

The Third Glorious Mystery – A Meditation on The Descent of the Holy Spirit

PENTECOST HAS A LONG, LONG HISTORY IN THE CHRONICLES OF REVELATION. It's been celebrated since early Hebrew days. But throughout its long history it's been celebrated in many different ways, and for many different reasons. That's how revelation works: certain things happen, although the reason for them might not be clear, and then gradually everything crystallizes into something ordered and transparent that catches the light and lets us see it in its entire splendor.

It started as a harvest feast of the Hebrews, the celebration of the presentation of the "first fruits" to God. This feast seems to have begun as a Canaanite Festival that the Hebrews took up when they reached the Promised Land.

Pentecost was always a time of rejoicing, like most harvest festivals. Besides the presentation of the gifts and sacrifices to the Creator, there were hymns of thanksgiving and praise; which evidently made the Israelites think about thanking God for his spiritual gifts, like the Law.

So the original Feast of First Fruits, developed into Pentecost, the Feast of the Fiftieth Day, and its focus turned gradually away from the bounty of God's crops to center on the providence of his Law.

Christ also used the metaphor of crop and harvest again and again to, signify the establishment of his kingdom, but his Apostles don't seem to have expected anything in particular to happen on Pentecost, in fact, the account in Acts doesn't really point to any subtle comparisons between the first fruits of the harvest and the first fruits of the Holy Spirit, nor between the thunderous descent of the Old Law on Sinai and the fiery descent of the New at Jerusalem. Of course, the fact that the Descent of the Holy Spirit happened on the old feast of Pentecost makes the connection well enough, and it ties together all of the different strands of the history of that Jewish holiday.

There is still some debate about what, exactly, happened at the first Christian Pentecost, but the general outline in Acts is clear. The Apostles were gathered together in one place, with those loyal Christians who had stayed faithful despite the Crucifixion and the persecutions that followed it.

Mary was there-it's always been understood that the people mentioned in Acts are included in the hundred and twenty, and that "they were *all* gathered together" means exactly that.

Then there was a theophany, an epiphany of the Holy Spirit. There was a strong wind in the house, apparently as a kind of warning. Then the Spirit appeared as a large flame that separated into individual flames that settled above the heads of those present, "and they were filled with the Holy Spirit". In Christian art and language, flames always represent love, specifically the ardent love of God for humans, which is why virtually every image of God in Scripture and since, from the Burning Bush to the Sacred Heart, is shown in flames like those of a furnace. Both great deliveries of the Law to Man, the great theophany at Sinai and the descent of the Holy Spirit, happened in the imagery of fire from Heaven; both speak eloquently and elementally about charity, about the love of God for his creatures, and the establishment of his Law in love.

Jesus himself had said that this particular event would happen at the end of the Old Covenant and the establishment of the New. The Spirit would dwell in the Faithful, and the Faithful in the Spirit, as he is in the Father and the Father is in him. That is, the advent of the Holy Spirit upon the Faithful would mark the taking up of the first fruits of Christ's teachings, the birthday of the Church.

The Christians gathered together received both kinds of grace, sanctifying and actual, and they received them in accordance with their vocations. **The grace most often celebrated in the liturgy of Pentecost is the sanctifying grace that vivified the Church at that moment and that has sustained Her ever since. Here, as the Spirit breathed upon Her in that mighty wind, the Church received Her soul, as it were. The Apostles knew what they had to do, get people to repent and be baptized.**

To accomplish this, they received two distinct actual graces. First, the Apostles were confirmed in priestly office or, more specifically here, in episcopal office; they were to lead, to shepherd, the Church. As part of this grace, they knew how to do this, which is itself unprecedented.

In fact, there had never been an organization like the Church on Earth before, an organized body

of men and women who moved out purposefully to bring everybody's attention to a new religion and a new way of life.

With the light of this actual grace, the Apostles saw the whole world united in a single creed, a vision that no religion on Earth had ever shared. They understood what the sacraments were and how to administer them; they understood how to direct missionaries to the far ends of the Earth. They had a lot to work out, of course, but after Pentecost they knew how to work it out. Even when they disagreed with each other about discipline, they knew how to work it out. We may take the innovations of the earliest days of the Church for granted, business as usual, but that's only because what the Apostles did in the days after Pentecost has remained the norm for two thousand years since. We forget how utterly different the world, the Faith, and religion were before that first Pentecost.

Secondly, the Apostles, Mary, and the others that were with them - about a hundred and twenty persons in all, men and women alike - received whatever actual graces they needed to perform their particular tasks, to live up to their individual vocations. Evidently some among the hundred and twenty had received some official recognition in the Church before this, but none had the authority of the Twelve. There were no priests, yet, and no deacons, and the only one of the followers who assumed the office of Bishop with the remaining Apostles was Matthias. So the majority of the Christians visited by the Spirit that day must have been laymen - which include women.

But Mary had not received any priestly office from Christ as the Apostles had; she had not received any special charge of primacy as St. Peter had. She had received no priestly or pastoral office whatsoever. Still, John Paul II said, "the fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, received neither the mission proper to the Apostles nor a ministerial priesthood; cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them". Acts doesn't say that some of the tongues of fire were larger than others; all are represented as equal. But each of those flames of love was intimately suited to the person on whom

it rested; each had a precise configuration of particular gifts, in particular degree, to bestow on each individual person, almost as if that person were the only one involved with the Spirit.

Two extraordinary linguistic graces in particular were bestowed, two miracles of language. One was that the devout people in the crowds understood the Apostles simultaneously, no matter what their native languages were. That is, the Apostles spoke ecstatically about the wonderful works of God, as Mary had done in her *Magnificat* after the Holy Spirit had come upon her, but the devout Jews from Rome heard them in Latin, those from Parthia heard them in Pehlevi; people from the Greek-speaking cities of Asia Minor must have heard them in their own local dialects. Acts specifies that this phenomenon didn't affect everybody in the crowd, only the devout, which would indicate those who already sought to do the will of God; Christianity is a covenant, and a covenant requires the free consent of both parties.

The second miracle of language was that the Apostles were able to speak intelligibly in languages that they had not learned naturally. This was obviously necessary for the immediate spread of the Church. None of the Apostles, evidently, was an educated man. None would have been prepared to speak intelligibly to the Gentiles. And yet St. Peter went to Rome; St. Jude went to Edessa, where people spoke Syriac. St. Philip, was taken instantaneously to Ashdod near Tel Aviv, where he preached to the Philistines and St. Bartholomew taught successfully in India.

The purpose of both of these miracles, the miracle of hearing and the miracle of speaking, was specifically to spread the Gospel to all peoples, so the language was intelligible. The message of Pentecost was to be understood directly and clearly.

This Gift of Tongues has happened in the Church since the days of the Apostles, **but only very, very rarely**. When the Corinthians started mistaking other linguistic behavior for the Gift of Tongues, St. Paul wrote to them very clearly about it, requiring that the distinction be made between those who spoke actual understandable languages by infused knowledge and those who babbled; he uses the word "barbarian", someone who speaks in an uncouth or crude way, or someone who stammers meaninglessly.

To keep the distinction clear, St. Paul specified that there had to be an interpreter to confirm that the person was, in fact, speaking a known human language and speaking it properly. Even when a person could miraculously speak a genuine language that he hadn't studied, being understood and understandable, St. Paul ranked the gift low on the scale of spiritual favors, and he specified that it was intended for unbelievers, not for believers. He commanded the Corinthians to use only articulate and plain speech.

The gift of tongues does not mean going off on one's own, linguistically, speaking in a way that one makes up inside himself that nobody else can understand. This is a behavior that anybody can learn, given sufficient motivation to be a follower or a leader of followers; it's very easily faked, and in fact it has to be started by someone before it spreads in a group. Those who claim to interpret, too, fall short on analysis.

At this moment, more than any other in Scripture, the fact that there is twelve of them carries immense meaning. Twelve is a number of completeness, or, more specifically, a complete cycle, a sort of circular completeness that includes both beginning and end, in perpetuity.

But the connection between Pentecost and Easter has never been forgotten: the two holidays are seen together as beginning and end of the same like the red rose petals, the red vestments of Pentecost recall the flames of the Holy Spirit, and they foreshadow the blood that the Apostles would shed in establishing the Church, the blood of martyrs that Tertullian called the seed of the Church.

Two sacraments intimately associated with Pentecost, whereby the Gifts of the Holy Spirit are obtained, are Confirmation and Holy Orders. The Saturday that falls after Pentecost has always been the preferred time for ordinations, because the whole liturgical cycle of the week builds up an appropriate context for the sacrament: the seven days of the week celebrate the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Wisdom, the gift by which one can judge all things as God sees them, is celebrated in the liturgy of Pentecost Sunday. **Understanding**, the Gift that helps one understand what God has revealed, on Monday. **Counsel**, the Gift of knowing what to do in a difficult situation, is celebrated on Tuesday. On Wednesday, **Fortitude**, gives the courage to do what is right. Thursday's liturgy speaks of **Knowledge**, through which one sees this world as it really is. **Piety**, the proper regard for God and things related to God, is celebrated on Friday. Then on Saturday, is the celebration of **Fear of the Lord**.

All of these liturgies gathered together passages from both Testaments and arranged them meaningfully to constitute a vast, week-long prayer for Wisdom and enlightenment; as preserved in the old Roman Missal, they are a rich store of meditation and reflection.

Then on the following Sunday, Holy Orders take place. Churches that held these customary ordinations still echo visually this week-long plea for the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, as we meditate on the third Glorious Mystery of the Rosary, the Descent of the Holy Spirit.

This meditation is posted at our website in a printable version.

It has been edited from the book, *Rosary, Mysteries, Meditations, and the Telling of the Beads*, by Kevin Orlin Johnson.

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