

Homily for May 23, 2010 (Pentecost Sunday)  
*Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104 (v.v.); 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13; John 20:19-20*  
“Making Bricks and Sharing Gifts”

I recently heard a news story about a reporter’s journey along the Grand Trunk Road, the colonial-era highway that connects Pakistan and India, stretching from Peshawar to Calcutta. The reporter was interviewing young Pakistanis to get a sense of their hopes and dreams. For many, sadly, their future prospects appeared bleak.

Pakistan is a poor country. The median age of its people is under 21 and only about half of the adult population is literate. Many people struggle to get by on the equivalent of a dollar or two a day. The nation is torn by political, ethnic, and religious conflicts and faces increasing threats from various forms of terrorism. Its conflict with India, which goes back to the partition and founding of the nations in 1948, is made even more volatile because both sides have the capacity to manufacture and use nuclear weapons.

Pakistan is not a place where hope comes easily. I was therefore surprised and humbled when I heard the radio reporter interview a young man who is one of an estimated three million who make bricks for a living. It’s hot, dirty, back-breaking and dangerous work. The man, who is 18 years old, said that he earned the equivalent of about \$120 per month. He recalled that he had been making bricks since the age of eight, and he added that could not foresee doing anything different for the remainder of his life.

Yet this young man was content and hopeful. He and his fellow laborers, he said, were not merely making bricks. Instead they were building a nation: school by school, mosque by mosque, and house by house. It was their gift to their neighbors and the generations to come.

As we celebrate Pentecost, it is good to ask ourselves: How much more vital and life-giving might our Church and world be if more of us had that same appreciation of our own gifts? Perhaps the problem is that when we consider the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we too often begin with ourselves. That’s when pride, envy, fear, and a lot of other negative things can get in the way.

Pride can cause us to look on our gifts selfishly or to delude ourselves into thinking that they are manifestations of our personal greatness rather than the greatness and grace of God. Envy can cause us to constantly compare ourselves with others, to engage in a spirit of competition rather than cooperation in our ministries, and even to undermine the good that others do and ultimately our community. Fear can cause us to deny, minimize or hide our gifts.

Our scripture readings, by contrast, ask us to consider a different starting point for our reflection on our gifts and ministries. Instead of starting with

ourselves, they tell us to start with God and the purpose of our gifts. The psalmist put it very succinctly when he wrote: “Lord, send out *your* Spirit, and *renew the face of the earth.*” The Spirit comes from God and has a mission of renewal.

How did the disciples move from being a largely uneducated group of Galileans cowering behind locked doors to boldly proclaiming “the mighty acts of God” in a variety of languages in the middle of a Jerusalem packed with pilgrims to observe the Jewish feast of Pentecost? They were simply open to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit that Christ had promised to give them, as we heard last week in our celebration of the Ascension (Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:46-53).

This may seem obvious but it’s not. When our focus is on ourselves, gifts are very often things that we think we want to get rather than things we receive from the goodness of others, including God. This is an unfortunate byproduct of our consumer culture. Very often our gift-giving is really another form of shopping. People ask us, “What would you like for your [pick one: birthday, Christmas, wedding, graduation?” We tell them; and they get it for us.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit work differently. In our gospel reading, it is Jesus who confers the Spirit on his disciples by breathing on them, recalling the work of his Father in creation:

*The LORD God formed man out of the clay of the ground  
and blew into his nostrils the breath of life,  
and so man became a living being [soul] (Gen 2:7).*

God is in control, not us. We can’t choose our gifts. We can only choose to recognize or deny them, to use them or sit on them, and to use them for godly purposes or selfish purposes. St. Paul eloquently underscores this in our second reading, where he also reveals the “catholic” nature of these gifts, universality reflected both in their diversity and in their fundamental unity (1 Cor 12:4-6):

### Catholic

#### Diversity

*“different kinds of spiritual gifts”  
“different forms of service”  
“different workings”*

#### Unity

*“the same Spirit”  
“the same Lord”  
“the same God”*

Paul also adds two other important characteristics of the gifts of the Spirit: (1) that God produces all of the workings of the spirit “*in everyone;*” and (2) “to each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is *given for some benefit*” (1 Cor 12:7). Some are given the gifts to build things. Through the generosity of the Holy Spirit through our rebirth in Baptism, our anointing in Confirmation and our nourishment in the Eucharist, we—each and all of us—have been given the gifts needed to build and be the body of Christ in our world...brick by brick. +