

# A New Pentecost Needed

By Richard Hart, O.F.M. Cap.

One of the most brilliant converts to the Catholic Church, Henry Edward Manning, was an Anglican at one time. He decided to publish a book of sermons. One of his friends, after reading the book, pointed out to him that he had entirely forgotten to mention the Holy Spirit. After admitting it, he started to read and study all he could find about the Holy Spirit. Through this study, which lasted about two years, Manning entered the Catholic Church where the Holy Spirit played a dominant role in his life.

Luke is the only evangelist who mentions Pentecost, and it plays a pivotal role in his writing. Paul speaks of staying "in Ephesus until Pentecost," which is the only time he mentions the feast (1 Cor 16:18). Luke also describes the event of Pentecost in Jewish terms. Later on the Gentiles receive the Spirit and become part of the community (Acts 10:34-48). We need to point out how the Spirit invited Gentiles into a relationship not only with God, but also with the Jews. One of the problems of the Spirit coming as a wind and then

disappearing is how can we count on the Spirit when needed.

The better approach is to believe that the Spirit is always present. Each day can be a new Pentecost. In the Pentecost story, we have various people coming together—Partheans, Medes, Elamites and others of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Is the same true of our assemblies today as we gather in an attempt to form community? Pentecost ushers in a new era, offering a challenge to any preacher.

Pentecost is not just the Church's birthday, but also a day of power for the Church to heal, liberate and build up the reign of God. But, we might ask our listeners, where is that power today? Have we become powerless when we speak out for the poor, the marginalized, the homeless and others? Do we identify more with the rich rather than the poor, with success and prosperity rather than failure, the haves rather than the have nots?

We don't need power to identify with the prosperous and the rich. One needs the power of the Spirit, however, when one stands in opposition to mate-

rialism, consumerism, militarism, racism, and sexism. To the degree we put the poor first will the power of Jesus' Spirit come alive. No one who truly experiences the power of the Spirit can be a racist.

## Jesus and the Spirit

The stories of Jesus as found in the Gospels might be looked at as "video clips of the Pentecostal life." The Spirit animates Jesus' life. Luke and Matthew point out how Jesus was conceived through the power of the Spirit. All four Gospels depict the Spirit at His baptism, and leave no doubt that the Spirit is the motivating force behind His Spirit-filled ministry. Jesus was baptized with the Holy Spirit.

We need to show how that same Spirit continues today to teach, cast out demons, heal and feed. In the passage of Jesus feeding the 5,000 found in Mark's Gospel (6:34-44), we might show how God continues to feed the hungry in similar situations. Didn't Gandhi once say that God can come only as bread? A passage where individuals resist the reign of God might be used to show how people, groups, and systems continue to do that today. Mark's Gospel develops the misunderstanding of Jesus' mission by the Apostles, which also indicates they don't understand the Spirit's work.

Jesus was the Spirit-filled one as is evident when he went to the synagogue in Nazareth. Of all the beautiful and meaningful passages in Isaiah, he chooses: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners." (Is 61:1) But where were the Apostles once Jesus died and rose from the dead?

They were out fishing and in the upper room behind locked doors for

## IN BRIEF

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fear of the Jews. Something was missing in their lives. Who would have thought that these ordinary men would be the future princes of the Church. Las Vegas certainly would not have bet on them. Once the Holy Spirit descended on them, however, they become fearless and courageous. They became more eloquent than a Demosthenes or a Patrick Henry. Over 3,000 people converted that day by Peter's one sermon (Acts 2:41) (How many people convert because of our preaching?).

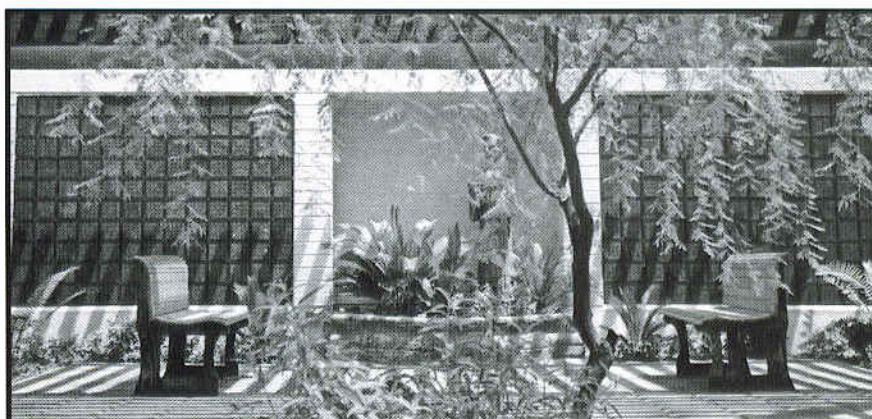
The Apostles went forth courageously to light the candles of Christian faith on the altars of the civilized world. Because of the Holy Spirit's inspiration, they were willing to seal their lives with their own blood. We might ask what is missing in our lives? Does the Spirit play a vital role?

The Acts narrates the Church's story of the Spirit's power in building up the reign of God which Jesus preached about most. We have to alert our assembly, however, that the Spirit was not asleep before coming in full force, but was very operative in Israel and beyond, as found in many Scripture readings on Sundays. We never hear the complete story of Acts, especially the last chapters where the story reaches its climax.

### **The Tower of Babel**

The contrast is often made between the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) and Pentecost. When the Tower of Babel was being built, the people desired to stay together and not be scattered. God intervenes and prevents this from happening by having them speak various languages and scattering them all over the earth. Preachers often set this story and Pentecost as opposites insisting that Pentecost is a reversal. Maybe the confusion of Babel is restored at Pentecost because of the Spirit. People who had been scattered have now been brought together to form community by the power of the Spirit.

The stories also might be read as parallel stories. In both, people are tucked together in one place. In the Babel story the people want to make a



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## ***Pentecost means more than the birthday of the Church, it means a clarion call to every person to embrace a mature spiritual life.***

name for themselves, but don't want to be scattered. In the Pentecost story the people feel secure by keeping to themselves and excluding others.

God makes confusion out of all this which forces them from their safety nets to live in diversity. Only by doing this will they reach their fullest potential, moving from unity to diversity. For centuries artists have attempted to show through paintings, murals, and icons the story of Pentecost. If we look closely at the faces in these pieces of art, we find confusion and bewilderment rather than joy and amazement. The event was unsettling.

This is often contrary to what we preach and celebrate as the birthday of the Church. Some churches are richly decorated for the feast. In Rome, rose petals descend from the ceiling of the church to symbolize the Holy Spirit descending on the Apostles. In France they blow trumpets during the Mass to recall the sound of the wind. In Russia Catholics bring colorful flowers and tree branches to church, while the Polish people richly decorate their homes. During the Mass here in the States people are asked to read sections of the Scriptures in various languages. One parish had the Gospel read in every language represented by the assembly.

The Pentecost scene emphasizes that the Gospel must not be heard in one language but in a diversity of languages. The Spirit is instrumental in pushing us from the known to unknown territory. We need to preach this diversity, challenging people to embrace the plurality of race and ethnicity. The voices of the marginalized must be heard. We need to listen to the cry of the poor across racial boundaries. Only then can we fully celebrate another Pentecost.

### ***Symbols of Pentecost***

The Jewish followers of Jesus celebrated a significant harvest festival 50 days after Passover. Wind, fire and tongues were the symbols. The power of the Spirit sounded like a "strong dri-

ving wind"—maybe stronger than the wind that split the Red Sea, or that Ezehiel invoked when he had the dry bones come alive (37:9). The wind was certainly stronger than the one Elijah encountered in the desert, (1 Kgs 19:11) or what Jesus spoke about to Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (Jn 3:8). The Pentecost wind might have approached hurricane proportions.

"Tongues as of fire" appeared and rested on the people. Theophanies were often accompanied by fire. John foretold that Jesus would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Lk 3:16). Fire burns and cleanses the dross of sin and selfishness from the land and in our lives. Forest fires challenge even the most skilled firefighters. Yet the heat from these devastating fires causes flowers that may not have been seen for years to germinate and bloom. What can be said of the Spirit's fire?

The Spirit enabled them to speak in various tongues, creating a cacophony where each "heard them speaking in his own language" (Acts 2:6) and resulting in amazement and confusion. Some even scoffed saying, "They have had too much wine" (Acts 2:12). Tongues enabled them to speak eloquently of the mighty works of God which continue to this day. We are inspired to do the same.

### ***Celebrating Pentecost***

People celebrate Christmas with parties and gifts and Easter with eggs, egg hunts and bunnies. We celebrate Mother's and Father's Day, Independence Day, Labor Day and Thanksgiving. But how do we celebrate Pentecost, the day that Jesus poured out His Spirit upon us? Is it celebrated as a second-class feast? Pentecost is unique.

That Spirit wants to empower the poor, deepen family life and ties, and set the oppressed free. Pentecost is

much broader than glossolalia. It includes the salvation of thousands, preaching God's word to all people of many cul-

tures and backgrounds while being anointed by God's Spirit. Pentecost means more than the birthday of the Church, it means a clarion call to every person to embrace a mature spiritual life. Pentecost occurs 50 days after the Passover, but it also represents Moses receiving the Sinai law 50 days after leaving Egypt.

With Pentecost, when the "new law" was given, came Christ's fulfillment of His messianic mission, the door to new horizons. In the Orthodox Church, Pentecost is also called Holy Trinity Sunday because all three persons are included.

The prophet Joel predicted "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit upon all humankind" (3:1), a prophecy fulfilled at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit descended not only on the Apostles, but also on all who were present. All people were and are called upon to a prophetic vocation. Realizing this more fully might energize us to be more courageous in bringing about a New Creation and to celebrate the feast with great enthusiasm.

### ***Transformation***

Pentecost is about transformation. We die to our selfishness so that the risen Christ can become more alive in us. If we want to develop compassion for others, the best way is to act that way. By showing acts of compassion over and over again, we become more compassionate and loving like Jesus. The same can be said of someone we can't get along with. By gradually changing our thoughts and feelings, the power of the Spirit enables us to show compassion and the highest kind of love, love where there is no return. The Holy Spirit, also called the Comforter, will help us. St. Paul assures us, "The Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness" (Rom 8:26).

The more we are transformed, the more ready we are, with the guidance of the Spirit, to address the difficult,

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painful and thorny issues that need our attention. The Spirit continues to lead the Church so that it can speak the truth in love.

If God could intervene in the lives of ordinary people at that first Pentecost, isn't it possible that God continues to do that even now? What might God do next for an encore? The Spirit is not a respecter of persons but comes to old and young, rich and poor, female or male, free and slave, and people of all cultures. The powerful don't want that kind of equality because it squelches their power.

The Spirit makes it crystal clear that we don't know who will be chosen. It might be a homeless woman, an illegal alien, who speaks a powerful, prophetic message. The Spirit speaks to us in mysterious ways. The impossible, becomes possible, the unimaginable, imaginable.

Pentecost really gives believers their mission and motivation. But have we as preachers made our listeners aware of their mission or properly motivated them? Several years ago, a survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates showed that 60 percent of Catholics never had any personal experience of the Holy Spirit, while 37 percent did. In contrast, 21 percent of the Evangelical Protestants surveyed never had an experience, and 75 percent did. The 16 Vatican II documents emphasize the importance of the Spirit because there are at least 320 references found there.

When the Spirit is at work, things usually get turned upside down or around. Strange things happen such as Jacob being chosen over Esau, Joseph over his brothers, David over his older brothers, the prodigal son over the dutiful but resentful son, Mary Magdalene over the twelve to announce Jesus' resurrection, Saul, an enemy of the Church, becomes Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Nothing is too difficult for the Spirit. The Spirit is contagious. An estimated 80,000 Catholic adults were baptized during 2001-2003, a time of war, sex scandal and discontent—certainly a powerful example of how the Spirit is alive in the Church.

We certainly are living in the best of times and in the worst of times, depending on our outlook or attitude. As the saying goes, nothing is so bad that it can't get worse. We are living in the in-between time which is often chaotic. The Church has to be ready for a new Pentecost with fresh new insights and new beginnings.

We are called to boldness in what we believe and not become tongue-tied when our faith is attacked. We need to take pride in who we are, and what we are becoming as we take a strong stand against abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment and other thorny issues. Otherwise, we are like chameleons, little lizards that change their color to blend into their surroundings.

Pope John Paul II in many of his letters encouraged the laity to "put out into the deep." Jesus did not expect His Apostles to set out in leaky boats or to use nets filled with holes when He told them to lower their nets. Too often the media, rather than the Spirit, shapes what we believe.

We Americans are fond of trendy brands such as Nike, Starbucks, Gap, Disney, Coca Cola, Pepsi. We worry less about whether the product is good or good for us than about whether it is "cool."

Catholicism, in a sense, might be thought of as a brand asking people for their time, talent and treasure. In today's secular world, we might wonder whether such an unpopular brand can survive. Pope John Paul II has insisted that we Catholics are not here to guard a museum, but rather to cultivate a flourishing garden.

Pentecost—not the event of 2,000 years ago, but its continuing power—enables the Church to keep on renewing itself. What began in Jerusalem and traveled all over the world must continue as the ongoing Pentecost in every Catholic's life. **P**

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