

June 9, 2019 The True Superheroes Homily: In recent years some of the most entertaining and successful motion pictures made in Hollywood have featured so-called “superheroes”, fictional characters drawn from DC and Marvel comics. Their extraordinary powers distinguish them from all of us. A superhero can soar like a bird, possess the brute strength of a lion, and run faster than a deer. Consider two comic book legends that are easily the most recognizable to long time fans of the genre: Superman and Batman. When Clark Kent, a reporter for the Daily Planet enters a phone booth in a time of extreme danger, he emerges as the Man of Steel, a superman. His transformation is nothing less than remarkable. His outward appearance, now suddenly changed, which includes a striking costume with a long flowing cape, alerts us to his new role as a figure of enormous strength and power.

When the multi-millionaire Bruce Wayne, enters the bat cave, he emerges as Batman. His striking costume includes a mask, disguising his identity as one of Gotham city’s most distinguished citizens. His extraordinary powers are used in the service of combating crime and crushing the evildoers. One can appreciate why the superhero has a distinctive costume. He or she must be distinguished from the many that are all too ordinary and are not blessed with superhuman powers. But is that really so? What can superheroes teach us about the solemnity of Pentecost?

On the fiftieth day after Easter, God filled his Church with the Holy Spirit.

In today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear of 120 men and women gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem. They await the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus on the eve of his death. (“But I tell you the truth, and it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you”. (Jn.16:7) They are united in prayer. The mighty breath of God... the source of all life... seeps through the assembled community. “And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong, driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were”. (Acts 2:2) The descent of the Spirit transformed the first followers of Jesus, who had previously hidden in fear of those responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion. Clearly, the gift of God is the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost, the Apostles and their companions are not changed physically. Their outward appearance remains unchanged. In the depths of their souls, however, they are transformed into living instruments of God’s unseen power.

St. Peter is a case in point. On the night before Christ’s death, Peter denied his Master not once, but three times. On the day of our Lord’s death, he was nowhere to be seen. He had deserted him. On the night of Easter Sunday, he was in hiding behind locked doors. Peter the fisherman enters the upper room and later emerges as, well, Peter the fisherman. His appearance has not changed. But he is now the bearer of the Holy Spirit. The one who denied Christ will one day suffer the death of a martyr. Out of deference to his crucified and Risen Master, he will ask to be crucified upside down. To be noted is that among the gifts of the Holy Spirit is fortitude or strength infused by God to help overcome difficulties or to endure pain.

In the Office of Readings for Thursday of the seventh week of Easter, there is a commentary on John’s gospel by St. Cyril of Jerusalem, one of the Doctors of the Catholic Church. He writes, “The Spirit changes those in whom he comes to dwell. He so transforms them that they begin to live a completely new kind of life.” He cites example of biblical figures seized by the Spirit. “Saul was told by the prophet Samuel:

the spirit of the Lord will take possession of you, and you shall be changed into another man.” Likewise, St. Paul writes, “The Spirit transforms us into his likeness, from one degree of glory to another.”

Once we receive the Spirit, as at Confirmation, there is no need for us to don a costume in order to symbolize our new identity. We look no different. To expect a physical change is to miss the point. We have been empowered with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. We each have so much untapped potential, which, alas, is too often, wasted.

The feast of Pentecost marks the end of the Easter season. But for those who claim to be bearers of God’s Spirit, it is an opportunity for a new beginning.

Come Holy Spirit and renew the face of the earth!

Amen!