



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION ON THE SOLEMNITY OF PENTECOST

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Vatican Basilica
Sunday, 31 May 2009*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we live in faith the mystery that is fulfilled on the altar, that is, we take part in the supreme act of love that Christ accomplished with his death and Resurrection. The one and only centre of the liturgy and Christian life itself the Paschal Mystery acquires in the various Solemnities and Feasts specific "forms", with additional meanings and special gifts of grace. Pentecost is distinguished from all the Solemnities by its importance since what Jesus himself had announced as the purpose of the whole of his mission on earth is brought about in it. Indeed, on his way up to Jerusalem he had declared to his disciples: "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!" (Lk 12: 49). These words were most visibly brought about 50 days after the Resurrection, at Pentecost, the ancient Jewish feast which in the Church has become the feast par excellence of the Holy Spirit: "There appeared to them tongues as of fire... and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2: 3-4). The real fire, the Holy Spirit, was brought to the earth by Christ. He did not steal it from the gods like Prometheus, according to the Greek myth, but rather made himself the mediator of the "gift of God", obtaining it for us with the greatest act of love in history: his death on the Cross.

God wants to continue giving this "fire" to every human generation and he is naturally free to do so as and when he wishes. He is spirit, and the Spirit "blows where he wills" (cf. Jn 3: 8). However, there is a "normal way" which God himself chose "to cast fire upon the earth": this way is Jesus, his Only-Begotten Son, incarnate, dead and Risen. In his turn Jesus Christ constituted the Church as his Mystical Body so that she might extend his mission in history. "Receive the Holy Spirit", the

Lord said to the Apostles on the evening of the Resurrection, accompanying these words with an expressive gesture: "he breathed" on them (cf. Jn 20: 22). In this way he showed that he was communicating his Spirit to them, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. Now, dear brothers and sisters, in today's Solemnity Scripture tells us once again how the community should be, how we should be in order to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the account which describes the event of Pentecost, the sacred Author recalls that the disciples "were all together in one place". This "place" was the Cenacle, the "Upper Room" where Jesus had eaten the Last Supper with his Apostles, where he had appeared to them risen; that room which had become, so to speak, the "headquarters" of the nascent Church (cf. Acts 1: 13). The Acts of the Apostles, however, rather than insisting on the physical place, intend to point out the inner attitude of the disciples: "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer" (Acts 1: 14). Harmony among the disciples is thus the condition for the coming of the Holy Spirit; and a presupposition of harmony is prayer.

Dear brothers and sisters, this also applies to the Church today, it applies to us, who are gathered here. If we want to prevent Pentecost from being reduced to a mere rite or even an evocative commemoration but want it to be an actual event of salvation, we must prepare ourselves in devout expectation for the gift of God through humble and silent listening to his Word. Since Pentecost is renewed in our time, perhaps taking nothing from the freedom of God the Church should concentrate less on activities and be more dedicated to prayer. The Mother of the Church, Mary Most Holy, Bride of the Holy Spirit, teaches us this. This year Pentecost falls on the very last day of May on which the Feast of the Visitation is normally celebrated. That too was a sort of miniature "pentecost" which caused joy and praise to well up in the hearts of Elizabeth and Mary, one barren and the other a virgin, who both became mothers through an extraordinary divine intervention (cf. Lk 1: 41-45). The music and singing that accompany this liturgy help us likewise to be with one accord devoted to prayer, and for this I express my deep gratitude to the Cathedral Choir and the *Kammerorchester* of Cologne. Joseph Haydn's *Harmoniemesse* has very appropriately been chosen for this liturgy on the bicentenary of his death, the last of the "Masses" composed by the great musician and a sublime symphony to the glory of God. I address my most cordial greeting to all of you who are gathered here on this occasion.

In the account of Pentecost the Acts of the Apostles uses two important images to indicate the Holy Spirit: the image of the storm and the image of fire. Clearly, St Luke has in mind the theophany of Sinai, recounted in the Books of Exodus (19: 16-19) and Deuteronomy (4: 10-12, 36). In the ancient world the storm was seen as a sign of divine power, before which man felt subjugated and terrified. However, I would like to emphasize another aspect too: the storm is described as a "mighty wind" and this makes one think of the air which distinguishes our planet from the other stars and enables us to live on it. What air is for biological life, the Holy Spirit is for spiritual life; and just as an atmospheric pollution exists that poisons the environment and living beings, thus a pollution of heart and spirit exists that mortifies and poisons spiritual life. In the same way that one must not become inured to the poisons in the air and for this reason ecological commitment is a priority today likewise one must not become inured to what corrupts the mind. On

the other hand it seems that it is not difficult to become accustomed to the many products that contaminate both the mind and the heart and that circulate in our society for example, images which boost pleasure, violence or contempt for men and women. This is also freedom, people say, without realizing that all this pollutes, and intoxicates the mind, especially that of the new generations and moreover ends by conditioning their very freedom. The metaphor of the mighty wind of Pentecost makes one think instead of how precious it is to breathe clean air, physically with the lungs and spiritually with the heart, the healthy air of the Spirit who is love!

The other image of the Holy Spirit which we find in the Acts of the Apostles is fire. I mentioned at the beginning the comparison between Jesus and the mythological figure of Prometheus which recalls a characteristic aspect of modern man. In possessing himself of the energies of the cosmos "fire" the human being seems today to assert himself as a god and to wish to transform the world excluding, setting aside or even rejecting the Creator of the universe. Man no longer wants to be an image of God but of himself; he declares himself autonomous, free and adult. Of course, this attitude reveals a relationship with God which is not authentic, the consequence of a false image which has been fabricated of him, like the Prodigal Son in the Gospel parable who believes that he can fulfil himself by distancing himself from his father's house. In the hands of such a man "fire" and its enormous potential become dangerous: they can backfire against life and humanity itself, as history unfortunately shows. The tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where atomic energy used for the purposes of war, ended by sowing death on an unheard of scale, serve as a perennial warning.

It would truly be possible to find many examples, less grave but equally symptomatic, in everyday reality. Sacred Scripture reveals to us that the energy capable of moving the world is not an anonymous and blind force but the action of the "Spirit of God... moving over the face of the waters" (Gn 1: 2) at the beginning of the Creation. And Jesus Christ "brought to the earth" not the vital force that already lived in it but the Holy Spirit, that is, the love of God who "renews the face of the earth", purifying it from evil and setting it free from the dominion of death (cf. Ps 103[104]: 29-30). This pure, essential and personal "fire", the fire of love, came down upon the Apostles gathered in prayer with Mary in the Upper Room, to make the Church an extension of Christ's work of renewal.

Lastly, a final thought may also be found in the account of the Acts of the Apostles: the Holy Spirit overcomes fear. We know that the disciples sought shelter in the Upper Room after the arrest of their Lord and that they had remained isolated for fear of suffering the same fate. After Jesus' Resurrection their fear was not suddenly dispelled. But here at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit rested upon them, those men emerged fearless and began to proclaim the Good News of the Crucified and Risen Christ to all. They were not afraid because they felt they were in the hands of the strongest One. Yes, dear brothers and sisters, wherever the Spirit of God enters he puts fear to flight; he makes us know and feel that we are in the hands of an Omnipotence of love: something happens, his infinite love does not abandon us. It is demonstrated by the witness of

martyrs, by the courage of confessors of the faith, by the undaunted zeal of missionaries, by the frankness of preachers, by the example of all the saints, even some who were adolescents and children. It is demonstrated by the very existence of the Church which, despite the limitations and sins of men and women, continues to cross the ocean of history, blown by the breath of God and enlivened by his purifying fire. With this faith and joyful hope let us repeat today, through the intercession of Mary: *"Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the earth"*.

© Copyright 2009 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana