In the book of Genesis, we read that the Lord God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life and the human being became a living thing (Ge. 2:7).

God is as close as our breath. The Holy Spirit is a life-giving power. It is a force within us. (This gives new meaning to "The force be with you").

The Spirit gives us wisdom to discern what is right. The Spirit gives us courage to do what is right. But we so often choose to rely on other powers. We rely on the dominant culture which bathes us in consumerism, individualism, the power of our ego. The Spirit directs us to Christ and his words to us, to his call to follow him in love and service and total reliance on God.

It is good that we have examples of the Spirit breaking through people's lives. It is not always apparent at the time but we can look back and see the Spirit stirring people like Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Simone Campbell. When it comes to revivifying and reforming the church we look back at Paul, Benedict, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Catherine McAuley and so many of our spiritual ancestors. In these days of a church that is battered and reeling from scandal and lack of direction, we look to those men and women who were rocked by the Spirit to have courage to speak and act.

One of my heroes of the twentieth century and an idol to me as I was growing up was Pope John XXIII. He appeared as a gentle and jovial grandfather but he was sly as a fox. He seemed so simple and loving but he was a man of great erudition,

had taught in seminaries, edited books, absorbed history. He traveled and held posts in Paris and Bulgaria. He made it possible for countless Jews to escape the demonic powers of the Nazis. Then unexpectedly elected Pope (certainly a surprise of the Holy Spirit) he called an Ecumenical Council and prayed for a new Pentecost. Open the windows of the church. Let the Spirit move among us. Once you let the Spirit in, you cannot control what happens. Fifty-five years later we are still struggling to absorb the workings of the Spirit at that Council. And the powers opposing the Spirit are strong.

It is clear to me that we desperately need the Spirit – in our individual lives, in our communities and in the Church throughout the world. The Celtic Christians called the Holy Spirit the Wild Goose. The Spirit defies standing still, resisting change, relying on the old ways, thinking that rules and dogmas can contain God. The Spirit challenges us to clearly proclaim the resurrection of Jesus.

One thing the Spirit does is to embrace differences, loves diversity, even while calling all to live and cooperate in the unity of one people.

The Spirit stirs our hearts to feel the suffering of the battered people of Israel and Gaza in the past ten days. The Spirit makes us aware of our oneness with the people of India, Afghanistan, Syria, Honduras and Guatemala and all the poor and oppressed areas of our globe. We are one with them.

The Spirit moves us to regard the climate crisis of the earth as our problem. We cannot be indifferent to the needs of our world and all its peoples.

As Catholics who are concerned for the future of the church, we can stop blaming others and rely on the Spirit to give us insight and courage to act for all people. In particular I ask myself the following questions:

- What does Catholicism mean today? Can I give some description of the church without centering on Pope, Bishops and priests? Is it truly a catholic, universal church?
- What can we white north-eastern Catholics learn from the Latino church? Is it possible we are provincial and elitist?
- What can the black churches teach us and black Catholics in particular?
- What can the suffering and rejection of gay people in the church tell us about who we are as a people?

Perhaps the Spirit is trying to wake us up to see more clearly.

Perhaps the chaos that we feel about is like the chaos of the opening words of the creation story in the Book of Genesis. The Spirit breathed above the chaos in the depths of creation. Maybe our chaos has to get worse before we cooperate with the Spirit in getting over our fear, our passivity, our small worlds, our reliance on things.

Folks, we've got to believe! We need the Holy Spirit badly. It must start with each of us breathing deeply, taking the Spirit in to cleanse us, to awaken us, to move us to exhale God's breath in our chaotic world. It is time for a new Pentecost.

I close with a poem from Christine Valters Paintner:

    This breathing in is a miracle,  
    this breathing out, release,  
this breathing in a welcome to the unseen gifts which sustain me  
    each moment,  
this breathing out a sweet sign, a bow to my mortality,  
    this breathing in a holy yes to life,  
this breathing out a sacred no to all that causes me to clench and  
    gasp,  
    this breathing in is a revelation,  
    this breathing out freedom.

(Dreaming of Stones, Paraclete Press, 2019)

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