

We need a new Pentecost in the world

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Dear brothers and sisters, today is Pentecost, one of the greatest days in the life of the Church, and so it must be a day of joy. In fact, this is a good day for all of us to renew our devotion to the Holy Spirit, whom we call every Sunday “the Lord and giver of life.”

I’ve always been taken by the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts, which we just heard in our first reading. It had been fifty days since the resurrection of Jesus, and just a short time earlier, Jesus had ascended into heaven, departing from the earth. The apostles were in the Upper Room, that same place where they had celebrated the Last Supper with Jesus. And it was the place where Jesus appeared to them on the evening of the Resurrection, the first Easter night. But now Jesus was gone again, they were back in that upper room, waiting and praying. The apostles were hesitant, and perhaps just a little afraid. They didn’t know exactly what would happen next or what they were supposed to do.

But in that moment of uncertainty, the Spirit came. With the sound of a strong, driving wind, and in tongues of fire that rested upon each of them, the Holy Spirit came and filled them with the divine power of God. Their uncertainty gave way to wisdom and understanding, for Jesus promised to send them the Spirit of truth. Their fears were swept away, and they were filled with strength and courage to go out from that place and to be what Christ had called them to be, his apostles, his missionaries. They did go out, and immediately began to speak about Jesus to the people gathered in Jerusalem from all nations. The same apostles who had run away when Jesus was arrested, and Peter, who denied that he even knew Jesus, now boldly proclaimed him and would courageously face down the authorities who wanted to silence them.

And from that moment on, there was no stopping them. The apostles set out into the world, and preached the Gospel of Christ everywhere, making Jesus known throughout the world. Pentecost is often called the “birthday of the Church,” because it was on that day that the Church came to life in Christ and his Spirit. Through this outpouring of the Spirit, the Church received her mission, her purpose. No longer would the followers of Jesus be afraid and lock themselves away from the world. Now they would begin to carry out our Lord’s command to “go and make disciples of all nations.” As Jesus said on that first Easter night, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

My friends, that same commission is given to you and to me. Jesus sends his Holy Spirit to us, and then sends us out into the world, not to hide the faith, but to live it and to share it. We received the grace of the Spirit at the moment of baptism, when we first began to share in the divine life of God. And then in Confirmation, we were anointed and sealed in that same Spirit, so that the gifts of the Spirit could take flight in each one of us. Through the gifts of wisdom, understanding, fortitude, and many others, we are equipped to live as followers of Christ in a world that increasingly ignores him. We are inflamed with the Spirit, just as the apostles were, so that we might overcome the coldness and indifference of our culture. We are filled with God’s own strength so that we might persevere before the challenges and temptations that surround us.

But that gift of the Spirit isn't limited to big, organized missionary projects. Actually, he starts in the quiet work of sanctification, making each one of us holy, more Christ-like, more perfectly conformed to Jesus. On that first Easter night, Jesus said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." Jesus sends the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, for the renewal of our lives. He frees us from the prison of sin and helps us to discover a new life of holiness and grace. Jesus explicitly gives the power of forgiveness to the apostles and to those who carry on their mission, and we would be foolish to ignore this gift.

In fact, the Spirit is present in every act of the Church. When the Gospel is preached, the Spirit opens our hearts to receive God's truth. When the sacraments are celebrated, the Spirit is moving among us, filling us with the saving grace of Christ. When we exercise works of charity or mercy, it is the Spirit who impels us to love as Jesus loved. When we give witness and even make sacrifices for our faith, it is the Spirit who sustains us and makes it possible for us to persevere. The life of every saint is evidence of the Holy Spirit alive in the Church. And the faithful life of every follower of Christ is proof that the Spirit is still with us, still moving among us, still bestowing God's gifts on his people.

My friends, I believe we need a new Pentecost in the world. Many have turned away from Jesus, and many try to pull us away from his grace and his truth. There is much strife in our world, and truth has been denied or undermined, the truth about God, the truth about the sanctity of life, the truth about marriage and family life, the truth about the dignity of every person of every race. Let us pray to the Holy Spirit, and ask him once again to come to us, and to fill us with his gifts, to make us holy, and to send us out as witnesses of the love of Jesus. If we are afraid, or timid, or feel unsure of ourselves, then we have only to ask, and the Spirit will come, just as he came to the apostles. We already share in the Spirit's gifts through baptism and confirmation. May the Spirit now send us forth once again as confident and joyful disciples of Jesus in the world.