NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

'The first passion must be for the truth'

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 28, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

This feast of Pentecost is a feast when we are called to experience great joy, excitement and enthusiasm. We're reminded on this feast of what St. Paul said to the church at Rome: "The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. We are infused, filled with the very love of God because the spirit of God has been poured into our hearts." That's what we celebrate today. This is a day for great celebration, and yet we are living at a time when, for many reasons, I think we don't experience that great joy.

Pentecost
Acts 2:1-18
Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34
1 Corinthians 2:3b-7, 12-13
John 20:19-23
Full text of the readings [1]

As we gather together as the church, as God's people, to celebrate this Eucharist, there is a heaviness in our church today that is felt by many, many people. You could know this by the fact that, as I have mentioned before, 10% of the people in the United States are people who have left the Catholic church -- 30 million people. The second largest Christian denomination in our country now are those who used to be Catholic in a practicing way.

That of course does cause us to feel sadness, but then also, as Pope Benedict himself has said very recently, there is a terrible sin in our church. He named it "sin," and that is this terrible scandal that has swept over our whole church, every part of the world. We have experienced it profoundly here in the United States, a scandal because of what happened to children in our church, but a scandal because the leadership of our church has covered it up, has facilitated it even by allowing priests who are perpetrators of this terrible evil to move from one place to another to continue their acts of abuse against innocent children. This is the sin within our church.

We also feel a terrible sadness because of what is happening in so many places in this country and other parts of the world too -- parishes are being closed. Just recently in a nearby diocese, the bishop announced the closing of 52 churches at once this spring. It's happened here in our archdiocese and it happened because we don't have enough priests to staff every parish the way we did before and the leadership in our church, our bishop, refused to begin to bring forth new leadership, the leadership of lay people who could serve as leaders of parishes, men and women trained to be pastoral leaders. It could happen; parishes would not have to be closed.

So these are just a few of the reasons why we feel this sadness, this heaviness in our church, even on this day of Pentecost, when we should be filled with excitement and enthusiasm. Listen to what happened on Pentecost: the sending of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised at the Last Supper, "I will send to you my spirit, my advocate," and then on Easter Sunday night, he comes to the disciples locked up in a room out of fear. This is the whole community of disciples as it existed at that point and Jesus comes into their midst with a beautiful message, "Peace be with you."

He comes to encourage them, to strengthen them, and then he tells them, "As God has sent me, I send you," giving us his very mission, to spread the love of God, the message of God's love throughout our world. Then he breathes upon them, receive the Holy Spirit, that breath of the spirit Jesus gives to them, and they are enlivened by that spirit and again he says, "Peace be with you." Then he tells them what's going to bring that peace -- when you forgive, forgiveness happens, reconciliation happens, peace happens. That's what the spirit can do.

And Jesus also says when you restrain evil, that evil is restrained through the power of the spirit of Jesus. In our

first lesson today, St. Luke describes this whole event of the outpouring of the spirit on the church, the disciples, in a more symbolic way. He draws upon images that to that community, would have been very familiar. The sound of the wind shaking the very building would remind them, because Luke uses the same words as used in the book of Genesis, when God brings a powerful wind over the chaos prior to creation and draws forth the brilliant creation that we now experience, the creation of the whole universe through the power of God's spirit.

Or the same word is used when, in that book of Genesis, the story of creation of humankind is given to us. That human body is formed out of clay but then God's spirit breathes on the form and it becomes a living body, a human person. The power of the spirit, that's what Jesus is giving to the disciples on that Easter Sunday night, or also that symbol of fire -- the tongues coming out upon the disciples. They would have remembered that pillar of fired in the desert that led them from slavery to freedom. They would have remembered the burning bush that showed the presence of God. Here Luke wants us to realize in this fire, is God's spirit. So in that very powerful, symbolic way, Luke tells the same story that John tells in the gospel. Jesus comes to give us the very spirit of God, to give us his spirit so we can go forth and change our world, "As God has sent me, I send you."

But now that's going to happen. We have to enter into this Pentecost. We have to open our hearts to receive the spirit of God, the spirit of Jesus. We have to ready ourselves to be transformed to become the ones who go forth as Jesus did to spread the message of God's love. But at this point, if a new Pentecost is to happen within our church, we must accept our role, all of us who are the church, just like that whole community of disciples received the spirit, received the charge to go and spread the good news. So we are the church, we have to open ourselves, we have to be reformed.

I was reading this past week, a passage in the document on the church from the Vatican Council II, and this document says it so well: "The spirit dwells in the church and in the hearts of the faithful," that's all of us, "as in a temple." The spirit prays in us, bears witness in us to our adoption as sons and daughters of God, and the spirit leads us, the whole church, into all truth and gives it unity and communion and in service. That's what the spirit does according to the Vatican Council, is doing to us this morning as we celebrate this feast of Pentecost.

Then the passage, a little bit further, goes on to say, "The whole company of the faithful," all of us who are believers, who are members of this community of disciples, "who have an anointing by the Holy Spirit, cannot err in faith." "This instinct of faith is awakened and kept in being by the Spirit of truth. Through it the people of God hold indefectibly," that is, they will not lose it, "to the faith once delivered to the saints, penetrate it more deeply by means of right judgment, and apply it more perfectly in their lives."

All of that is enabled to be done by us because as we heard in our second lesson today, Paul explaining to that church at Corinth, that community of disciples like ourselves, how there are the varieties of gifts but the same spirit, and a variety of services but the same Jesus, varieties of activities but the same God, who activates all of them in everyone. We are the church, we must begin to act as the church. To each of us is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good, so even though we are many, Paul says, by that spirit we become one body. We become the body of Jesus Christ. We become his community of disciples, his church.

So we must act as the Vatican Council document guided us, we are the church and we have an anointing by the Holy Spirit. So our voice is important, we cannot err in faith. The instinct of faith is awakened and kept in being by the spirit of truth. And as we hold it indefectibly, penetrated more deeply by means of right judgment, apply it more perfectly in our life, but then this has to spread throughout the whole church. If we were going to make a new Pentecost happen, if we're really going to become enlivened as a church, then we must begin to bring about change in our church today, to overcome this sadness, this pall that hangs over us, so strike off in a renewed direction, the way the first disciples left that upper room and went out into the world. We must demand change in our church.

This past week, I read an editorial in a Catholic magazine published in Great Britain called *The Tablet*. It's a

powerful editorial, a demanding editorial, because it demands of the whole church profound change, the kind of change that all of us who are the church must demand and bring about. The archbishop of Westminster is quoted in the editorial, Archbishop Vincent Nichols. He says, "What has happened was wrong, so now the first passion must be for the truth." He's talking about that terrible scandal, that sin that Benedict says is in our church. It was wrong, so now the passion of our whole church must for the truth. People who are courageous about the truth do us a great service.

So in our church now, from our leadership, every bishop throughout the whole church -- priests, religious, all of us who are the disciples of Jesus -- must be willing to have this passion for truth, bring out the truth, what has happened, and then we must demand change, accountability. Pope Benedict himself has recently said, "Yes, forgiveness must be forthcoming, but that does not preclude justice." Those who perpetrated this sin within our church, those who abused, those who facilitated that abuse, those who covered up that abuse, those who moved perpetrators from one place to another, must be held accountable. That's the kind of reform that has to happen in our church.

That editorial in The Tablet magazine says, "The need for thorough reform is certainly urgent." "As a starting point, in Rome," the editorial says very explicitly, "everyone tarnished by the sex-abuse scandal should be retired." Here the editorial is talking about leadership in the church and then says, "that must include Cardinal Bernard Law, the former archbishop of Boston, who resigned over a sex-abuse scandal. He was shown to have covered up, but then who was moved to Rome as archpriest of the Basilica of St. Mary Maggiore and also joined several congregations within the curia. The body within the church are the closest advisors to the pope and carry out the pope's work. Pope Benedict can no longer afford to have anyone around him tainted by scandal."

So we have to bring about reform at that level of the church -- the pope and his curia -- there has to be reform there; there has to be reform within our own bishop's conference. Within every diocese in our country we have to have this passion for truth, a willingness to hold people accountable, a willingness to bring about change. This is what the spirit of Jesus dwelling within us is demanding of us today. This being the church does not come easy to any of us, yet if we really open ourselves on this feast of Pentecost to the coming of the Holy Spirit among us, that spirit being poured into us, the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which is given to us, if we open ourselves to that, each of us can become the disciple Jesus calls us to be.

All of us together acting with the gifts of the spirit alive within us can be a powerful force for change, that strong wind that brings life and new life, that fire that burns away evil and brings forth light and goodness. This is what can happen to our church and must happen to our church. We must undergo this kind of renewal, a new Pentecost, a new outpouring of the spirit. So as we enter into this Eucharistic liturgy now, enlivened by this word of God, I hope that every one of us will say yes to Jesus when we receive his body and blood at the time of communion. Say yes, pledge ourselves to be a vibrant, courageous, truth-telling, passionate for justice person in our church.

All of us must be that, pray that we will be, so that this Pentecost today will be the beginning for each of us, for our church and parish community, our larger church in the United States, our church throughout the world, that this Pentecost will be the beginning of a new time in our church when all of us will go forth as Jesus sends us to transform our world, bring his message of love, be the witnesses that Jesus calls us to be. This is what must happen, and it will, as we let this feast of Pentecost penetrate into our hearts and carry us back into our world to do the work that God calls us to do as the living witnesses of Jesus.

[This homily was preached at Homily given on Sunday, May 23, 2010 at St. Radegund, Austria.]

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