

HOMILY AT THE PAX COMMUNITY LITURGY
SUNDAY, MAY 13, 2007
SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Introduction

The theme chosen for today's liturgy "A Runup to Pentecost" represents something of a reaction to a certain neglect of the great feast of Pentecost which we celebrate in two weeks. With great fanfare the Church marks the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit, but then on the following day we find ourselves immersed in "Ordinary Time"; day to day life takes right over.

So it seemed important to reflect on Pentecost today and perhaps over the next two weeks before the actual feast.

I

Two events in recent history speak volumes about the continued presence of the Holy Spirit in our times.

First, Vatican Council II. Some of us remember an old pope, John XXIII, elected as an interim pontiff after the long papacy of Pius XII and seemingly cut from the same traditional cloth as his predecessor, who suddenly and totally unexpectedly called for an Ecumenical Council barely 90 days into his papacy. And with incredible results.

That 77 year old pope in announcing and promoting his Council used phrases that bespeak the presence of the Holy Spirit, for example the need to open the windows to let into the Church some fresh air. And he criticized those who doubted the need for a council or felt that it was a bad idea, calling them "prophets of doom".

As those of us who lived through those conciliar years came to realize, all the gifts of the Holy Spirit were on display before, during and after the Council—those gifts we learned about in our early years: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord. John XXIII and this successor Paul VI, as well as everyone else connected with that 20th Century watershed event needed those gifts for the historical work they were about.

II

Less well known is the second event in recent times that points to the constancy of the Holy Spirit among us. That was the Conference of Latin American Bishops which took place in Medellin, Colombia in 1968. This gathering was the response of the Latin American Church to Second Vatican Council and proved quite as dramatic as the Council for those of us who experienced it. At Medellin a bereft Church revolutionized itself, turned itself around from an institution that was identified with the elite sectors of Latin American society, to a faith community which called itself to a "preferential option for the poor". Again, the fresh breath and fire of the Spirit were evident.

III

These two historical events, II Vatican Council and the Medellin Conference have been called “new graces of the Holy Spirit” in the Church. They were and continue to be inspirations of the Advocate, the Paraclete promised us by Jesus Himself.

Such “new graces” have always gifted the Church from those very early days which we heard about in today’s first reading, when the Christian community was in doubt as to whether or not Gentile converts to Jesus had to become part of the Jewish faith before being baptized. The Holy Spirit gifted the Church with the realization that Jesus’ Way was a new covenant and that there was no need for gentiles to pass through Judaism in order to become followers of the Christ. The same Spirit has guided the Church often with “new graces” ever since.

IV

If I might interject here a personal note, having lived through these two major inspirations, these “graces” of the Holy Spirit in my lifetime, I am convinced that I could never leave the institutional church. With all of its—all of our—faults and sins, this institution does have within it the capability of reform and renewal. I have seen it, lived it and could never, I hope, turn my back on it.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion let me urge all of us to look for these “new graces” of the Spirit and recognize them. My home community in Washington received a new grace just yesterday when little Hannah Grace came into the world, daughter of two community members. Like every newborn she represents a “new grace” in the world.

We also have the ever “new grace” of one particular gift of the Holy Spirit—Fortitude. Let me suggest that Fortitude is not so much courage or boldness but the ability to overcome fear. We all suffer from fear in our lives, and our country currently plays on our fears to do some terrible things in this world (“we must fight in Iraq so that we won’t have to fight on our city streets”). But as Jesus said “fear is useless”. The gift of Fortitude enables us to overcome, control, rise above our fears.

May this be our prayer for ourselves and all of our brothers and sisters in this time: that we utilize the Gift of Fortitude to cope with all of the fears that assail us.