

“Pentecost 2006”

June 3, 2006

by Fr. Brian Joyce

This is a great weekend for celebrations. At this mass, we have Our Lord of Pardons Prayer Group celebrating its annual Fiesta to which we are all invited. We celebrate three hundred sixty-five days of Aidan being an ordained priest. The ordination happened one year ago today. We congratulate him. (Much applause!) And we celebrate Pentecost! We celebrate it with red. We probably should have balloons and streamers and party hats. It's one of the three major feasts of the Christian church, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. And it is the only one not yet captured by the mass market. I don't think any of you sent Pentecost cards. I didn't see any Pentecost sales going on. And I don't think there was a Pentecost egg hunt today.

We celebrate the amazing Spirit of God, promised to us and given to us. The Bible describes the power of the Spirit of God coming to us like an earthquake, like a hurricane, like a firestorm, not destructive but to shake us up and to give us life, and to remind us, as Jesus said, of all that he taught us and how it makes sense in our world and our culture today, and to surprise us. Our God's a God of surprise. God can't be tamed. God is never content to behave like a sedate, well-mannered funeral director. Remind us and surprise us, is what the Spirit does in our own personal lives and in the life of the Church. When the Papal power was at its height and the luxury was more than you could stand, Francis of Assisi was moved by the Spirit. Il Poverello, the "Little Poor Man," of Assisi came to remind us "Blessed are the poor in spirit." When we lived in the century with more wars and more killing than any other in human history and we were in the middle of what I think we all think of as a "really good war," maybe the best of the wars, Dorothy Day rose up to remind us that Christ was the Prince of Peace, not the prince of a pre-emptive strike, not even the Prince of a Just War. When there was struggle across the globe for human rights and, in our own land, for civil rights, Gandhi and Martin Luther King crossed the lines of religion and denominations to remind us and to surprise us. And when the Church, especially my memory of it is in the 1950's, had everything in a neat, successful package, with all the answers coming straight from the top down, John XXIII was moved by the Spirit to call for the Second Vatican Council and to put a face of smile and humor and simplicity on the Papal Power. I loved his humor. Remember when he was elected Pope some French women were there and they were waiting for the first glance at him, he was carried in in that sedia gestatoria which they don't use anymore, and they looked up at him and they said, "My God! He's ugly!" And he, having spoken French fluently where he was a Nuncio, looked down and he said, "Madam, I just won the Papal Election, not a beauty contest." In his first interview, he was asked, "How many people do you have working at the Vatican?" And he said, "... about half, about half." And he spent an afternoon with seminarians talking about changes and challenge in the Church, and

difficulties and problems and they said, “What do you do, Holy Father?” He said, “Oh, I go to bed and have a good night’s sleep. I say, ‘God, it’s your Church, not mine. You take care of it’”

This is often thought of as Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. Really, the birthday of the Church comes from the side of Christ, from the death and resurrection of Christ. It’s really the going public of the Church. Pentecost is its going public. How did it go public? With a gathering of believers, with some leadership, with no offices and no buildings, but with lots of spirit, Holy Spirit. The Church is not an international corporation with its CEO and stockholders in Rome. That is not what the Church is. Our personal experience, growing up believers, Christians, Catholics, our personal experience and the official teaching of the Catholic Church is that it is a community that is both universal and very local. The Church is fully and truly present in our local community and not as a franchise and not as a branch office, but as Church, as Body of Christ here and now.

A good friend of mine, Msgr. Phil Murnion, who died tragically a few years ago and was the founding director of the National Pastoral Life Center in New York, used to say “God’s favorite dwelling place is in the parish.” When we think of Church, we think of one, holy, catholic and apostolic. If that’s what we are as Church, let’s look at it... “One.” We are called to be one and there is a lot of polarization in the Church today. There’s a lot of anger, a lot of name-calling. I think we have to be a people who, even though we disagree, agree to disagree and respect one another and listen to one another. Did you hear, in the reading of scripture, they talk about it as a gift of tongues? Everyone’s language is out there. And then they say, “What the Spirit did is cause everyone to hear in their own language.” We have to pray for the gift of hearing, the gift of being willing to listen to each other, the gift of hearing.

The Church is “catholic,” which is the word that means universal. We’ve got a great example of that today as the Phillipino culture celebrates with us and shares with us and we share with them. But if we have such huge diversity and difference in the Church across the world, what we need to be is a Church of welcome. We need the gift of welcome. Remember James Joyce’s description of the Church, and I describe James Joyce as my relative if I am with people who like him, as an outsider if I am with people who don’t like him. But James Joyce described the Catholic Church as “Here comes everybody!” Recently, we’ve been addressing the immigration issue. Now, working out the details in a healthy way, that respects human dignity, is a challenge. It is hard. But it was interesting to me in the same month that Cardinal Mahoney and this country spoke out in favor of finding a way to welcome and make it home, the stranger among us. And the Cardinal Archbishop of London, of England and of Wales did the same thing because of the same problem in London. And the Papal Nuncio in Belgium where immigrants were taking sanctuary in churches, stood up on their behalf. Now the details we might argue about. But I would hope that we have the gift of welcome and that we are probably furious if they don’t speak, or, at least, saddened if our leadership doesn’t speak, or at least deeply puzzled because we have to be a people who put a priority on the gift of welcome.

And the Church is “apostolic.” Are we apostolic? I think apostolic, I think old people who are

rusty. Or I think bearded people who are dead. But, rather, what we see in the apostles and in the apostolic church is witness to Jesus, enthusiasm, and willingness to change the world. And if you are willing to change the world and turn it upside down, which is apostolic, you have to be political. They were very political. In their day and age, the emperor was worshipped as a god. The political saying was, "The Emperor is the Lord." And they stood up and they said, "Jesus is the Lord." It would be very much like being in Nazi Germany and saying, "Jesus is my Fuhrer, and no one else." We have to be people with the gift of enthusiasm for our faith.

And finally, the fourth mark of Church, is to be holy. When I think of "holy" I get the wrong impression. I think of the smell of incense and the sound of silence. But rather, the disciples were told when they met Jesus, "Rejoice." And they announced, as Peter did in his sermon, "Death cannot hold him." We have our problems. We have sickness among us. We have death and grief. We have angry divisions at times in our church. We have continuing warfare in our world and even torture and death to innocent children. Plus that, we have election coming up on Tuesday, which as far as I can tell from the ads, it's National Name-calling Day. And somehow, we are still called to be a people who rejoice and say that death cannot hold Jesus and cannot hold his spirit. So we remain a people of hope and a people of good humor.

That's what we need, the gift of humor. Let me tell you some stories. The first President Bush told this about himself, that he went on a PR trip to a nursing home and he saw this old man coming down all bent over, and he thought he would make a hit with him and walked up, took his hand, and said, "Do you know who I am?" and the man said, "No, but if you ask one of the nurses I'm sure they'll tell you."

One of the third grade teachers in our local community gave a writing task to the third-graders to write down their personal hero and something about them and take it home. One student took it home and showed it to her father and he was delighted to find out that she had picked him as her personal hero. He said, "Why did you pick me as your personal hero?" And she said, "Well, because I couldn't spell 'Schwarzenegger.'"

And here is an actual court transcript after a shooting among a group of people that I came across last week..... "Mrs. Smith, do you believe that you are emotionally unstable?" "I certainly should be." "How many times have you committed suicide?" "At least four." (This is in the record!) "Then, isn't it true that you cannot be an unbiased, objective witness? After all, you too were shot in the middle of the fracas." "No, Sir. I was shot midway between the fracas and the navel."

Why am I telling you jokes? Because sometimes good jokes can be closer to the gospel than sermons, and the sound of laughter certainly can be. We are called and hopefully inspired to be a people who smile and who sing and who laugh sometimes through tears, and who always hope. I want to read to you a prayer, and you can find it in Chester Cathedral which is in England. It was founded in the year 900. The writings go back at least five hundred years, a Christian writing

about this.

Give me good digestion, Lord, and also something to digest. Give me a healthy body, Lord, with sense to keep it at its best. Give me a healthy mind, good Lord, to keep the good and pure in sight, which seeing sin is not appalled, but finds a way to set it right. Give me a mind that is not bored, that does not wimper, whine or sigh. Don't let me worry much about this fussy thing called "I". Give me a sense of humor, Lord. Give me the grace to see a joke, to get some happiness from life and pass it on to other folk. Amen

So we pray for this parish to have a gift of hearing, a gift of welcome, a gift of enthusiasm and a gift of humor. Come Holy Spirit, help us sing and make us smile.....