

Fr. Curtis Miller

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Homily for Pentecost

It is a spirit that makes a body alive. So it is the Holy Spirit Who makes us alive as Christians, and Who makes the Church alive. Without the Holy Spirit, there is no Church and we cannot be Christians.

So Who is the Holy Spirit? The theological definition tells us that the Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Triune God. Sometimes we hear that and relegate the Holy Spirit to third place, as somehow less important or less divine, but that is not the case. God is one, yet a Trinity of three divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Who are each and all God, coequal and coeternal. We'll consider this mystery, the most mysterious one of our faith, next week on Trinity Sunday (which so happens to be our parish feast day and the first Sunday we will be able to gather again for Mass in-person).

Of the three divine Persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is perhaps the most mysterious to us. So what do we know about the third Person of the Trinity? One aspect we might notice is that the Holy Spirit is often there at important "beginnings," helping to prompt things to get going. In the first chapter of Genesis, at the beginning of the Bible, we read about how at the first moment of creation, at the beginning of time, the Spirit of God is hovering over the formless waters of chaos, then God breathes His Spirit over this chaos, transforming it to have order and goodness. Throughout the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit prompts the prophets to begin preaching God's message with boldness and courage. At the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit overshadows the Virgin Mary as she conceives Jesus. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, the Holy Spirit comes down upon Him at His baptism, and then drives Him out into the desert for His forty days of prayer and fasting. And, as we call to mind today, it is the Holy Spirit Who descended upon the Apostles at Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, beginning the life of the Church. The Apostles were inspired and enabled by the Holy Spirit to go out and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world.

For many of us, we first heard the name of the Holy Spirit at our baptism, when we were baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Throughout religious education classes, we learned more about the Holy Spirit, especially about the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit. At our Confirmation, when we were sent out to proclaim the Gospel like the first Apostles, we were sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit became present to us in a particular way at that moment and has never departed from us. The Holy Spirit is as truly present among us and in the Church as on that first day of Pentecost.

Presence is an important part of our relationship with God. We do not worship some God Who is hopelessly far away and remote from us. We do not worship a God Who only communicates to us through online video conference calls. No. We have a God Who is present, Who is with us. We know that this is particularly true of Jesus,

Who became man and dwelt among us. It is also true, however, of the Holy Spirit, Who came to dwell among us in a less visible but equally real way. We live in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

I think that many of our problems in society come from our inability to be truly present to each other. We hold others at arm's length and define people who are different from us as "them," as "the other." You've likely seen in the news lately the troubling stories about unarmed African Americans who were killed in recent days, and the ensuing riots in many cities. I bring this up not to get into politics (I'm very careful to not comment publicly on politics), but first of all to encourage us all to pray for justice, peace, and a greater respect for the God-given dignity of every human life. Secondly, I'd like to highlight one hopeful moment that was show among all the other chaotic news stories. In this scene, a chief of police of a major American city walked out among the protestors. She didn't come in riot gear to disperse or lecture them, but just to take time to listen to these people, to empathize with their anger and fears, to tell them that their safety is her priority, and then respectfully ask them to protest peacefully. I come from a law enforcement family, and that's the kind of police officer I know. What was she doing? She was being present to other people, listening to them, caring about them. All too often, even in more mundane daily conflicts, we arm ourselves in fear, and attack our perceived enemies. But when we are brave enough to be really present to others, to be open, and even vulnerable, then sometimes something unexpected happens: peace and reconciliation.

The Holy Spirit comes among us in that way: open and vulnerable. But it is precisely when we are aware of the Holy Spirit's presence among us, within our very souls, then we can find the strength and courage to be present to other people. Consider the Apostles on Pentecost. They had just been hiding in fear, surrounded by enemies, including people who had shouted in the crowd at Jesus' trial, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" These were their enemies. Yet when the Holy Spirit came upon them, they rushed out into the crowds, no longer fearful, no longer seeing anyone as enemies. They just wanted to share the good news of Jesus with everyone. If we allow the power of the Holy Spirit's presence to shine forth in our hearts, then we will be able to do the same today, and help transform this hurting, troubled world with the joyful Gospel of Jesus Christ.