

Solemnity of Pentecost (Year B)

May 23, 2021

Readings: Acts 2:1-11; Galatians 5:16-25; John 15:26-27; 16:12-15

Today's Scriptures provide us ample food for thought and reflection. The passage from Saint Paul's letter to the Galatians is one of the most challenging in the lectionary cycle. Yet, on the day in which several of our young people are receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation, perhaps it is fitting. We cannot be naive about the challenges that face anyone who takes seriously the gospel of Jesus Christ. Saint Paul minces no words when he compares a life "by the spirit" with one "of the flesh."

This most challenging teaching speaks powerfully to our world today. Is there any doubt about the struggle between flesh and spirit? If we are honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that this battle is real. It can be painful at times and most discouraging. But we mustn't forget that Jesus has won the ultimate victory through the sacrifice of the cross.

Saint Paul lists the "works of the flesh," and he is quite right in stating that they are obvious: immorality, impurity, lust, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, to name but a few. As challenging as it is to read these passages, we should be thankful that through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the sacred authors faithfully transmitted Apostolic teaching.

For the faithful Catholic, there is a major distinction between living the faith and aspiring to the faith. In other words, we may fail—and sometimes fall—and yet we are not defeated. We are not defeated, because the grace of God dwells in our hearts and souls, strengthening us for the daily skirmishes of life. It isn't easy being a teenager today, though all too often we sell you short. I think teenagers increasingly understand what is at stake— they appreciate hearing the truth, even the difficult truths. I say this because at the core, we believe that you can live a faithful Catholic life, knowing that God never commands the impossible.

Teaching the difficult truths of the faith is not without its challenges. But it is promise that I made on the day of my ordination, 32 years ago this coming week. Woe to me if I only teach the easy truths. We need to lovingly challenge one another to live the fullness of the gospel truth.

The Solemnity of Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, a solemn sign that God does not abandon His Church, but rather guides her throughout the ages. **But there was a catch!** Jesus hints today that we must be willing to wait, watch and listen. “I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now.”

Following the resurrection, Pentecost was the early Church’s defining moment and its birthday. People from all over the known world– Egypt, Mesopotamia, Libya, Rome–could hear the Galileans speaking in their own tongues of the mighty acts of God. They were utterly astounded.

Jesus was signaling how God’s abiding presence would be manifest in the future. For any of us who prefer the immediate answers of a Google search engine, we may need a spiritual re-boot! The Holy Spirit makes His presence known– but for our part, we need to be docile, to listen, to earn and to wait. If we insist on a secular model for our relationship with God, that relationship is doomed from the get-go.

St. John Henry Newman, a brilliant 19th c. church leader, explained the distinction between difficulties and doubt:

Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, as I understand the subject; difficulty and doubt are incommensurate... People say that the doctrine of Transubstantiation is difficult to believe; I did not believe the doctrine till I was a Catholic. I had no difficulty in believing it, as soon as I believed that the Catholic Roman Church was the oracle of God, and that she had declared this doctrine to be part of the original revelation.¹

¹ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua* Chapter 5: The position of My Mind Since 1845

This is an important distinction between difficulties and doubt. God is not at our beck and call, ready with immediate answers to every question. We have work to do, and sometimes we will struggle.

Sometimes, like the disciples, we cannot bear the truth– it seems unfair or just too difficult to live. Sadly, some may even set themselves against the truths of the faith or against those in Church leadership. In such cases, if we allow our anger to rule the day, we will never be at peace. To our Confirmandi– continue to think, ask questions, and pray for guidance.

May we never turn away from the truth or from the Church, which is the sure instrument of Christ’s saving truth on earth. The real challenge for the apostles was to trust that they were not being abandoned after the Ascension, that in fact the Lord was still very much present.

The Holy Spirit was sent and remains present in our lives today for guidance, even as we make full use of the natural gifts freely given to us. Recall, before Jesus said to the disciples, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he twice said “Peace be with you.” Jesus wants us to feel secure, not troubled. He was telling the disciples that they were now capable of forging out on their own, for with the Holy Spirit present they were never really alone.

Now they would wait on God’s Word, and through prayer discern God’s mysterious ways. Pentecost is a powerful reminder that God’s care and concern for His people crosses all boundaries of language and race, nationality or age. The Holy Spirit speaks to us all, in His own way, in His own time. May we listen attentively and respond.