

Pentecost Sunday

May 23, 2021

Today we celebrate Pentecost, the day on which the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles, filling them with His presence and power in a most extraordinary way. It is often called the birthday of the Church, for on this day Christ's disciples, filled with the Spirit, began their mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the whole world, beginning in Jerusalem. And ever since then the Holy Spirit has been present and active in the Church. It would almost seem appropriate to unofficially dub Pentecost the Feast Day of the Holy Spirit!

Yet, how often do we actually think about the Holy Spirit? How much do we really know about Him? As Benedict XVI once noted, "The Holy Spirit has been in some ways the neglected person of the Blessed Trinity."

In a certain way that neglect is the Spirit's own doing. For He came not so much to reveal Himself as to put Christ into our hearts; to testify about Christ and give us new life in Him. The Spirit came to guide the Church in all truth, to sanctify her members, to draw others to Christ, to repentance and conversion. In other words, He is more known to us by His works than in His Person.

Yet there are some things we can say about the Holy Spirit. And we can use the Nicene Creed as our guide.

The first and most insightful thing we can say is that the Holy Spirit is the personification of divine love. That is a big statement and we need to unpack it a bit.

The Holy Spirit is a distinct Person of the Blessed Trinity. He exists as the communication and personification of the mutual, self-giving, and eternal relationship of love and unity between God the Father and God the Son. This is what the Nicene Creed means when it says that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son.”

Now that same Creed makes a point of telling us that the Son is “consubstantial” with the Father. But while it doesn’t say it, so is the Holy Spirit. For to be “consubstantial” simply means to be of the same divine substance or nature. This is philosophical terminology that the Church uses to try to articulate the relationship between the three Persons of God.

Being of the same substance means that each Person of the Blessed Trinity shares in all the attributes of the one divine nature. Such attributes as being infinite, eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-perfect. That is why “with the Father and the Son He is worshipped and glorified.”

The Nicene Creed does tell us that the Holy Spirit has already “spoken through the prophets.” This means that the Holy Spirit did not just begin acting in the world after Jesus ascended into Heaven. We read in the Old Testament of the Spirit coming upon such persons as Gideon,

David, Ezekiel and Micah. Further, the Spirit inspired the writers of Sacred Scriptures.

But it goes further. The actions of the Holy Spirit go back to creation itself. As the opening of Genesis is sometimes translated: "*The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters*" (1:2). The Holy Spirit is also involved in the new creation in Christ. We receive the Spirit of adoption in baptism, cleansing us from sin and filling us with divine life, making us children of God. As Jesus said, "*It is the Spirit who gives life*" (Jn. 6:63). That is why the Nicene Creed calls Him "the Lord, the giver of life."

And as I said at the beginning, the Holy Spirit is still very much active in the Church today. It is the Spirit who enkindles within us belief in God, and faith and love of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. It is the Spirit who imparts grace through the sacraments. It is the Spirit who gives us charisms (i.e., a spiritual gift given to someone for the good of the Church and her mission.) It is the Holy Spirit that makes us who we are as Christians.

So Happy Birthday. Happy Pentecost.