

# PENTECOST

Liturgy of Thanksgiving for Parish Pastoral Council Members  
St John's Cathedral      Sunday 11 May 2008

This feast of Pentecost is the birthday of the Church <sup>1</sup>. The Second Vatican Council explains it like this:  
“On the day of Pentecost, (the Holy Spirit) came down on the disciples that he might remain with them forever; on that day the church was openly displayed to the crowds and the spread of the gospel among the nations, through preaching, was begun”<sup>2</sup>.

The Spirit of life gives the community different gifts, uniting it into one body, and sending it out on its mission to the whole world <sup>3</sup>.

On the first Pentecost the apostles were filled with joy and with an extraordinary enthusiasm that was seen and heard by people of many languages and backgrounds – each of them hearing in their own language about the wonderful works of God. Some people sneered at these preachers, saying that they must be drunk, but thousands believed that day; they accepted the truth of what Peter was telling them – that Jesus had done wonderful things during his life on earth; that he had been cruelly killed; that he had been buried; that he rose from death and ascended to God's right hand, that he had now sent the Holy Spirit as he promised (Acts 2). And those people who believed shared the life of the new community of believers from that day on.

It would be a mistake to think of what happened that day as simply the beginning of the mission *of the apostles*. That was not what Jesus had taught them. In St Luke's Gospel he calls and appoints the 72 disciples; he sends them out to announce that the Kingdom of God is very near. These were not the apostles, they were not the leaders among those who were with him; they were what one might call his “ordinary” followers. No doubt they went out to the towns and villages with a lot of apprehension. But “they returned with joy”, amazed at how powerful the message was; “even the demons submit to us in your name”. The Gospel tells us that Jesus “was filled with joy by the Holy Spirit” and he gave thanks to his Father for revealing even to children truths that seemed hidden from the wise and powerful (Lk 10:1-24).

Your Parish Pastoral Councils and your clusters are about putting that same call into action. They are about what Pope John Paul said to us here in Limerick – that there is no such thing as an ordinary layperson, “As God's holy people (all of) you are called to fulfill your role in the evangelization of the world”<sup>4</sup>.

The history of the Church's mission which began on the first Pentecost has seen many achievements and many failures – but sometimes the failures have actually been more fruitful than the achievements. We learn and we grow as followers of Christ when we realize that it is not our plans and hopes that will save the world, but what God may do – sometimes surprisingly, sometimes even unrecognized – through us. The people who are received into God's Kingdom in the story of the Judgment in Matthew's Gospel are all amazed: “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or sick or in prison and show that we cared for you”. We too will be amazed, please God, at what our apparently unsuccessful efforts have done.

And so we are here to give thanks for all the endeavors and all that has been achieved, and to give thanks also for the initiatives that have struggled or fallen through. Nothing that we do in our effort to follow the way of Christ is ever lost. That is the source of the joy that should mark not just our celebration today, but the whole life of our parishes and clusters.

Maybe that's an important challenge to put before ourselves this afternoon. Do we find in ourselves the joy and the enthusiasm and the hope of the first disciples? We may be afraid that we are fighting a losing battle – though mind you a few hundred people starting out to transform the religious beliefs of a great pagan empire also had a fairly daunting task ahead of them!

We can see, however, that we are facing a world which poses challenges that our parents and

grandparents would never have expected – declining numbers at Mass, a sharp fall in vocations to the priesthood and religious life, the feeling that religion has been pushed to the margins of life in our society, and, if we are completely honest we feel in ourselves the pressure to regard our faith as just one among the endless variety of things that demand our attention.

There are also the challenges of living in a world where we are more immediately aware than in the past of the poverty, deprivation, fears and troubles of our brothers and sisters here in Limerick or wherever they are in the world, a world where wars and natural disasters appear in graphic detail on our television screens, where we suffer what Pope John Paul called the ‘gigantic remorse’ that comes from knowing that while we live in relative affluence there are babies dying of starvation under their mothers’ eyes<sup>5</sup>. There is the challenge of living in a world where we are exploiting the resources of the planet in a way that will make future generations wonder at our selfish disregard for their interests.

It is very easy to feel that all of this is too much and that anything we can do will be insignificant in relation to the scale of these problems. The answer cannot be to close our minds to the sufferings and challenges but to understand that, however great they are, our God is infinitely greater. Indeed the more we appreciate the enormity of the problems of our planet, the more we see how great is the love of God who still offers the hope of fulfillment to every member of the human family.

God is the source of the meaning and hope that “surpasses everything else”<sup>6</sup>. We find it hard to see the Good News of Jesus as shedding light on every single moment and aspect of our lives. But there is no corner of life in which God is absent, in which God’s love is not calling to us. Every human being no matter how unfortunate is in the loving care of God whose promise is stronger than any suffering. The lives of the apostles were transformed by that joy and hope on the first Pentecost. That day they began the task of sharing the Good News, a task which would fill every moment of their lives from then on. That is what Pentecost means. Some years ago the French Bishops issued a pastoral letter which said this:

The Holy Spirit is never really received into our souls except when he disturbs our routine, sets our lives on fire and draws us on to greater courage and sharing in his work for the human race and for the gospel<sup>7</sup>.

We don’t just look at the problems of the world and tell ourselves that God will solve them. We also look at what we heard in the reading. The Holy Spirit gives us the gifts we need. There are different gifts, different forms of service, different workings but the same God. We are a body which has many parts which are meant to work together for the benefit of all.

The coming of the Holy Spirit did not send out a whole lot of “Lone Rangers” to engage in a hopeless battle to defeat giants and to protect the weak, like a whole lot of Don Quixotes, The Holy Spirit formed a body whose parts cannot function without one another: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (I Cor 12:21).

That is true at every level of our lives as Christians. It is true in our families. Our living of our faith is rooted first of all in how we live at home as a family of believers, as the church in the home. That is the most basic Christian community where faith is shared and lived. Do we pray together? Do we reflect and talk together about our faith in Christ? Does the Sunday Mass which is supposed to be the summit and the source of everything ever figure in our conversation? Do we see all the members of the family as people who are filled with the Holy Spirit and bearers of the Good News which gives hope and meaning to life?

It is true of our parishes and clusters. There is no use complaining about how secular and shallow the world has become if we do not think and work together about how the light might shine more clearly in our own communities. There is no use complaining if we have not been trying to recognize and encourage and welcome the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given in order that we can be the Body of Christ in our parish, our cluster, our diocese, our world. There is no use complaining if people who

have come to live in our country can be in our neighborhoods, even in our churches, and are never made to feel welcome. There is no use complaining if we do not pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

“...Wherever people are praying in the world, there the Holy Spirit is...”<sup>8</sup>.

That is what we are celebrating this afternoon – all the efforts that have been made by Parish Pastoral Councils and by Clusters and by many groups to try to build up communities united in the Spirit, calling God “Abba, Father”<sup>9</sup>, in which the Gospel will be visible as the truth that makes us one, makes us free, makes us joyful. We give thanks because in all of this the Holy Spirit has been at work “setting our lives on fire and drawing us on to greater courage and sharing in his work for the human race and for the gospel”.

It is true that our individual gifts are small and inadequate. Even all the gifts of a whole parish or cluster or diocese cannot overcome every obstacle or solve every problem. But when we know that these gifts are not just our possessions, they are the work of the infinitely powerful and loving Spirit of God, we can be filled with hope and joy.

The late Senator Robert Kennedy once spoke about how powerful an individual can be if he or she stands for a cause. The hope he expressed might seem like wishful thinking, but not if we apply it to the life of the Body of Christ gathering and using the gifts that the Spirit has given us. Then what he says is absolutely true and can be applied to each individual, each family, each parish, each cluster, each diocese, which,

“...sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a mighty current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (On the Holy Spirit...), 25. <sup>2</sup> VATICAN II, *Ad Gentes*, (Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity), 4. <sup>3</sup> Cf. VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), 4. <sup>4</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Homily in Limerick, 1 October 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 11. <sup>6</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 31. <sup>7</sup> FRENCH BISHOPS, *Let us Proclaim the Mystery of Faith*, Veritas, Dublin 1979.

<sup>8</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 65. <sup>9</sup> Cf. Gal 4:6, Rom 8:15. <sup>10</sup> KENNEDY, R. F., *To Seek a Newer World*, Bantam Books, New York, 1968, p. 233.