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The Holy Spirit and the Church: a truly catholic communio

“The Church cannot prepare for the new millennium in any other way than in the Holy Spirit” (John Paul II, 1994:44).

Pope John Paul II has invited the Church to rededicate itself to the Holy Spirit in this second year of the Jubilee celebration. For those responsible for catechesis, education, preaching, and evangelization, reflection on the Holy Spirit will challenge some of our operative assumptions about the Church. This is especially true of the Church of the West.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE CHURCH OF THE WEST

Pope John Paul is well aware that for most of the last millennium Western theology has not been “in the Holy Spirit,” especially in its theology of the Church. He wants the next millennium to be different. The contemporary resurgence of the Holy Spirit in the Church’s theology and spirituality was sanctioned at Vatican II. In fact, all that came out of Vatican II can be summed up as the Church’s rediscovery of the Holy Spirit. The renewal of the liturgy, the empowering of the laity, episcopal collegiality, a more “spiritual” understanding of holiness, biblical study, ecumenism, etc., can all be traced to giving a rightful place to the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. Pope John Paul II wants to make sure, not only that the Church remains “in the Holy Spirit” but that it continues to sink its roots ever more deeply so that we enter into the third millennium as we embarked in the first: full of the Holy Spirit—the mark of the Annunciation and of Pentecost.

The Church is truly a triune reality. It was conceived in Christ and born of the Holy Spirit in order to reconcile all humanity to the Father who is in heaven, our origin and destiny. It is Christ incarnate who gives the Church its body; it is the Spirit who breathes life into that body. The Church has tended to its body for most of the last millennium. It is time now to tend to its Spirit again.

PENTECOST IS THE CHURCH’S MISSION

In this article I will concentrate on only one aspect of the Spirit, the event of Pentecost. It is important to recognize that the Church did not “begin” on Pentecost. It began in Christ. It already existed in the first
chapter of Acts. On Pentecost (Acts 2), what was already conceived, was “born” into the world—pushed out of the womb of the upper room into the larger world where it was destined to live and grow until the end of time. On that day the Church was full of the Holy Spirit (as was Mary at the annunciation). Thus, what it means for the Church to live in the Holy Spirit, is forever embedded in the events of Pentecost.

As Luke reports the story, it is clear that the increase of the Church is a matter of divine origin. The sudden transformation that made skillful apostles out of Jesus’ disciples cannot be explained by mere human means. It is due to the “tongues as of fire” that came to rest on them as each one was “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4) which put their own tongues on fire with the good news of Jesus. Not only did they make bold proclamations, but they were understood by tongues other than their own.

In this, the very nature of the Church is revealed. The good news of Jesus, and the body of believers formed by it, knows no bounds. “There were devout Jews from every nation under heaven in Jerusalem” (Acts 2:5) at the time. And all of them heard the apostles speaking in their own language. (Three times this is mentioned in just five verses.) The whole world of Judaism is represented and the Word is for all of them to hear, none excluded.

The Catholicity of Pentecost

But the Word did not stop there. Eight chapters later in Caesarea, Peter meets a man named Cornelius, a centurion. Those “with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:45). Peter baptized this first family in what amounted to the Pentecost of the Gentiles. The redeeming power of Christ, pushed by the Spirit, had crossed over the barrier that had previously divided humanity.

Paul and his companions furthered the evangelization of the Gentiles and ultimately transformed this Church of Christ into what it was destined to be: the Church of all races and cultures. At the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) it stepped beyond the confines of an exclusively Jewish matrix once and for all and officially sanctioned its immersion in the immense Greco-Roman world.

This “break toward the universality of the faith” (John Paul II, 1996:338), rooted in Christ, became the mission of the Church at Pentecost. It remains the mission of the Church through all time. Vatican II pointed out that “[Pentecost] foreshadowed the union of all peoples in the catholicity of the faith by means of the Church of the New Covenant, a Church which speaks every language, understands and embraces all tongues in charity and thus overcomes the dispersion of Babel” (Decree on Missionary Activity, 4).
The Triumph of Pentecost is the Dispersion of Babel

For Luke the catholicity of Pentecost had a very specific context. He listed fifteen different nationalities and languages who were present for the first public proclamation of the good news by Peter (Acts 2:9-10). They represented “every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:2). This world of converts to Christ, drawn into one body by a common Spirit, was in stark contrast to the babble of languages and peoples (Gen 11:1-9) so dominant in human experience. The Spirit of Pentecost aims to overcome Babel.

In Acts the divisiveness and alienation of Babel disappeared when peoples who heard “the good news” were able to communicate with one another in the same Spirit. This gave human history a new direction, which will only be complete when the “great multitude . . . from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” will finally be “standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). The dispersion of Babel is a reason for the Church’s existence and a significant part of its mission in the world.

In Acts “the dispersion of Babel” has a very specific meaning with significant implications for us today. It was the “alienation” of peoples that was overcome on that first day of Pentecost in the gift of tongues. The different languages did not disappear. Luke repeated three times: “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” (Acts 2:8). In the triumph of Pentecost the Spirit became a point of unity and communication for all peoples in Christ, no matter what their language happened to be.

There are two important truths here which are often pitted against each other in our own time. On the one hand, the unity of Pentecost in Acts was not achieved by making everyone the same. Yves Congar pointed out: “The Church overcame Babel not by a return to a uniformity that existed before Babel, but by proclaiming an implantation of the same gospel and the same faith in varied and diverse cultural soils and human spaces” (Congar, 1983: 26). (There was a time when we believed that what made the Church “catholic” was that it was exactly the same everywhere, in language and practice. But Vatican II called us back to the catholicity of Pentecost of which Congar speaks, which is more patristic.)

On the other hand, in the triumph of Pentecost the Church acquired more than just the diversity of languages. The world already had that. Rather, the Spirit in Christ brought those many languages into a newfound unity. (Inculturation is necessary to proclaim the gospel. But sometimes inculturation is spoken of in such a way that the point of unity is lost or not even envisioned. This will surely breed further nationalism and ethnic divisiveness, which returns us to the alienation of Babel we are to overcome.)
These two truths (the diversity and the unity of Pentecost) belong together. Whenever we separated them in the past, it has always gotten us into trouble. Both extremes—a uniformity that suppressed other cultures, or a relativity that makes each culture an island unto itself—are a loss of catholicity. The triumph of Pentecost and the reversal of Babel is the reconciliation of diverse languages into “one spirit in Christ.” Therein is the heart of the Church’s mission.

PENTECOST ECCLESIOLOGY: “COMMUNIO” THAT IS FULLY CATHOLIC

The Church is a triune reality. We are forever constituted in Christ. Out of his incarnation—his life, teaching, death and resurrection—comes the Church. But we are also forever constituted in the Holy Spirit. An ecclesiology that is equally attentive to the Spirit will treat communio (the Church as communion) as a fact of revelation to the same extent as the incarnation. In other words, the Church’s gospel, doctrine, sacraments, and structure—which come from Christ—are fully grasped only when they are also appreciated as gifts of communion “in the Holy Spirit.”

What does “Pentecost ecclesiology” mean for the Church at the close of its second millennium? The communio of the Church exists only in real congregations where it is practiced and in concrete decisions which Christians make “in the Holy Spirit.” It does not exist in the abstract. The fact is, the genesis of the Church is always a local reality. This is the level of the Church that John Paul II is trying to affect by the Jubilee. The challenge of Pentecost is intrinsic to every ecclesial community: diocesan, religious, parochial, domestic, etc.

What does it mean for a local church to live in the communio of Pentecost? It is tempting to think of this communio as simply a “good feeling (or sense) of community” among the congregation. And obviously that is a sign of the Spirit’s presence. But the sum total of the Church’s mission cannot be reduced to that, especially if it is achieved by gathering only like people together. That is not the essence of Pentecost. The triumph of Pentecost is the dispersion of Babel. And most importantly, the reversal of Babel needs to happen in every community which calls itself the Church.

A parish that is truly catholic, welcomes all Catholics, for instance, regardless of their nation, people, tribe, or language. That is what Pentecost is truly about. But we all know that is not the general reality. However, there are numerous parishes who do realize that this is their vocation and are known precisely for this. In the triumph of Pentecost “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all in all” (Col 3:11). But obviously the forces of Babel were not magically eliminated on
that first night of Pentecost. The defeat of Babel must be realized locally and concretely, where the barriers of alienation are removed one instance at a time, one person at a time. This is where the mission of the Church is lived.

Pentecost Ecclesiology: Concrete Implications

Several challenges follow from this mission.

1) Racism remains the greatest sin against Pentecost. The divisiveness and alienation of Babel reign supreme all over again when one race of people acts against another, whether it be blatant or subtle. Much of this country’s history has been tarnished by animosity toward blacks by whites, which has triggered animosity in reverse. It is a cancer on this nation and on the Church. The time to embrace the Spirit of Pentecost is long overdue. A parish that is truly catholic welcomes all Catholics, regardless of their race or color.

2) The Bishops’ Conference predicts that by 2010 the majority of Catholics in the United States will be of Hispanic descent. If we want to see this as part of the triumph of Pentecost, we need to begin preparing our people now. If the forces of Babel get the upper hand, this will be turned into a racist struggle instead.

When a parish tends to be of one race because it reflects the make-up of the neighborhood, that is one thing. But when the neighborhood is racially mixed and the parish is not, that is quite another. I suspect that far more white parishes are artificially segregated than are black or Hispanic parishes. To not evangelize, to not welcome others different from ourselves who live around us, is racism. It is time to turn this around; it is time to unleash the Spirit of Pentecost; it is time to dismantle the power of Babel. It is time that we begin to look, act, and be more catholic.

No doubt, getting ecclesial communities of diverse racial backgrounds to respect each other and to work together on equal footing will require skills that are still new to the Church, even though they came with Pentecost. This will mean that we will be challenged to rethink everything from liturgy, to leadership, organization, and communication styles, to architecture, to evangelization, to involvement in the neighborhood.

But this is not the first time that the Church has had to face this; nor will it be the last. Honoring both the unity and the diversity of Pentecost is no easy task, but it is a necessary one. The dispersion of Babel will make the Church more catholic. It will also contribute to the “renewal of the temporal order” which is at the heart of the salvation Jesus has won for us, as Vatican II clearly stated (Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, 5–7).
3) “Intentional parochial communities” must face up to the challenge of Pentecost. If the “intention” is to gather faithful of like minds, values or attitudes from a very narrow range of the Catholic spectrum, that does not seem to be consistent with the mission of the Church. It might be easier to develop a sense of community that way, but that is not a communio that is fully catholic. Creating communio out of homogeneity is not faithful to Pentecost.

4) A particular type of intentional parish requires special attention: those based on language and nationality. The triumph of Pentecost as the defeat of Babel raises a new challenge to this ecclesial arrangement. Even if they were necessary at the height of immigration, that does not necessarily justify them as permanent structures.

People have a right to societies and organizations which foster and preserve cultural heritages. But national, ethnic, and linguistic principles of organization are not equal to the faith. The Church must be more than just one of these societies. The failure to realize this reinforces ethnic and nationalist tensions, which have exploded into the atrocities so prevalent throughout the globe this century. The Church has to make a conscious effort at this point in history to put itself on the side of Pentecost and not Babel.

Pentecost did not ignore race or nationality, but it did transcend them. The gift of the Spirit transformed those who heard into a new reality that was truly catholic. Pentecost did more than just honor the diversity of languages; it reconciled them in the Word of God. We bring our race, nationality, culture, and language to the Church and they become something more, without being lost. When all of that variety is brought into a harmony by the Spirit, we have the fullness of catholicity and the richness of Pentecost.

But this issue is not unique to our own time. The patristic era faced the same identical problem, even though they did not use the modern concepts of nationalism or ethnicity. In antiquity Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem were cosmopolitan cities, with multiple languages, representing antagonistic cultures and ethnic rivalries: Copts and Greeks in Egypt, Syrians and Greeks in Antioch and Palestine, and Romans everywhere. But the Church refused to parcel out the Christian assemblies according to this diversity of cultures. Instead, they created Christian communities territorially precisely because they wanted to assemble the Church as the new Pentecost (Legrand, 1970:331). The mission of the Church was to refashion the world, not to duplicate its divisions.

5) This last point connects with another challenge. Reversing Babel is not restricted to the religious domain alone. The Church also has a vocation to the reconciliation of peoples and the redemption of divi-
sion and hatred in the civic realm. Since Pentecost, Christian faith refuses to be confined to the private sphere. The Spirit still pushes the Church out into the world with the good news. Whenever there is violence (whether in former Yugoslavia, Israel and the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Algeria—or wherever there is tension between peoples closer to home) the Church has an opportunity to confront the spiral of hatred by being itself a sign of Pentecost. It is precisely this mission that brought John Paul II to both Sarajevo and Lebanon in 1997.

CONCLUSION

It is the Spirit who makes the Church one and holy; it is the Spirit who keeps the Church apostolic and catholic. Each one of these describes the Church. But the one attribute that is most naturally used to identify who we are is: “the catholic Church.” This is no accident; it happens to be the one that is most closely identified with Pentecost.

REFERENCES


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