

Pentecost 2009

Homily, May 31, 2009

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, New York

Fr. Han van den Blink

1. Today we celebrate the great Feast of Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit descended on the gathered disciples in a great rush of wind and settled on each one of them as a tongue of fire. Who is this Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the Spirit Jesus promised to send to his disciples after his Ascension, the Spirit that St. John calls the *Paraclete* or Advocate, the Spirit of truth that Jesus said would guide them into all truth (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit that, as St. Paul puts it so movingly, bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God and intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words when we do not know how to pray (Romans 8:16).

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit that dwells in all things and is everywhere present and for that reason has been called the Indwelling Spirit, a name much beloved by Anglicans. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Risen Christ within us and among us. The Holy Spirit is the treasury of blessings that makes a living faith possible. The Holy Spirit is the very real, blessed but elusive divine presence that can renew us and kindle in us the fire of love for God and one another, and that can empower us to live faithfully regardless of the circumstances.

In his late night conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus speaks to this renewal through the Holy Spirit, when he tells the Pharisee that he needs to be born again, for “no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5).” Water, of course, refers to baptism, that is to say to the dying and rising again to new life in Christ, reborn and committed. And to be born of the Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit. The gracious, renewing and healing presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is always a gift. But not an exclusive gift reserved for the chosen few but rather a gift for all who earnestly seek God, who love Jesus, and who seek to be healed, forgiven and renewed.

2. The importance of the Holy Spirit in our lives is so essential, the role that the Holy Spirit plays in our ongoing conversion is so critical, that it is not at all surprising that the early Church, mainly through prayer, came to articulate the relationship between God, the Risen Christ, and the Spirit as the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

What is surprising is that the Holy Spirit has been neglected for so long in Western Christianity. And by “neglected” I mean “not taken seriously”. Let me focus briefly on two reasons for this neglect. One is that the Holy Spirit cannot be controlled because God cannot be controlled. The Spirit “blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.”

This can make the Holy Spirit dangerous and problematical, especially for those in positions of power. The Spirit can and does speak through women and men who are not authorized or deemed suitable, for whatever reason, to make pronouncements on matters of God but who often do that anyway. The writings of St. Teresa of Avila convey vividly how careful she had to be to avoid being branded a heretic at a time when that accusation

could land a person in the hands of the Inquisition. It is not surprising that the great mystics of the Christian tradition for whom the Holy Spirit has always been central have often been treated with suspicion or even rejection during their life and have only been honored after they are safely dead.

Ever since the Middle Ages, and here I am getting to another reason for the neglect of the Holy Spirit, there has been a trend to separate faith from reason, prayer from action, the life of faith from theology, dogma from spirituality. This movement received a tremendous boost from the European Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries and the later scientific revolution. This trend manifests itself everywhere, even in seminaries, which have often become, for all intents and purposes institutions for the academic study of the Christian religion. There is not much room in such a system for the Holy Spirit.

3. And yet as Fr. Richard Benson, the founder of the SSJE (1868), pointed out long ago, an intellectual understanding of God is not enough. Fr. Benson was not only a deeply spiritual but also a highly educated man who did not despise reason in the slightest. He knew that we are created “to know God with ‘an active, experimental knowledge’ through union with him, by participation in the divine life.”

That is why he sympathized with the many agnostics who flourished in his Victorian times. In speaking to this issue he wrote, “Christian dogma is often spoken of as very dead and dry ... and being dead and dry, it has lost its very Christianity. It remains a dogma of the faith, but no more like the original dogma of the faith than is the husk that lies on the ground identical with the fruit once found upon the tree.”¹

4. How is the activity of the Holy Spirit and the process of being born anew experienced in the life of contemporary Christians? Let me end with an example of the powerful healing and guiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of a colleague of mine. During the 1980s and 1990s when I was active in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, I got to know a wonderful man whose name was Loris Buccola. Some of you have heard me speak of him before. He was a pastoral counselor, a seminary instructor, and an ordained deacon in the Roman Catholic Church. He was a faithful Catholic. He was a bright, appealing guy with a wonderful sense of humor and the street savvy of his Sicilian ancestors. He was down to earth. He was also an accomplished athlete whose specialty was long distance biking and running. He was in terrific shape physically. Lean and mean.

Then tragedy hit. “Five years ago at age 58,” he wrote in an article for his AAPC colleagues not long before his death, “just as I had become convinced that I was immortal and indestructible, I was diagnosed with ALS (‘Lou Gehrig’s disease’), an incurable disease of the nervous system which leaves victims paralyzed from head to toe and unable to speak, swallow or breathe on their own. Most people with this disease die within two to five years from a combination of malnutrition and loss of respiration unless they are accommodated by a feeding tube and respiratory assist.

¹*Benson of Cowley*, edited by Martin L. Smith, Cowley Publications, 1983, 30.

I am currently nearly completely paralyzed from the neck down but mercifully have retained all of my speaking and swallowing functions although my breathing is somewhat diminished. I navigate the computer, compose documents, send and respond to emails, call out and answer the phone, and switch channels on the TV, all with the aid of voice-activated software.

At first my family, friends and I were in a state of shock and terror. Only gradually have we come to accept –even embrace- the changes in our lives required by this unexpected circumstance. I recall talking with my colleagues at a regional meeting when I was still able to walk short distances, sharing this perspective. Someone in the audience asked why I was not more ‘enraged’. The only thing I could respond was, ‘Whom would I be angry at, and what good would it do?’ You could call this ‘reframing’ or ‘cognitive restructuring’ or simply the force of necessity [or, I would add, the result of many years of practicing the presence of God]. In my case, there was little or no time available for ‘doing grief work’ in the traditional sense of ‘working it through’.

My only other option would have been to collapse in fear and despair. The only thing I can credit for not doing this is the embrace of the Holy Spirit, because it certainly was not anything I accomplished by trying really hard. I was quite unclear about what this embrace meant since it seems to have come from somewhere prior to and deeper within than thoughts or language. The word was there before I could understand the full implications in practice, an experience of grace and desire.

Four years later, the embrace has taken clearer shape. My immobility is a gift which has enabled me to think, meditate and contemplate on many things. I’m ‘reading’ books on tape with great relish, on topics long neglected. My experience of life and eternal realities is richer and deeper. Heaven is now an immediate reality with and surrounding me on every side rather than a far off hope.²

Loris went on to say in that article that he was still seeing clients and that he believed he was doing better psychotherapy than ever. “Today,” he wrote, “I am much less reluctant to address clients’ spiritual and religious issues directly, when it is clear that these are factors either in the problem or the solution... What I have experienced is that my clients and I are able to draw closer to each other, to a safe place where the real spiritual and emotional healing happens. In fact, my wheelchair home has perhaps increased people’s ability to experience the sacred space within me. We are on a shared journey where neither of us has been able to avoid the pains and losses of life, the mystery of death and resurrection.”

This profound sense of the web of loving relations in which Loris Buccola found himself emerged again at the very end of the article when he mentioned that “he is the proud father of three grown children and married to Jane, ‘one of the world’s great women.’”³ Thank you, Loris, my dear friend, for leaving us with this powerful testimony to the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life.

²Loris Buccola, “My New Home”, *Journeys*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Winter-Spring 2005. 5.

³Buccola, 22.

The Holy Spirit whose descent on the disciples we celebrate today is the same Holy Spirit that descended on Loris Buccola. May this same Spirit, by God's grace, descend on us.

Let us pray: "Come, Holy Spirit, visit the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send for your breath and we shall be created and you shall renew the face of the earth."

Amen.