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# The Humble, Yet Powerful Beginning of a New Age

## Biblical Reflection for Solemnity of Pentecost C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, MAY 18, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- We know the story well (Acts 2:1-10) -- it is the dawn of the day of Pentecost and the followers of Jesus are gathered to wait and pray. This new day begins with an explosion of sounds from heaven, and a violent wind. The story is reminiscent of the mighty wind that hovered over the waters in the Genesis creation story. What was first heard was then seen -- tongues like fire (2:3). The first gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of speech in different languages.

The scene quickly shifts from the inside upper room, where the disciples are gathered, to the Jerusalem streets outside the house. There the Gospel is already drawing crowds together. Out in the streets, "devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem (2:5)" confront the church, and their initial response is bewilderment (2:6). The "tongues" spoken of are obviously various languages of "every nation under heaven," since each foreigner exclaims: "We hear, each of us, in our own native language" (2:8).

Luke's roll call of the nations -- Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes (2:9-10) -- makes it very clear that no nationality is excluded from the proclamation of the Good News. In these few lines, Luke gives us a story in miniature, of the whole plot of the Acts of the Apostles.

### Authentic Christian spirituality

Chapter 8 of Paul's letter to the Romans addresses the elements of authentic spirituality (vv 8-17). To please God is the goal of human life aimed at by both Jew and Christian, yet this goal cannot be attained by those who are dominated by self ("in the flesh"). In order to please God, one must be "in the Spirit," i.e., living "according to the Spirit" (8:5).

According to Paul, the baptized Christian is not only "in the Spirit," but the Spirit is now said to dwell in him or her. Paul insists that attachment to Christ is only possible by the "spiritualization" of human beings. This attachment is no mere external identification with the cause of Christ, or even a grateful recognition of what he once did for humanity. Rather, the Christian who belongs to Christ is the one empowered to "live for God" through the vitalizing influence of his Spirit.

Without the Spirit, the source of Christian vitality, the human "body" is like a corpse because of the influence of sin, but in union with Christ the human "spirit" lives, for the Holy Spirit raises the dead to life. The Spirit not only gives new life, but also establishes for human beings the relationship of an adopted son and daughter and heir. It is the Spirit that animates and activates the Christian and makes one a child of God. The theme of sonship in Romans is Paul's attempt to describe the new status of the Christian in relation to God. Christians have received the Spirit (of Christ or God), but this is not a "spirit" in the sense of a disposition or mentality

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that a slave would have. Animated by God's Spirit, the Christian cannot have the attitude of a slave, for the Spirit sets free. Through the Spirit the Christian proclaims that God is Father.

### Pentecost in the Gospel of John

Today's Gospel scene takes place on the night of the first Easter. Jesus' appearances to the disciples, without or with Thomas (John 11:16; 14:5), have parallels in the other gospels only for John 20:19-23; cf Luke 24:36-39; Mark 16:14-18. John's first appearance of the Risen Lord to the disciples is both intense and focused (20:19-23). It is evening and the doors were bolted shut. Anxious disciples are sealed inside. A suspicious, hostile world is forced tightly outside. Jesus is missing. Suddenly, the Risen One defies locked doors, blocked hearts, and distorted vision and simply appears.

The meeting with the risen Lord in John's account is the humble yet powerful beginning of a new age: Fear is transformed into joy; pain is changed to peace and trust; flight and hiding become courage and mission. Division and hatred are vanquished by the gift of the Holy Spirit -- by God's love revealed in Jesus and through his power to remove evil and sinfulness.

Jesus "breathing on them" recalls Genesis 2:7, where God breathed on the first man and gave him life; just as Adam's life came from God, so now the disciples' new spiritual life comes from Jesus. This action is also reminiscent of the revivification of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37. This is the evangelist John's version of Pentecost.

"Peace be with you" is the greeting and gift of the Risen Lord. The Hebrew word "shalom" means re-establishing the full meaning of things. Biblical peace is not only a pact that allows a peaceful life, or indicates the opposite of a time of war. Rather, peace refers to the well being of daily existence, to one's state of living in harmony with nature, with oneself and with God. Concretely, this peace means blessing, rest, honor, richness, health and life. The gift of peace, that Jesus entrusted to his first disciples, becomes a promise and a prayer shared with the Christian community.

The mission and the power of Jesus are entrusted into the poor, limited and fragile hands of his apostles. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, that same mission continues in them, granting the power to forgive sins and the possibility of reconciliation and intimacy with the Father.

### Courageous heralds of the Gospel

The Holy Spirit renewed the Apostles from within, filling them with a power that would give them courage to go out and boldly proclaim that "Christ has died and is risen!" Frightened fishermen had become courageous heralds of the Gospel. Even their enemies could not understand how "uneducated and ordinary men" (Acts 4:13) could show such courage and endure difficulties, suffering and persecution with joy. Nothing could stop them. To those who tried to silence them they replied: "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). This is how the Church was born, and from the day of Pentecost she has not ceased to spread the Good News "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

At Pentecost, the full meaning of Jesus' life and message is poured into our hearts by the Spirit alive in the community. The movement of the Spirit in people results in gifts and talents. This movement does not reach its end in individuals. Rather, it is supposed to have a ripple effect so that our unique abilities promote the common good. The Spirit's gifts are many: teaching, instructing, healing, consoling, forgiving, and encouraging. The Spirit will increase our gifts to the extent that we love Jesus and our brothers and sisters, obey the commandments, and share what we have received so lavishly and freely with others.

### Christian hope: a gift of the Spirit

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Hope is one of the true manifestations of the Spirit at Pentecost. For the world of sound bites, hope usually means that we make ourselves believe that everything is going to turn out all right. We use the word hope lightly and cheaply. This is not the hope of Christians. We must be icons of hope, a people with a new vision, a people that learn to see the world through the lenses of Christ, the Spirit, and the Church.

The Second Vatican Council encouraged Christians to read the signs of the times, and for Pope John XXIII these were signs of hope and glimpses of the Kingdom's presence in our midst. The Kingdom manifests itself through the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, courage, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. And the Spirit's fruits make the Kingdom palpable and palatable: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, long suffering, mildness, faith, modesty, continency, and chastity.

It is also possible to follow a "via negativa" and to say where the Kingdom is not. Where there is no justice, no peace, no sharing, no mutual trust, no forgiveness, there is no Kingdom. Where there is rancor, envy, distrust, hatred, ignorance, indifference, unchastity, cynicism, there is no Kingdom and certainly no life.

In God himself, all is joy

A second manifestation of the Spirit at Pentecost is joy. Pope Paul VI's 1975 Apostolic Letter on Christian Joy -- "Gaudete in Domino" -- describes this joy: "Let the agitated members of various groups therefore reject the excesses of systematic and destructive criticism! Without departing from a realistic viewpoint, let Christian communities become centers of optimism where all the members resolutely endeavor to perceive the positive aspect of people and events. 'Love does not rejoice in what is wrong but rejoices with the truth. There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure.'

"The attainment of such an outlook is not just a matter of psychology. It is also a fruit of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit, who dwells fully in the person of Jesus, made Him during His earthly life so alert to the joys of daily life, so tactful and persuasive for putting sinners back on the road to a new youth of heart and mind! It is this same Spirit who animated the Blessed Virgin and each of the saints. It is this same Spirit who still today gives to so many Christians the joy of living day by day their particular vocation, in the peace and hope which surpass setbacks and sufferings. It is the Spirit of Pentecost who today leads very many followers of Christ along the paths of prayer, in the cheerfulness of filial praise, towards the humble and joyous service of the disinherited and of those on the margins of society. For joy cannot be dissociated from sharing. In God Himself, all is joy because all is giving."

[The readings for Pentecost are Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 or Romans 8:8-17; John 20:19-23 or John 14:15-16, 23b-26]

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Pentecost reflection "The Gift of the Holy Spirit":

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