

Solemnity of Pentecost: Vigil Mass A2023

This evening we keep vigil for this wonderful Feast of the fulfillment of the promise that Our Lord made to the disciples to give them the Holy Spirit. In the Jewish Tradition, the Feast of the Pentecost was celebrated fifty days after the celebration of Passover as we do today by celebrating it fifty days after Easter.

In the Jewish tradition Pentecost was mostly an agricultural celebration. During the festivities, the Israelites offered to God the first fruits of the land, as required in Exodus 34. Later, Pentecost became the feast commemorating the historic fact of the Covenant.

According to Exodus 19, the covenant at the Mount Sinai was celebrated fifty days after the departure from Egypt and the first Passover. It was at Sinai that God gave the Law to Moses and sealed the Covenant with the Israelites. These two meanings of the Jewish Pentecost, as a feast of harvest and a commemoration of the giving of the Law, play a big role in the understanding the Christian celebration of Pentecost.

First, although God gave the Law to Israel and made the Covenant with them, time and again the people turned away from God. The first reading of tonight shows what happened when people wanted to become their own masters and to compete with God. Their rebellion and disobedience against God brought division among them, confusion and dislocation as consequence of their sinful pride.

To bring the people back to him again, God decided to change their hearts and to give them a new spirit. As he says in Ezekiel 36: "A new heart I will give you; and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of the stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances".

The Holy Spirit is the instrument of the new life of God within us. Anyone living according to the Holy Spirit sets himself apart from the ways of the world that lead to sin. He belongs to Christ and is led by the law of Christ. He has a new heart that is guided by an internal law that God has set deeply within him. He does not pretend to be what he is not. He does not judge other people harshly because he thinks they are not holy like him. His obedience to God's law is not done so that people may see him and praise him. He is transformed into a new person whose life's goal is to please Jesus. He is not ashamed of his weaknesses, but in his humility turns again and again to the Lord to ask forgiveness for his sins.

As St Paul states, "The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groaning. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because he intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will".

While at Babel people failed to understand each other as they moved away from one another; the Holy Spirit brings together the people who were once dispersed so that they become one people in Christ Jesus. Those who allow themselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit speak the language of truth that unites more than it divides. Anywhere people are divided from one another, whatever might be the reason, there the Holy Spirit is absent.

Second, just as the first fruits of the harvest were consecrated to God by the Israelites, so we, the disciples of Jesus, are consecrated to God as first fruits, for according to the words of St Paul, “God chose (us) as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit” (2 Thessalonians 2:13) “.

By offering to God their first-fruits, the Israelites recognized that their whole land, work and crop belonged to God, whose blessing, through the rain and the heat made the harvest possible. In the same way, our Lord poured his Spirit within us as “the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption” (Ephesians 1: 14) so that we belong completely and wholly to him, mind, body and soul until the day of the resurrection of the flesh.

Thus, our present life has become a life in the Spirit, where we are called to please God more than ourselves. We are groaning in pains, like the remaining of the creation, to be set free from the bondage of sin and to have access to God’s adoption for the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8: 22-23).

However, our Lord does not force our hands; he lets us free to walk in his ways or to go our own ways, without him. In the same way, the Holy Spirit does not act automatically or magically in us. As no one can enter a door that is locked; neither can the Holy Spirit act in us if we do not open our heart to him.

If we accept to cooperate, our life can be changed for the best. That is why in today’s Gospel, our Lord says, “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. (...) Rivers of living water will flow from within him who believes in me”, meaning he will go from abundance to abundance.

It is the Holy Spirit who stirs in us the thirst and the hunger for God. It is he who pushes us to glorify God in our body, mind and our heart. It is the Holy Spirit who brings change and transformation in the lives of those who are obedient to Jesus. Without the grace of the Holy Spirit, there is neither life within us nor a way of pleasing God. Only with the assistance of the Holy Spirit can we lead a life of grace and true knowledge of God.

To do the will of God requires first of all our commitment to God as the one without whom our life has no meaning. The role of the Holy Spirit is that of helping us by his gifts to conform our lives to the reality of God’s children. Hence, the importance of being attentive to his insights within us so that we grow in faith and come to do God’s will in our lives.

This is the prayer we have to present to God in this celebration of the feast of Pentecost. Let us ask our Lord to pour the Holy Spirit into our hearts, so that we may be able to renew our life by the strength of his grace. May the Spirit of harmony and unity guide those who work for peace and understanding between nations and peoples! May God bless you all!

Genesis 11: 1-9; Romans 8: 22-27; John 7: 37-39



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