

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for Pentecost
May 23, 2015 (Year B)

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Reflections on
Acts 2:1-11; 1 Cor. 12: 3-7, 12-13; John 20: 19-23

Happy Pentecost eve! Tomorrow will be the 50th day since Easter (Pentecost is from the Greek word for 50), so we've had seven weeks again this year to absorb what happened then.

But imagine what it would have been like for the *first* followers of Jesus. Think what they have been through. What we sometimes glibly call “the passion” was a traumatizing event for them. And the danger is not over; they've had a close-up vision of what could happen to them, and of how they might fail to face the challenge with faithfulness and integrity.

Sure, they've also experienced the risen Jesus, a mind-boggling occurrence that will take years to digest. But his appearances are not a return to what they had before; Jesus is not available in the same way, he can't be clung to (as he told Mary Magdalene in the garden). He shows up and vanishes on his own schedule, so they can't just go and consult him whenever they wish. And yet, they are left to carry on Jesus's mission.

Who can blame them for thinking, “What do we do now?”

With historical hindsight, we know that something very remarkable *did* happen, even though it stayed below the radar of written history for decades. Humanly speaking, it is really hard to see how the movement initiated by Jesus not only survived, but caught fire.

Today's readings, written 20 to 50 years later, tell us how Christians understood how this all happened: It wasn't their doing! It was the work of that most mysterious, elusive manifestation of God, the Holy Spirit. In hindsight, they could see

the Spirit's presence in the life of Jesus. Moreover, to their astonishment, they experienced it as active in their own communities, even after Jesus's departure from the earth.

Today's readings provide two “takes” on how this spirit was first made manifest. Our gospel reading is the quieter one, taking us back to the evening of Easter Sunday. I read this passage to you six weeks ago, on the second Sunday of Easter—except it was longer then; it went on to say, “Now one of the 12, was not with them . . .” Of course this shifted the emphasis of the homily to Thomas and his difficulty in believing.

Tonight the focus remains on the small gathering, consisting of 10 of the 12 (no Judas, no Thomas). If there were a few others present, like Mary Magdalene, they are not mentioned. At any rate, Jesus appears to them and does something very intimate; he breathes on them, passing on to them the Spirit or breath that had breathed in him.

John's gospel says that Jesus had tried to prepare his disciples for this. At his last meal with them he had promised not to leave them orphaned, to send them a “paraclete.” This strange word has been translated in various ways: “comforter” fits, given the trauma they'll go through; “advocate,” or “helper” also fits, given the dangers they'll face. Jesus uses other terms as well. Once he actually refers to the “Holy Spirit,” but more often he talks about “the Spirit of Truth” who will teach them and remind them of everything they need to pass on.

So the focus in John's account is on an in-depth, perhaps slow, transformation of the disci-

ples' understanding, on a personal, local level, in the aftermath of a terrible trauma.

Because today is the first anniversary of the Isla Vista massacre of six students, I wonder if we can see here something of a contemporary parallel to the disciples' situation. Can we discern how the Spirit has accompanied our community as it deals with this tragic reality? Did we find, in some mysterious way, comfort, support, and a "Spirit of truth" to teach us how to respond appropriately?

In contrast to John's account, our reading from the Book of Acts, Luke's sequel to his gospel, shows us a very public manifestation of the Spirit. This is no intimate gathering. There is still a core group of believers, but it is a large one; the verses preceding tonight's passage say that there were about 120 people, including "certain women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." Moreover, the event spills over into the city of Jerusalem at large, which is crowded with pilgrims coming to the Jewish feast of Pentecost. There are "Jews and converts to Judaism" from all over the Mediterranean world.

Pentecost is also known as the Feast of Weeks, to use a more Jewish idiom. It occurs on the 50th day, that is a full seven weeks, after Passover (7 times 7 days plus 1). Passover, of course, commemorates the escape of the Israelites from Egypt. Pentecost, in Jewish tradition at the time of Jesus, was celebrated as a commemoration of God's descent onto Mt. Sinai to meet Moses. There God gave the refugees from Egypt the Torah, the "law." This was their founding document; it gave their community a shape and a direction, making of them a nation. Luke, by analogy, sees the Christian Pentecost as marking the foundation, the "birthday," of the church.

The event on Mount Sinai was a *theophany*, an appearance by God in all his majesty—not that anyone saw God, of course. There was thunder and lightning, a mighty din, and then, the Book of Exodus says, "the Lord descended in fire."

In the Book of Acts God again descends in fire, this time in a house in Jerusalem. Luke gives us a

wonderful image of the fire dividing into tongues of flame, alighting on each and every person present. The immediate effect is to empower all those gathered to preach: "We hear them preaching," the amazed crowd says, "each in our own language, about the marvels of God."

There are lots of echoes of Jewish tradition in this account. Besides the event on Mt. Sinai, this is a reversal of the tower of Babel story, in which different languages were seen as a curse and source of dissension. It is also a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel, that God "*will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, Your sons and daughters will prophesy.*"

And it is a great launching pad for the evangelizing work of the Spirit, which is what the 28 chapters of the Book of Acts are all about.

The gospel of John and the Book of Acts were written in 80s and 90s of first century, so Luke and John have had a couple of generations to look back and think about how to tell the story of how their communities came to be. But our first historical evidence comes decades earlier, from St. Paul, writing in the 50s of the first century.

The Spirit's presence in the churches at this time is obviously a *felt* reality. Indeed it is so firmly established in evangelization and sacramental practice that it doesn't need much comment. It goes almost without saying, except as a reminder, that every Christian is baptized in the Holy Spirit.

So it is not surprising that Paul's references to the Spirit, while fairly frequent, are often in passing. But sometimes, as in Corinth, there is an issue that needs further comment. Evidently, the gifts of the Spirit are being discussed in that community in ways that are sometimes too narrowly defined, with a bias to the more public, obvious ones; this would include leadership roles, but also speaking in tongues (you may remember Paul suggesting that the more valuable gift may be that of interpreting what those speakers are actually saying!). Sometimes the Spirit's gifts are spoken of in ways that elevate some people over others.

Paul will have none of it. He exhorts the community at length, to recognize that EVERYONE is gifted by the Spirit, and all gifts are given for the purpose of serving the community, not to aggrandize an individual or any group.

Every church community, including our Church of the Beatitudes, is challenged by these readings to ponder how the Spirit, and more specifically, the gifts of the Spirit, are manifested in our midst—and to do so in a spirit of wonder and gratitude.

I hope we have all had the experience of astonishment at what has come to fruition in us individually, and among us as a community. We should be amazed and grateful for what has been drawn out of us, which is more than we could have imagined of ourselves.

Some of these gifts are more public in nature, like those made visible in Acts, while others are quieter, behind the scenes, or “under the radar” for the moment, as in John. Sometimes, indeed, the work of the Spirit is hidden in struggle, whether in our personal lives or in our life together. We see how the Catholic Church as a whole is struggling in our time.

There have always been and there will always be struggles. But even here, as Paul reminds us in a reading for the vigil of Pentecost, *The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness . . . and expresses our plea with groanings too deep for words.*

And so with courage, and gratitude and amazement we continue to pray,
Come Holy Spirit, come!