

## Pentecost 2007

This weekend I've witnessed two men be ordained to the priesthood and one to the diaconate for service in our diocese,; and as every year, it brought back a flood of memories, memories of what will always go down in my mind as the most important event in my life. It was eleven years ago this weekend—not only Memorial Day weekend but also the weekend of Pentecost that year—as I prepared for the ordination Mass, in awe of what I was undertaking and nervous as all get out over the details of the weekend. Not surprisingly, of all the events which have occurred in my life, this is the one with the most pictures. Not unlike a wedding: pictures taken before the actual event, depicting the activities leading up to the actual moment; pictures taken during the event, capturing in a more tangible way the unforgettable; pictures taken during the hours after the event, encapsulating the joy of the whole weekend. We cherish these pictures—of things like weddings and ordinations—because they sort of capture in time the most important events of our lives. But after the picture taking comes the vocation to be lived out; and happy memories aren't what make for happy vocations. I know that, unfortunately, among my classmates from the seminary one of the ones who seemed the happiest at the time of ordination was the only one of our class to leave the priesthood; and I've seen couples who were less than perfectly happy on their wedding day for whatever reason who made the marriage work; and couples who were blissfully in love on that one day, who could not keep the marriage together. The motto of Engaged Encounter is that “a wedding is for day; a marriage is for a lifetime”; and that is so true, and not only of marriage. It's so easy to look for particularly joyful moments, and that's not bad in and of itself; but if we want any sort of lasting happiness and contentment, we shouldn't be looking for a moment, but rather be looking for something to last a lifespan.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes for us a crucial event in the life of the Church and in the life of Christians, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the believers in the event known and commemorated as Pentecost. It occurred, as do all major event, in a moment in time; and what a memorable event both for the apostles, as Jesus himself sent the Holy Spirit upon them for their ministry in the Church, and for all believers, as they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and were suddenly able to understand each other in foreign languages, and as the Spirit appeared to them as of tongues of fire, which then parted and then rested on each one of them. But as memorable and critical a moment as it was, the Holy Spirit did not come down to give them that memorable *moment*; the Spirit came upon the Church for the duration, for a lifetime; he was not there one minute and then gone the next, but remained with them even after the phenomenon of the event had passed. And the Spirit is still sent upon us at the beginning of our Christian lives at baptism, and then strengthened in the sacrament of Confirmation; and he is present when we celebrate all the sacraments; and the Holy Spirit is guiding our vocations, indeed, he guides our very lives as Christians. He isn't with us for a moment, then gone as fast as he came; Jesus sends the Spirit upon us to remain with us, and to sustain our Christian life.

The Holy Spirit is probably the hardest of the three Persons of the Trinity for us to comprehend. Jesus is relatively easy to conceptualize: we know, after all, what he said, what he did; we can easily and accurately use the Bible and our imaginations to re-enter events in his life. And our senses also can tell us that Jesus is present here, among us, in the Eucharist; with the gift of faith, we know that when we see the Host after consecration that Jesus is truly present; our senses tell us that He remains because our faith tells us that he is truly there to begin with. And the Father; well, the Father we cannot really envision but we can imagine, for he too has spoken to us through Jesus, through his Church, and through the Scriptures; we have, in the natural order, a concept of “father.” But the Holy Spirit, even though he is a person of the Trinity, may be harder to conceptualize, and so we may desire a “feeling” of his being present. But it is not through feelings that he presents himself; feelings may be useful gauges of his presence, but do not cause his presence nor define his presence. We comprehend the Holy Spirit then mostly through symbols: the symbol of the dove, flying freely about; the symbol of fire, as in tongues of fire; the symbol of wind, as Luke described a noise like a strong driving wind. And these are very apt, because they all denote different effects from a single source. For one person, fire provides light; for another, warmth, for another it purifies something. For one person, the wind provides cool refreshment; for another, energy; for another, causes the seeds to scatter and be sown. And so it is with the Holy Spirit: he is sent upon each believer, but the effects of his being sent will vary according to God’s will for the recipient. Some are moved to become priests; some moved to serve the poor, most moved to raise Christian families; as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “to each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.” And this is what makes the Holy Spirit the great unifier, even though he achieves different effects; *because* he achieves different effects, and yet achieves through each one the will of the Father, we become one; we are defined, not by the variety of our Christian actions, but by the fact that they all have the same source. In each of us, it is the same Spirit at work.

The Spirit then is received as a free gift from God; known not as much by feeling as by sacrament. But if we know from the sacraments that we have received the Holy Spirit, then it is by his effects in us that we may come to know that we have retained him; or if we have turned off the path to Divine Life at some point and then returned, that we have recaptured him. Paul also wrote that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” Any and all of our Christians actions show that we have the Spirit; to say that “Jesus is Lord”—the Spirit moved us to say that; to come to Mass: the Spirit moved us to come; to forgive our transgressors—the Spirit prompted us to do so. The depths of our Christian actions, then, show us the depth of our receptivity to the Spirit and to how much we are allowing him to dwell in us. It will not be by the intensity of our feelings that he will be known, but by the depths of our mercy, of our charity, of our level of service to those in need and to all around us, and by our very love of God.

Before they exchange vows, a married couple may have extremely deep, profoundly deep, feelings for each other; but at that point in their relationship, there is no sacramental grace occurring as of yet, because the sacramental graces come about through the exchange of vows and through the becoming of man and wife. Before his ordination, a priest may be an excellent teacher and speaker; but any words of consecration or of absolution would bring about nothing, neither forgiveness of sins nor the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, because no power would have yet been given to him. In his Gospel, John wrote “there was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.” While the Holy Spirit was active in the world before the Pentecost event, it was at that event that he became, shall we say, activated in the Christian. And it was not until that time, because “Jesus had not yet been glorified.” This means that it is part of a chain of events—the death, resurrection, ascension, and glorification of Jesus—that together make for the pivotal happening, which we prepared for during Lent and which we have celebrated throughout the Easter season: the Paschal Mystery. The sending of the Paraclete would not have come about without the glorification of Jesus, which came about through his ascension, which required first the resurrection, which only occurred because of his death. And it is by our faith in the Paschal Mystery—and each element of it—that our redemption has taken place, and our salvation is being achieved. With our Lord ascended into heaven, and yet mysteriously present here in the sacraments; with death now conquered and heaven now opened, we come to the end of the Easter season by celebrating the culmination of Easter events: the Holy Spirit, not coming upon us for a moment in time, but entering our lives and leading us into Jesus’ glory. To paraphrase the Engaged Encounter motto: Pentecost was a day, experiencing the Holy Spirit is for a lifetime. Embrace the experience: follow Jesus into his kingdom.

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