

PENTECOST – June 12, 2011
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

“Come, Holy Spirit, come! And from your celestial home shed a ray of light divine!” These opening words of *Veni, Sancte Spiritus*, the ancient hymn of praise to the Holy Spirit [Sunday: and a version of which we sang as the Sequence before the gospel] set the stage for this great feast of Pentecost. With this feast we conclude our Easter season celebration for another year, and we do so with special festivity. The brightness of the red vestments, flowers and other environment (including your own red apparel!) recall those tongues of fire that came to rest on the apostles, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the others gathered in the upper room, by means of which they were filled with the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost has often been called the birthday of the Church, and for good reason. Because it was only after the apostles and others received the Holy Spirit that they were able to begin the work of the Church—to proclaim and live the gospel of the risen Christ. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians [Sunday: in our second reading]: “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” After the descent of the Holy Spirit, however, it became immediately apparent that the name and message of Jesus was intended for everyone. Recall what St. Luke tells us in Acts [Sunday: in our first reading]—how the crowds in Jerusalem were astonished to hear and understand the apostles’ preaching even though they all spoke different languages: “We are Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Romans [and many others], yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God.” That was only one of the many and more obvious manifestations of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

That universal outreach of the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit has been a reality ever since that Pentecost day nearly 2000 years ago. Think of how the Christian faith has been preached and spread to the whole variety of peoples, cultures, kingdoms and nations around the world. Even if the human aspect of the spread of the gospel has not always been accomplished perfectly or without sin, it is the Holy Spirit—that divine aspect—that has been and remains the primary and ultimate reason for the worldwide success and presence of the Christian faith. Thus, the gospel has been preached in the whole spectrum of languages. We might well paraphrase what those crowds said in Jerusalem: “We are Americans, Germans, Irish, Italians, Filipinos Hispanics, Vietnamese, Africans, Bohemians (yes, even we Bohemians!)...yet we have all heard of the mighty acts of God.”

Just recently and here in our own community we have had occasion to learn of another national group and their connection in the Holy Spirit with the universal Church. Perhaps you read in the Courier two weeks ago about a small group of refugees from Burma (also called Myanmar) who live here in Waterloo and work at the meat-packing plant. Burma is a country in southeast Asia where Buddhism is the religion of the great majority of the people. There is, however, a small Catholic presence in Burma (primarily the result of evangelization efforts there in the 1850’s)—about one percent of that country’s total population of over 50 million. What is especially interesting for us is that many of our new Burmese neighbors come from that small Catholic enclave. They have been attending Sacred Heart parish here in Waterloo since they live mainly in that neighborhood. Fr. Jaeger and his staff, with assistance from Archbishop Hanus, have done great work in making them feel welcome even with the inevitable language barrier.

This is simply another example of the reality, power and universal presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church which is in its essence truly catholic in the original meaning of that word: truly universal and intended to embrace all peoples everywhere. Just as the Church has been intended for all, it is also enriched by that universal presence. And just as the Holy Spirit has helped the Church embrace all newcomers from other lands in the past (including the homelands of our immigrant ancestors), so does the Spirit now help us to welcome our new neighbors from Burma or whatever other country they may come from.

The other aspect of the Holy Spirit's presence and power in the Church that I want to mention has to do with something else St. Paul mentioned in first Corinthians [Sunday: in the second reading]—and that is how the Holy Spirit fills and strengthens us with his gifts in ways unique to each one of us. “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit... we were all given to drink of one Spirit.” Part of our challenge and task as individuals and as Church is to discover and discern those gifts that the Spirit has given each of us and then to use them as the grateful and generous stewards that we are called to be. I continue to be inspired on a regular basis with how faithfully you folks always respond to that call.

That is especially true when it comes to our outreach to our sister parishes in Okolona, Mississippi, and in Grison Garde, Haiti. Every year about this time we give special attention one weekend to those parishes and their needs. Your response to the special collection we took up a few weeks ago for Okolona after the devastating tornados down there was incredible—you truly outdid yourselves! Sr. Liz sent a note gratefully acknowledging your generosity; I'd like to share it with you: [N.B. her note is dated May 10; further gifts have come in since then, so the total is even higher].

Our Haiti committee wanted to give some extra attention this time to our Adopt-a-Student program by which you can make it possible for individual children to get a good education at the parish school in Grison-Garde who would not otherwise have that opportunity. I remember vividly how impressed I was with the parish and its school when I went on the Haiti trip two years ago—the excitement and the desire of those kids to be at that school was something amazing and inspiring to see! Members of our Haiti committee have set up a display table outside in front of the main entrance—I strongly encourage you to check it out. Refreshments will be available there as well—such a deal! You will see pictures of the students at the school, a diagram of the water purification system that has been installed, and other information as well—especially about the Adopt-a-Student program itself.

This is truly the work of the Holy Spirit, and we are truly privileged to be able to take part in this work. I thank you once again from the bottom of my heart for all you do for our sister parishes...and for St. Edward parish as well. We celebrate the feast of Pentecost today, but in truth it seems to me like every day is Pentecost here as I see over and over again the variety and abundance of the Spirit's gifts in all of you, and the joyful generosity with which you use them. “Come, Holy Spirit, come! And from your celestial home shed a ray of light divine!” May that same Spirit help us always to offer and to fully live that prayer.