**Homily for Pentecost Sunday**

**May 31, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11 (Descent of the Holy Spirit.)*

*Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 104 (Lord, send out your spirit, and renew the face of the earth.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 (Many gifts, but the same Spirit.)*

*Sequence: Veni, Sancte Spiritus (Come, Holy Spirit)*

*Gospel: John 20:19-23 (Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into his disciples.)*

When we Christians think of the Holy Spirit, our minds often turn immediately to the scene in the Upper Room described in our first reading today. We remember the noise like a strong driving wind, the tongues as of fire, and the Apostles speaking in tongues. But, that spectacle captures only a small part of the Mystery that we celebrate at Pentecost. The entire Liturgy of the Word today probes that mystery in a variety of ways, leading us to a fuller understanding of the Holy Spirit.

The most ancient text that we heard today was Psalm 104. At the time of its composition, there was no concept of a Divine Person called the Holy Spirit. The “spirit of God” of which the Psalmist speaks is understood not as a *being*, but rather, as a *life force* that emanates from God to create and sustain all life on earth. The Hebrew word *ruach*, like its Latin equivalent (*spiritus*), means both “spirit” and “breath.” It is the breath of life, on which all living things depend for their existence. Hence, the Psalmist says of all living creatures, “If you (God) take away their *breath* (or, their *spirit*), they perish and return to their dust. When you send forth *your spirit* (or, your *breath*), they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.”

By the latter part of the first century A.D., when all of today’s Scripture readings were composed, Christians had come to believe in a *Holy Spirit*, sent by the Father to dwell within every baptized Christian. They recognized that this Spirit played an essential role in the Christian life, although the Church was still very much growing in its understanding of God as a Trinity of Divine Persons. In fact, the divinity of the Holy Spirit would not be formally defined until *300 years later*! Still, even at this early stage of the Church’s development, the Gospel of John, the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians illuminate a number of different aspects of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for “spirit” (*pneuma*), which is also translated as “wind,” lends itself to a more active interpretation than the divine “breath” which creates and sustains life. So, in all of these texts, we see the Spirit empowering, encouraging, even impelling people to action. Greek speaking Christians of the first century understood the Holy Spirit to be like a wind at their backs, pushing them forward and boosting their efforts to proclaim Christ and live the Gospel, often in the face of persecution.

The Gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles both show the Apostles receiving the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, but they portray that first encounter in very different ways. John shows the Risen Jesus literally *breathing* the Holy Spirit into his disciples as he encourages them to go out and reconcile the whole world to the Father through their ministry. The famous Pentecost scene in the Acts of the Apostles is not nearly as intimate. With Jesus already ascended into heaven days earlier, the Holy Spirit bursts onto the scene and takes possession of the Apostles. First, the entire house is filled with a type of “wind” – the first manifestation of the Spirit. Then the Spirit appears as tongues of fire, which visibly descend upon each of them. They suddenly feel moved to action, impelled to speak in tongues and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to the large crowd of Passover pilgrims gathered outside.

That’s when we see another vital aspect of the Holy Spirit emerge. While the Spirit is clearly a very powerful force, it is not chaotic or random in its effects. As Jesus stressed repeatedly to his disciples, *the Spirit does the Father’s will*, which is to *unite* peoples, to bring about *harmony and communion*, that all may be one. Thus, all the pilgrims in Jerusalem, though they come from many different nations and speak many different languages, all hear the Gospel proclaimed to them *in their own native language*. So, this is not a cacophony of meaningless noise, but just the opposite. The Holy Spirit is breaking down barriers, enabling the Apostles to create a community of believers, united by *one faith* and *one proclamation* of the Gospel.

St. Paul also stresses that unifying power of the Spirit in his exhortation to the Christians in Corinth, who were torn by divisions and prideful boasting about their individual gifts. While acknowledging the great variety of spiritual gifts that the Corinthians possess, Paul also reminds them of the true nature and *purpose* of those gifts. All of them derive from the same source, and all of them are intended to serve *the common good*. Hence, they should never be a cause for boasting, nor should they be employed for selfish pursuits. Rather, all who belong to the Body of Christ should use their *individual* gifts to build up the *whole Body*. As Paul says so eloquently: “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 the *one Spirit*.”

Today, in addition to the readings and the Psalm, we also heard the words of a hymn from the Middle Ages, entitled *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* (Come, Holy Spirit). Sequences like this used to be a frequent feature of medieval liturgies, but now they’re limited to only a few special feast days, like Pentecost. Not surprisingly, this *much later text* contains a more developed theology of the Holy Spirit than we can find anywhere in the Bible. The hymn portrays the Holy Spirit as a comforter, a healer and a guide. The emphasis is not so much on how the Spirit acts on a person *from outside* as how it *enters into* a person to fill the believer with its “sevenfold gifts.” The Spirit is called “the soul’s most welcome guest.” It provides both “sweet refreshment” and “solace in the midst of woe.” It heals our wounds, renews our strength, and washes away the guilt of our sins. But, the Spirit also moves us to repentance and conversion, “bending the stubborn heart and will” and “guiding the steps that go astray.” Ultimately, the Spirit leads us to “virtue’s sure reward” – eternal salvation.

On this great Feast of Pentecost, let us ponder ever more deeply this powerful yet gentle divine force that abides within us, the great Mystery that we call the “Holy Spirit.” We revel in the gifts that it imparts, and we find comfort and solace in its constant presence. We listen for its often subtle promptings, and we discern the truths that it reveals. It is our breath of life, our greatest source of strength and encouragement, and our surest guide. *Veni, Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!