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Pentecost

Michael Sean Winters | May. 20, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The Holy Spirit is the person of the Trinity most difficult to get our minds around. We all understand Fathership and Sonship and see, throughout the Gospels, the intimacy that characterizes their relationship. But, the Spirit absconds from our intellect and receives less attention and focus in the life of the Church that the first two persons of the Trinity. Even Voltaire, in his famous deist quip, after watching a beautiful sunrise at Fernay, praised the Creator God - ?I believe! I believe in you! Powerful God, I believe!? before adding ?As for monsieur the Son, and madame His Mother, that?s a different story!? ? did not even think the Holy Spirit worthy of a mention. The Sacrament of Confirmation is certainly the stepdaughter of the sacraments of initiation in practice, having been misplaced to a time after Holy Communion and turned into a kind of Catholic bar mitzvah.

So, what do we make of Pentecost, the Feast when we celebrate the Holy Spirit?s coming among us? A few themes stand out.

First, we commemorate the descent of the Spirit on the apostles and call this the birthday of the Church. It is easy in our era, when the study of comparative religion invites us to a kind of relativistic mindset, to neglect this key aspect of the Church?s self-understanding: The Church is where the Spirit lives. We cannot pray unless the Spirit prompts us. We cannot have a sacrament without the Spirit?s sanctification. We cannot evangelize without the Spirit. And, when and where the Spirit is not found within the Church, where it is crushed by human sin and the gifts of the Spirit are not in evidence, people are rightly disillusioned or scandalized. This Spirit is a Holy Spirit, and while the Church must operate with human vessels, nothing is more of a counter-sign to the Gospel than an unholy member of the Church.

Second, the images we use to describe the Spirit attest to its power. We say that the Spirit is like the wind. Yesterday, I enjoyed a cool breeze in the afternoon but later watched television images of a tornado?s massive destructive power wind its way through Oklahoma. We say the Spirit is like a flame. Where would we be without fire? Its discovery is one of the great achievements of culture. But, we also know the power of fire to destroy. Only the image of the dove seems not to suggest a two-edged sword. These images of things we need ? and I would add water for baptism and the eucharist ? but which also have the power to destroy, these images teach us something about the spiritual life that we do not like to consider: It is not about comfort or success or even serenity, although sometimes the life of faith does yield these. Still, sometimes faith calls us to stretch, to set out into the deep, to change course, to stop doing something bad that we enjoy, to trust in God, but to hedge our bets.

The Holy Father touched on this yesterday in his homily in Rome:

Newness always makes us a bit fearful, because we feel more secure if we have everything under control, if we are the ones who build, programme and plan our lives in accordance with our own ideas, our own comfort, our own preferences. This is also the case when it comes to God. Often we follow him, we accept him, but only up to a certain point. It is hard to abandon ourselves to him with complete trust, allowing the Holy Spirit to be the soul and guide of our lives in our every decision. We fear that God may force us to strike out on new paths and

leave behind our all too narrow, closed and selfish horizons in order to become open to his own. Yet throughout the history of salvation, whenever God reveals himself, he brings newness and change, and demands our complete trust: Noah, mocked by all, builds an ark and is saved; Abram leaves his land with only a promise in hand; Moses stands up to the might of Pharaoh and leads his people to freedom; the apostles, huddled fearfully in the Upper Room, go forth with courage to proclaim the Gospel. This is not a question of novelty for novelty?s sake, the search for something new to relieve our boredom, as is so often the case in our own day. The newness which God brings into our life is something that actually brings fulfilment, that gives true joy, true serenity, because God loves us and desires only our good. Let us ask ourselves: Are we open to ?God?s surprises?? Or are we closed and fearful before the newness of the Holy Spirit? Do we have the courage to strike out along the new paths which God?s newness sets before us, or do we resist, barricaded in transient structures which have lost their capacity for openness to what is new?

Don?t you wish you had this man as your parish priest? I suppose, in a sense, he is becoming the world?s parish priest.

Third, the Spirit is real. Difficult to understand, yes. Difficult to follow, of course. But, when we invoke the Holy Spirit, She comes. Think of the great prayer, Veni Creator Spiritus, that is sung at ordinations. Something real happens at an ordination. The ordinand may have practiced the ceremony in advance with a liturgist, right down to the laying on of hands. But, when the day before, at the rehearsal, the master of ceremonies lays hands on the ordinand as part of the rehearsal, the ordinand stands up after and he is not yet a priest. When, the next day, the bishop performs the same action and invokes the same prayers, the ordinand stands up after and he is a priest. The Spirit works in tangible ways, in the sacraments, as will as in less predictable ways, but She is always real.

Finally, for the past few Feasts of Pentecost, members of new ecclesial movements come to Rome to be together. I know some people are suspicious of these new movements, but I discern in them the Spirit at work. (Obviously, as with the Legionaries, they can miscarry: again, fire warms, but can also kill.) The new ecclesial movements really bring to life the vision of the Second Vatican Council. They help people to grow in holiness, to be true to their baptismal dignity. They tend to be decidedly allergic to clericalism, with laity and clergy inter-mixed in new and important ways. They are faithful to the Church ? full of faith, not just some mindless obedience to superior authority. The Spirit is a superior authority and these movements seem to me to function like a caldron that nourished, and contains, the flames, and a grove of trees that softens and directs the wind. I am sure that these movements upset some people, just as Francis and Dominic and Ignatius upset some people in their day. It is also curious to note that while we tend to think of these movements as growing out of the Second Vatican Council, many of them actually started before the Council. The council did not drop out of the air, nor emerge only from the lecture halls at select theologates in Europe. The Second Vatican Council emerged from the work of Chiara Lubich in Trent, and from the first meeting of Don Giussani with students in Milan in the 1950s, it emerged as the Spirit moved through the hearts of these founders and their followers. She moves still.

Lastly, I think the Spirit inspires some of the most beautiful music, especially music about the Spirit. Who does not love the hymn ?Draw us in the Spirit?s tether,? or ?Come, Holy Ghost, Creator Blest,? or ?Come Down, O Love Divine.? But, my favorite is the ?Veni, Creator Spiritus.? Here is the hymn, with exquisite choral interludes between the verses, sung in the Sistine Chapel at the start of the conclave in March. Can anyone doubt, really, that the Spirit heard this beautiful hymn ? and responded!

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