

## **The Context of the Spirit**

Pentecost

June 9, 2019

Fr. Tony Davis

Has something you've said ever been taken out of context? If so, you know how frustrating it can be to find yourself in this situation. You feel misunderstood, taken advantage of, and extremely defensive. What was meant to be an honest comment may never be taken back and the damage has been done, unintentionally of course.

This weekend, we celebrate Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples 50 days after Easter. Jesus had already ascended to the right hand of the Father and now the Father sends the Holy Spirit as promised. Quite honestly, even for those of us who love this feast, it is all somewhat elusive. We know Jesus Christ and the content of his teachings, but when asked to describe the Holy Spirit and Pentecost, we are usually at a loss. Images help.

The Holy Spirit, as our readings this weekend suggest, is described as things like breath, noise, wind, and fire. All of these elements are easier to feel/sense than to talk about or explain. That is why the devout Jews in Jerusalem were so confused in our First Reading. They couldn't know or define the Holy Spirit, but they were nonetheless astounded and amazed at the sight. The simple Galilean disciples were mysteriously speaking the languages of all the diverse Jews in the city. Something was happening!

The Benedictine monk Kilian McDonnell, who writes about the Holy Spirit, acknowledges the difficulty of explaining the Holy Spirit. He says, "the Spirit can never become an object of theological reflection in the sense that the sacrament of baptism can, because the Spirit is the

universal comprehensive horizon within which any and all theological reflection is possible.” In other words, it’s so difficult because the Holy Spirit is more like a backdrop or horizon for everything else than an actual object in itself. It is more like the environment or atmosphere.

Perhaps what gets us Christians most in trouble is when we forget about this backdrop and talk exclusively about the content of Jesus Christ. Yes, we do have great content from our Lord that is objective, challenging, and confrontational, but content isn’t everything. We also need context. If Jesus Christ is the content, the Holy Spirit is that context.

*The context of the Holy Spirit is just as important to our faith as to the content of Jesus Christ.*

How would you describe the context provided by the Holy Spirit?

For starters, we can look to the Pentecost Sequence chant that we heard before the Gospel for some ideas: ‘creator spirit,’ ‘purest light,’ ‘filler of loveless hearts,’ ‘fount of life,’ ‘flame of love,’ ‘oil of sevenfold grace,’ ‘the living source,’ ‘the unseen force.’ I wonder how much better off our Churches would be if we reframed all of our content (teachings, beliefs, and doctrines) within this context. Content alone isn’t enough. We need a context. Our context, as Christians, is the Spirit who renews the face of the earth.