

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 (EXCERPT)**
12 June 2011

The Gospel passage then offers us a marvellous image to clarify the connection between Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Father: the Holy Spirit is portrayed as the breath of the Risen Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 20:22). Here the Evangelist John takes up an image of the creation narrative, where it says that God breathed into the nostrils of man the breath of life (cf. Gen 2:7). The breath of God is life. Now, the Lord breathes into our soul the new breath of life, the Holy Spirit, his most intimate essence, and in this way welcomes us into God’s family. With Baptism and Confirmation this gift was given to us specifically, and with the sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance it is continuously repeated: the Lord breathes a breath of life into our soul. All the sacraments, each in its own way, communicate divine life to human beings, thanks to the Holy Spirit who works within them.

In today’s liturgy we perceive another connection. The Holy Spirit is Creator, he is at the same time the Spirit of Jesus Christ, but in such a way that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are

one God. And in the light of the First Reading we may add: the Holy Spirit gives life to the Church. She is not born from the human will, from man’s reflection, from his ability or from his organizational capacity, if this were so she would have ceased to exist long ago, as happens

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with all that is human. Instead the Church is the body of Christ, enlivened by the Holy Spirit. The images of wind and fire, used by St Luke to portray the coming of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:2-3), evoke Sinai, where God revealed himself to the People of Israel and granted it his

Covenant. “Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke”, we read in the Book of Exodus, “because the Lord descended upon it in fire” (19:18). Indeed Israel celebrated the 50th day after the Passover, after the commemoration of the flight from Egypt, as the feast of Sinai, the feast of the Covenant. When St Luke speaks of tongues of fire to represent the Holy Spirit, this Old Covenant is called to mind, established on the basis of the Law received by Israel on Sinai. Thus the event of Pentecost is represented as a new Sinai, as the gift of a new Covenant in which the Covenant with Israel was extended to all the peoples of the earth, in which all the barriers fall from the old Law and its heart appears holier and more unchangeable; in other words as love, which the Holy Spirit himself communicates and spreads, a love that embraces all things.

At the same time the Law is expanded, it is opened, even though it becomes simpler: it is the New Covenant which the Spirit “writes” in the hearts of all who believe in Christ. The extension of the Covenant to all the peoples of the earth is represented by St Luke with a list of peoples, that is considerably long for that epoch (cf. Acts 2:9-11). With this we are told something most important: that the Church was catholic

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from the very outset, that her universality is not the result of the successive inclusion of various communities. Indeed, from the first moment the Holy Spirit created her as the Church of all peoples; she embraces the whole world, surmounts all distinctions of race, class and nation; tears down all barriers and brings people together in the profession of the triune God. Since the beginning the Church has been one, catholic and apostolic: this is her true nature and must be recognized as such. She is not holy because of her members' ability but because God himself, with his Spirit, never ceases to create her, purify her and sanctify her.

Lastly, today's Gospel presents these beautiful words to us: "the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord" (Jn 20:20). These words are profoundly human. The Friend lost is present once again and those who were formerly distraught rejoice. But it says far more. For the lost Friend did not come from just anywhere but from the night of death; and he passed through it! He is not just anyone; indeed he is the Friend and at the same time the One who is the Truth that gives life to men and women; and what he gives is not just any kind of joy but joy itself, a gift of the Holy Spirit. Yes, it is beautiful to live because I am loved and it is the Truth who loves me. The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Today, at Pentecost, these words are also addressed to us, because in faith we can see him. In faith he comes among us and to us too he shows his hands and his side and we are glad. Therefore let us pray: Lord, show yourself! Make us the gift of your presence and we shall have the most beautiful gift: your joy. Amen!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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



Head: We are aware of many ways that members of the Church have fallen short. What do you think of the idea that the Church is unfailing holy, regardless of her members actions?



Heart: Pope Benedict describes Jesus as "the Friend" many times. Who is Jesus to you?



Hands: The Church embraces the whole world, regardless of race, class and nation. How can we live this truth in our parishes?

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'.