

PENTECOST, THE BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH AND OF THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Fr. Steven Scherrer, MM, ThD

Homily of Pentecost, June 12, 2011
Acts 2:1-11, Ps. 103, 1 Cor. 12:3-7, 12-13, John 20:19-23

“And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4).

Today we celebrate the miracle of Pentecost, when the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to preach the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who saves us, repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and the need to believe in Christ to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and a new life in Christ. On this day the Church was born, and the apostles began their mission to preach with power and to convert thousands to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, Lord, and Savior of the world. In his first sermon on the day of Pentecost, St. Peter said, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Since the day of Pentecost until now, the Holy Spirit has continued his work of renewing the face of the earth. The Spirit gives power to the words we preach, so that they give new life to all who accept them with faith. God loved us in sending his Son to save us, and “if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). The apostles expressed their love for others by preaching to them, with the courage and the power given to them by the Holy Spirit, the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. They were his witnesses unto the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). So did the Holy Spirit inspire them, enabling them to do this work of renewing the face of the earth. So does the Spirit renew the earth, giving a special gift to each believer to use for this renovation. The apostles received the gift of preaching Christ with power and of converting thousands, completely changing the life of countless people, forgiving their sins and uniting them to God.

This is a way of loving one another, using our gift to serve the world. But there are also other gifts from the same Spirit. Each one receives his own gift, appropriate for him—and all are gifts for building up the Church, thus renewing the face of the earth. St. Paul had the gift of preaching to the Gentiles the mystery of Christ for their salvation and transformation. Thus did the Spirit use

him for the work of renewing the earth. He preached the full message of God's revelation. "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable," he said, "and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:20-21).

This is the essence of the mission of the Church. This is the reason why missionaries are sent out even today—namely to preach Christ and to announce the good news that he paid our debt of suffering in punishment for our sins by his death on the cross, and that through faith in him this can be applied personally to us so that we can be saved and completely forgiven. The mission of the Church has other aspects too, such as works of charity—the building and staffing of schools, dispensaries, and hospitals, etc.—but it is the preaching of the gospel that is the heart of the mission of the Church in the world, as we see in the activities of Saints Peter and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles. St. Paul spent his life preaching the message of salvation through the death of Christ on the cross to those who did not believe in him—to Jews and Greeks. The thought never entered into his mind to leave these people in peace with their own religions, as though this were enough for them. He knew that everyone needs to hear the complete plan of God for the salvation of the world in his only Son, incarnate, dead on the cross, and risen for everyone. Then each person will have the opportunity and the freedom to either accept or reject the gospel of God's salvation.

The mission of the Church, inspired and enabled by the Holy Spirit, has nothing to do with either colonialism or imperialism. It began from Jerusalem two thousand years ago in the days of the Roman Empire, when that empire was pagan, and these poor missionaries from Palestine eventually converted the entire empire. The missionary movement of the Church continues until today in all the countries of the world wherever there are Christians. Christians from Colombia, Korea, Mexico, the Philippines, and India work as missionaries in all parts of the world. I knew missionaries from India working in Kenya and Alaska. The Holy Spirit gives them power to give new life in God through their preaching, when it is received with faith. The miracle of speaking in foreign tongues, which took place today, indicates that the message of Christ should be preached in all the languages of the world, and that humanity should be made one by the Holy Spirit through preaching Christ in all parts of the world.

The apostles were also given the gift of the Holy Spirit to forgive sins. The risen Jesus "breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" (John 20:23). Thus Christ instituted the sacrament of reconciliation, giving the apostles and their successors the power on earth to forgive sins in his

name. This is a great gift, as all who regularly and frequently use this sacrament know. It gives them relief from the pain of guilt for having sinned or fallen into imperfections, and it assures them that their sins are definitively forgiven and removed from them by the merits of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. This marvelous sacrament channels the merits of Christ's death on the cross individually and personally to each one who uses it with faith.

Pentecost is the birthday of the Church and of the mission of the Church. Our mission to preach Christ to the nations, to those who still do not know him, began today. Today is therefore a day on which we should renew ourselves in this mission, in this vocation.