

## MAY 20<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-11 I Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 John 20:19-23

No liturgical feast is more important yet more underrated in our church than Pentecost. Were we to return to its original meaning we'd have to not only change our church government, we'd also have to change the way we picture God working in our lives.

One of the big questions that constantly came up in the early church could be expressed this way, "How do we know what the risen Jesus wants us to do in life?" The Scriptural community was certain they were called to carry on his/her ministry, but how were they practically to do that?

We Catholics long ago stopped asking that question. We learned that we're simply to obey the hierarchical leaders Jesus set up during his earthly ministry. The pope and his bishops not only set the tone for the church, they dictate every one of our dos and don'ts. Scripture is only for extra credit. (And besides, as Luther showed, it can be horribly misleading!) The thing that eventually will lead us to eternal happiness is our faithfulness to the papacy. Though "good" Protestants can get into heaven by following the Bible, even "lukewarm" Catholics can squeeze through its pearly gates by just following the pope.

Our sacred authors – and all the first Christians – would have been amazed at such a frame of mind. In their theology and experience, Jesus left us not a religious system, but a person to carry on after him. That person was his Spirit. Only by surfacing and following that force could we be certain we're doing what the risen Jesus wants us to do.

The coming of the Holy Spirit is so significant that, like Jesus' resurrection, our sacred authors offer us more than one biblical theology to explain it. Luke, whose Spirit-event takes place 50 days after Jesus' resurrection, gives us one in today's first reading. John, whose Spirit arrives on Easter Sunday night, gives us another in our gospel pericope. And Paul uses our I Corinthian reading to remind us of the Spirit's gifts. All three theologies are reflections on what happens when the Spirit breaks into our lives.

Among other things, Luke zeros in on the disruptions Jesus' Spirit brings. Those serious about carrying on her/his ministry, best get used to wind, fire and noise being part of their everyday lives. The Galilean carpenter never promised his historical disciples a tranquil existence; his Spirit follows suite with his post-resurrection disciples. If we really want to surface what God wants us to do in our lives, we'd better emulate Bette Davis' advice, "Buckle your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy ride!"

John wants to make certain that those who dare to receive the Spirit had better zero in on forgiving those around them. Building communities is essential to our faith. Yet there's no way to pull that off without constantly repairing the bridges we've constructed with one another. Communities don't happen by accident.

Neither does the Body of Christ suddenly appear out of nothing. Paul is convinced the parts of that Spirit-fed body can only maintain their unique diversity when each member contributes to the whole. The Spirit not only blesses us with singular gifts, we're to use those gifts "for some benefit." They're for others, not for ourselves.

Considering the dying that's an integral part of each of these three theologies, I can see why the church eventually soft-pedaled the Spirit and began to concentrate on hierarchical rules and regulations. Far less demands on forgiving, few discussions about integrating diverse gifts into one body, and practically no wind, fire and noise. No wonder Pope Francis is meeting opposition from some of the church's conservatives. They simply want us to return to the good old, peaceful, non-Spirit days.

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## MAY 27<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: FEAST OF THE TRINITY

Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40    Romans 8:14-17    Matthew 28:16-20

I grew up with my teachers' warning, "If you can't define it, you don't know it." No matter how hard I'd try to convince them that I really knew the answer to their question, either I handed over a definition or they marked me wrong. There was no middle ground.

I wonder how today's sacred authors would fare at my teachers' hands. Though all three talks about God, none of them provides us with a definition of the Trinity.

It took the "official" church almost 300 years before it even came up with the catechism definition we all learned, the "three persons in one God" one. But as Fr. Bernard Lonergan frequently reminded us Licentiate candidates years ago, the bishops at the Council of Nicaea had to redefine several Greek terms to come up with that well-known, but rarely understood description.

Our Deuteronomic author, Paul and Matthew are much more interested in what God *does* than in who God *is*. That's completely understandable. How does someone define a being one cannot comprehend? Rudolf Bultmann once observed that our sacred authors have a built-in problem. They're writing about the "other side" for people who inhabit "this side." Any simile we surface – no matter how insightful - will limp horribly. That's why we should simply be content to reflect on the Trinity's actions in our lives, and leave the definitions until we reach the pearly gates.

Among other things, God's actions constantly demonstrate God's care. The Hebrew Scriptures begin with and revolved around the Exodus. Yahweh's freeing of some enslaved Israelites starts the Jewish "thing." Their faith doesn't begin with people learning how to define this new God; it starts with Yahweh breaking into their everyday lives in a forceful way. "Did anything so great ever happen before? . . . Did any god venture to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation . . . ?" If Yahweh demands we first learn a definition, we'd have no salvation history.

Paul agrees. He's a good Jew. Since he doesn't worry about defining Yahweh, why should he worry about defining Jesus as God? He's simply concerned with what the risen Jesus does in our lives. Above everything else, the Christ gives us a new personality. Paul reminds the Romans that we've been transformed into God's unique children. No longer God's fearful slaves, we're now on an equal level with God's son. The only kicker is that, like him/her, we have to suffer. There's no other way to attain real life.

But we're not in "this" by ourselves. One of the most significant things the risen Jesus does is simply to be with us.

Years ago, one of our local bishops ended his installation homily by quoting today's gospel pericope. Good choice. But there was one problem. He prefaced the quote by saying, "Never forget that this is what Jesus promised right before he ascended into heaven."

He inadvertently mixed up Matthew with Luke. There's no ascension in Matthew. The end of today's gospel pericope is the end of his gospel. Matthew's Jesus doesn't go anywhere. He's still "out there" somewhere with us. If Faith Hill is so close to the person she loves that she can feel him breathe, I presume the risen Jesus is so close to us that we can not only feel him/her breathe, the Christ can also feel us breathe. We're never in this faith thing by ourselves.

If today's feast prompts us to mentally return to our grade school catechism classes, we're celebrating it in a non-biblical way. Only those who, by nightfall, can come up with one or two more ways God's working in our lives have really listened to our readings.