

GOSPEL

John 20:19-23

In the evening of the first day of the week, the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them. He said to them, 'Peace be with you,' and showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord, and he said to them again, 'Peace be with you.'

'As the Father sent me,
so am I sending you.'

After saying this he breathed on them and said:

'Receive the Holy Spirit.
For those whose sins you forgive,
they are forgiven;
for those whose sins you retain,
they are retained.'

HOMILY OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

4 June 2006

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended with power upon the Apostles; thus began the mission of the Church in the world.

Jesus himself prepared the Eleven for this mission, appearing to them on many occasions after his Resurrection (cf. Acts 1: 3).

Prior to the Ascension into Heaven, he ordered them "not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father" (cf. Acts 1: 4-5); that is, he asked them to *stay together* to prepare themselves to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And they gathered in prayer with Mary in the Upper Room, awaiting the promised event (cf. Acts 1: 14).

To stay together was the condition laid down by Jesus in order to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit; the premise of their harmony was prolonged prayer. In this way we are offered a formidable lesson for every Christian community.

Some think at times that missionary effectiveness depends primarily on careful programming and

its subsequent intelligent application through a concrete commitment.

The Lord certainly does ask for our collaboration, but before any other response his initiative is necessary: his Spirit is the true protagonist of the Church. The roots of our being and of our action are in the wise and provident silence of God.

The images used by St Luke to indicate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit - wind and fire - recall Sinai, where God revealed himself to the people of Israel and offered his covenant (cf. Ex 19: 3ff.). The feast of Sinai, which Israel celebrated 50 days after the Passover, was the *feast of the Covenant*. Speaking of the tongues of fire (cf. Acts 2: 3), St Luke wants to show Pentecost as a new Sinai, as the *feast of the New Covenant*, where the Covenant with Israel is extended to all the nations of the earth.

The Church has been catholic and missionary from her birth. The universality of salvation is meaningfully manifested with the list of the numerous ethnic groups to which those who heard the Apostles' first proclamation belonged (cf. Acts 2: 9-11).

The People of God, which had found its first configuration in Sinai, extends today to the point of surmounting every barrier of race, culture, space and time. As opposed to what occurred with the tower of Babel (cf. Gn 11: 1-9), when people wanted to build a way to heaven with their hands and ended up by destroying their very capacity of mutual understanding, in Pentecost the Spirit, with the gift of tongues, demonstrates that his presence unites and transforms *confusion* into *communion*.

Human pride and egoism always create divisions, build walls of indifference, hate and violence. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, makes hearts capable of understanding the languages of all, as he re-establishes the bridge of authentic communion between earth and heaven. The Holy Spirit is Love. But how is it possible to enter into the mystery of the Holy Spirit? How can the secret of Love be understood?

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The Gospel passage takes us today to the Upper Room where, after the Last Supper, a sense of loss has saddened the Apostles. This is due to the fact that Jesus' words arouse disturbing questions: He spoke of the world's hatred of him and of his own, he spoke of his mysterious departure; and there were still many other things to be said, but for the time being the Apostles were not able to bear the weight (cf. Jn 16: 12).

To console them, he explains the meaning of his departure: he will go, but he will return; meanwhile, he will not abandon them, will not leave them orphans. He will send the Consoler, the Spirit of the Father, and the Spirit will enable them to understand that Christ's work is a work of love: love of the One who gave himself, love of the Father who has given him.

This is the mystery of Pentecost: the Holy Spirit illuminates the human spirit and, by revealing Christ Crucified and Risen, indicates the way to become more like him, that is, to be "the image and instrument of the love which flows from Christ" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 33).

The Church, gathered with Mary as at her birth, today implores: "*Veni, Sancte Spiritus!* - Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love!". Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or Reflection/ Homily?



Head: What does it mean to you to be "filled with the Holy Spirit"? What would you consider to be evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life?



Heart: Pope Benedict reminds us that God invites us to collaborate but he is the initiator. Have there been times in your life that you've tried to "build a way to heaven"?



Hands: Take time as a group to pray for one another for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit. You might pray, "Come Holy Spirit, please fill (name) afresh with your presence."

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another:

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Offer prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps praying the 'Glory Be'.