

HAPPY BIRTHDAY CHURCH

Reflection for Pentecost Sunday

Pentecost Sunday completes our fifty days of celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. This Monday, we return to *Ordinary Time* and will continue in it until we begin again the Advent-Christmas season in December.

If Christmas celebrates the birthday of Jesus, Pentecost celebrates the birthday of the Body of Christ, that we call Church. Church literally means the "gathered ones". Church is not primarily a building. Rather, it is the "gathering of those who believe in Jesus". In many quarters today, Christianity has become a private, individualized spirituality between individuals and Jesus. You have heard people say "I believe in God (or Jesus). I just don't do church." Such thinking is very foreign to the mind of God. When God called Abraham he said "I will make of you a great nation." Shortly, after Jesus kicked off his Public Ministry, he started to gather around him a community of disciples. Then he deliberately and intentionally founded a church. "Peter, you are the rock on which I will build my church." (Matt 16:16-19). Then he promised to be with this community of believers until the end of time. (Matt 28:26).

A Human and Divine Church

People often talk of the church as *merely* a *human* institution. The truth is that the church like Jesus, her founder is *both human and divine*. Unlike Jesus, the church is imperfect in her humanity because she is made up of sinners. Because our church is human and made up of sinners she is always in need of inner renewal and external reform of structures. But because the church is *divine*, she is *never* in need of *replacement*- a mistake Luther and others seem to have made. Of course, if Luther and other reformers sinned in breaking the *unity* of the church, the church sinned in allowing herself to become so unlike Christ. She sinned in failing to listen with humility to all the good and right things that Luther was proposing.

It is so important for us to remember the *divine* nature of the church as we are confronted with its human sinful side, especially as these imperfections manifest themselves in her leaders. For some people of weak faith this has been a turn off point. They leave our church and go and join another church that seems 'so friendly' and I 'perfect'. It is not unlike the spouse who leaves an imperfect spouse for a new partner. Sooner or later both the spouse and those who leave our church will find that there are no perfect spouses or churches out there. Individually and as a church our call is to face up to our dark sinful side and reform it and at the same time not allow our imperfections to discourage us. A part of the Good News is that Jesus works through imperfect individuals and churches to achieve his purposes. Individually and as a church we are, in the words of Paul "earthen vessels" but we carry within us the divine power of God (2 Cor 4:7). So we belong to a church that is *always, always* in need of renewal, but *never, never* in need of replacement. To go off and join another church because of the imperfections of our church is like saying, Christ goofed when he founded our church or to say that he has abandoned our church or to say that our church is irreformable.

When parishes seem spiritually dead, I can understand why Catholics go elsewhere to nourish their spirits and satisfy their hunger for teaching that touches their minds and hearts but they shouldn't stop coming to Eucharist. A parish may *seem* spiritually dead, but it is never dead as long as the Eucharist is faithfully celebrated. And yes, shame on our Catholic parishes insofar as we fail to provide people with uplifting worship experiences and solid scripture teaching.

A Church Empowered with the Spirit

Just as Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit, so was the church conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost Sunday, the Holy Spirit hovered over the disciples (Mary included) gathered in the Upper Room. Just as Mary was present at the birth of Jesus, she was present at the birth of the church. One of her titles is "Mother of the Church". Filled with the Spirit of God the new born church went off to fulfill the mission of Jesus to "go forth and teach and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28) This newly birthed church was now the visible, tangible presence of Jesus in the world. When Saul persecuted the newly formed church, Jesus identified himself totally with his church. Jesus said to him: "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4-6). A few centuries later, Pope Leo the Great would say:

*When the church baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes.
When the church forgives sins, it is Christ who forgives sins,
When the church anoints the sick, it is Christ who is anointing the sick.*

What beautiful words and what a noble truth. Sunday after Sunday when we gather to celebrate Eucharist, the person of the Presider, who is leading us in perfect worship of the Father. It is Christ who speaks to us when the scriptures are proclaimed. Christ is also present in the prayer and song and hospitality of the assembly and in a most excellent way he is present when we receive his body and blood at Holy Communion. Our job is to wake up to this wondrous event that is occurring before our eyes.

A Church That Listens to the Spirit

One of the biggest challenges for our church, especially for our leaders is to develop sensitive and responsive ears to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who is always seeking to transform our church into the likeness of Christ. Discerning the true voice of the Spirit is not easy. Hence, the importance for us individually and as a community to often pray for the grace of true discernment. An excellent one-liner prayers to the Holy Spirit is: *"Holy Spirit help me to grow in my ability to hear and respond to your prompting"*. Hearing and responding to the Holy Spirit is what the spiritual life is all about.

Please see elsewhere in today's bulletin a list of the people who coordinate the many ministries in our parish. I am most grateful to each one of them.

A Prayer to the Spirit of God.

The following is an American Indian's prayer to the Great Spirit of God. I am sure many of you have read it before. It especially calls us to see and respect the presence of God in creation.

**O Great Spirit,
Whose voice I hear in the winds,
And whose breath gives life to the world,
Hear me.**

**I come to you as one of your many children.
I am small and weak.
I need your strength and your wisdom.**

**May I walk in beauty.
Make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset.
Make my hands respect the things you have made,
And my ears sharp to hear your voice.**

**Make me wise so that I may know
The things you have taught your children,
The lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock.
Make me strong,
So that I may not be superior to other people,
But able to fight my greatest enemy,
Which is myself.**