

PENTECOST (June 5, 2022)

As I think you all know, my ancestry is Czech—and if you didn't know that, a name like 'Kopacek' should have been your first clue! I've been asked many times if I can speak Czech, and—sorry to say—I can't. Both my parents spoke it when they were growing up, so I learned just a few words. For example, I can count to fifteen in Czech, and when playing 500 I can bid in Czech. And since I grew up on a farm, I also learned a few barnyard words; I'll spare you the details...

I mention this thing about language because we celebrate today the feast of Pentecost, the feast of the Holy Spirit coming down on the apostles to begin the work of the Church in teaching the world about the risen Christ. As such, it brings our liturgical season of Easter to a close. And we can't think about Pentecost without thinking about languages. The Old Testament reading for [this/the] Vigil Mass told the story of the Tower of Babel—how the people had begun to disregard God and wanted to do their own thing. And so God gave them up to their pride, and from that pride arose division—including a division of languages. The first reading for Pentecost Day, on the other hand, describes the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles and others in the upper room. They then began to pray, and in a way that amazed the crowds. They were from many different kingdoms and spoke a variety of languages...but each could understand the apostles in their own language. We think we are pretty smart with our online language translation programs; that was nothing compared to what happened at Pentecost!

We can truly say that the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Holy Trinity, is the voice—the language—of God that allows and empowers us to declare and live our faith. St. Paul told the Corinthians that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’, except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). And he reminded the Romans that they (and we) can call on God as *abba*, or Father—our loving ‘papa’—and we do so through the Holy Spirit who affirms that we are indeed the children of God (Rom. 8:15-16). And at the Last Supper Jesus promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would teach them everything and remind them of all Jesus told them (John 14:26). Scripture and history both show that the Holy Spirit did precisely that. He gave the apostles and their successors the words, the language of Jesus to proclaim to the world the truth he is and the truth he taught—our need for ongoing conversion, to be perfected as our heavenly Father is perfect, and to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves.

One of the many ways the Holy Spirit does so is through his gift—we might say his *language*—of fortitude or courage. Fortitude is that gift that gives us strength and firmness in pursuing and doing what is good, right, moral and just, especially in the face of difficulty or even opposition or persecution. It's always good and inspiring to learn about those, especially the saints, who model the virtues for us. They show that living out the call to holiness is no mere abstract concept but is rather something to strive for in the details—the sometimes ugly details—of life.

Among the seemingly countless examples of those who resolutely lived out the Spirit's gift of fortitude, I'd like to mention St. Charles Lwanga and his companions whose feast day the Church celebrated [yesterday/Friday] on June 3. In the late 1800's Catholic and Anglican missionaries from Europe went to what is now the country of Uganda in east-central Africa. Many of the natives joyfully embraced the gospel of Christ, including Charles Lwanga and a

number of other young men and teens. The local king resented this new faith, especially when those young men refused to engage in immoral acts with him. In his rage, the king ordered that they be put to death.

It was a public execution—in front of a large crowd including their own family members and friends. They were bound and confined into prison huts near a large fire that had been set and upon which they would be burned alive. The young men began praying and singing hymns as they were placed on the fire, and they did not stop until they burned to death. The site of their martyrdom later became the base of a great shrine that is visited by thousands of people every year. Pope St. Paul VI canonized Charles Lwanga and his companions in 1964.

These saints provide a powerful example of the Holy Spirit's gift of courage and fortitude. They knew how God wanted them to live and how not to live. They refused to give in to the sin of their king, even if it meant their death which it did. We need that kind of courage today and, thanks be to God, there are many who proclaim, for example, the God-given right to life for every person—born and unborn--and who affirm the truth that marriage is for one man and one woman, even if they suffer ridicule or even worse for doing so. The same could be said regarding the other timeless and universal truths of our faith.

One writer has said of these Ugandan martyrs that “[t]heir witness calls us to join them in courage and faith. We have been given their example at a time when we all need it”. That was written in 2008, and it is so much more desperately true today. We may not all speak Czech or other foreign languages, but we can all ‘speak the language’ of fortitude and courage because of the Holy Spirit we received when we were baptized and even more so when we were confirmed. We need to pray for a deepening of that gift in each of us and especially for those in positions of authority in our nation and in our church. May the Spirit strengthen that gift in every one of us so that we each live and witness to the full truth of our faith with courage, with joy, and without one iota of hesitation, fear, or apology.