

PENTECOST (May 28, 2023)

This is the great feast of the Holy Spirit: Pentecost, what we can also call the birthday of the Church. Jesus' Last-Supper promise of the Spirit is now fulfilled. He gave the apostles their job description right before he ascended into heaven—they were to teach, baptize, and make disciples of all the nations (as we heard in last Sunday's gospel). And now the proverbial ball is in the apostles' court; it's time for them to get going. We can't help but wonder what they might have been thinking at this point. OK—they have received this Holy Spirit...but what do they do now?? This is a totally new thing: they are to tell the world about the crucified and risen Jesus, and to challenge the world to turn away from sin, to reform their lives, and be baptized. We shouldn't be surprised if those apostles may have felt more than a bit overwhelmed at that point: 'how do we do that?'

A recent book invites us to consider what the apostles faced in terms we might identify with. When there is a big, new project that we want to start on—in our parish, our school, our place of work, or our local city or town, what's one of the first things we typically do? We set up a committee, we do some initial brain-storming about goals and strategies to achieve those goals. We also figure out what resources we need—financial, human, and others--to succeed.

Now: imagine the apostles getting together after Jesus ascended into heaven, and they have the first meeting of their brand new evangelization committee. They know what Jesus told them to do—teach, baptize, and make disciples. How do they do that, and what resources do they have? Our author reviews what is available to them at that time:

- Bishops: twelve, the apostles themselves. Remember, Judas Iscariot, who took his own life after betraying Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, has been replaced by Matthias.
- Priests: same number—the same twelve apostles. There was not at this very early time a major distinction of roles in church leadership; that would happen later as the gospel and the Church spread more widely from its origins in Jerusalem.
- Deacons: none. That office came about later (see chapter six of Acts).
- Religious orders: none. Those came about later and in fact they continue to arise throughout the history of the Church even to our own time (e.g. the Missionaries of Charity founded by Mother Teresa).
- Seminarians: none.
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- Christian believers and supporters: a few hundred at most.
- Church buildings, schools and universities: none. Those would only come centuries later.
- Written gospels and the other writings of the New Testament: none. Those came about only after many years and even several decades after the apostles began their teaching and baptizing work.
- Money: very little! Collection baskets and boxes of envelopes came about later, although Acts does tell us that some of those earliest Christians would sell what they had and give the proceeds to the apostles for distribution to the poor.

Not exactly the most promising set of circumstances, right?? If we were trying to start a major project with such limited or even non-existent resources, our consultants would no doubt tell us: “forget it; there’s no way this will ever work!” But it did work for the apostles, and it has been working in and for the Church for nearly 2000 years now...precisely because of the Holy Spirit. Ever since Pentecost, that Spirit has continued to guide and move the Church to continue the task that Jesus gave to his apostles. Has that always been done perfectly and effectively? Obviously not—we Christians, clergy and laity alike, still struggle with sin which leads to giving poor example and even scandal to the rest of the world.

But that does not and cannot prevent the Holy Spirit from continuing to be the driving force and power to bring Jesus and his gospel to the world and for each of us to become more personally committed to Jesus. The Church is facing a whole lot of challenges these days, as is the Archdiocese of Dubuque and our own Holy Rosary Cluster. We face those challenges both from within and without, and many in the world seem to almost look forward to the Church crumbling away into irrelevance. But that won’t happen; of that, we have absolute confidence—not because of us, but by the Holy Spirit’s power and the will of Jesus who promised that Spirit to the Twelve and to us all.

We all share in that task, each in our own way. We are all on the 21st-century ‘human resources’ list available to the Church to carry on its God-given responsibilities. Our author says it very well: “[T]he history of the church and the world is still being written right now. It’s being written by the Holy Spirit through your life and mine.” Does that sound overwhelming or frightening or impossible? It’s not. We simply need to acknowledge on a regular basis our need for ongoing conversion and growth in holiness. We thank God for the gifts that Jesus gives us through the Holy Spirit. And we ask the Holy Spirit to help us know and do what he wants us and enables us to do in our particular circumstances. In that way, Pentecost does and will in fact continue—yes, even through you and me. It’s the Holy Spirit that accomplishes the great and necessary work of sanctifying the world; he simply chooses and empowers us to help in that work. Let’s say a firm and grateful ‘yes’ to his invitation to do our part.