

Our faith is very rich in its traditions and symbols. It was not by chance that the Holy Spirit came to guide the Church on Pentecost. Rather it was a fulfillment of what had, up to this point, been shrouded in mystery.

In the Jewish calendar, there were 3 great religious festivals of the year, the Feast of Booths, Passover, and Pentecost. Pentecost was originally a harvest festival in which the first fruits were offered to God. Instead of putting those first fruits in storage for a time of need, they gave them to God as a sign of their complete trust in His grace.

In the Exodus, the ancient Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt. They journeyed to God's mountain where God sent them a new law to guide them in how they should live.

It was on Pentecost that God gave the law to Moses at Mt. Sinai. And so this holy day took on added significance.

The Holy Spirit is the first fruit of the harvest of the New Covenant, a new redeemed life of grace given to us by Christ. This new life begins here on earth but will find its fulfillment at the end of this world when the final harvest will take place and a new Heaven and a new earth are established.

This ancient promise is brought to its fullest meaning as the Holy Spirit brings us the law of the New Covenant. As the Spirit is the bond of unity between the Father and the Son, the law of the New Covenant is the law of unity. Jesus prayed that we may be one, as He and the Father are one. Saint Paul tells us that the Church is a body with many parts but it remains one united body.

Pentecost is a richly layered event, symbols and meaning pile thickly on top of each other. But at its core, the meaning of Pentecost is very simple, to gather that which has been scattered, to unite that which has been divided.

It is the mission of the Church, and therefore the mission of each one of us, to reunite the human family that has been torn apart by sin. It was the sin of pride that caused our first parents to turn away from God. It was the sin of pride that caused man to attempt to build a name for himself, apart from God, by building a great city and tower that reached to Heaven. But such a work, built on such a foundation cannot stand. God confused the language of the people and the work was abandoned and the people scattered.

Today the Church takes on the work of bringing the people back together. That is why as soon as the risen Jesus breathes on the Apostles, He instructs them to forgive sins.

Do not underestimate the magnitude of the work that lies before us. It is the sin of pride that continues to divide us. And the devil has been at work for a very long time.

We are very good at dividing ourselves. We divide ourselves by race, creed, color, political ideology, and we have even managed to divide ourselves over gender and argue about the correct way to address each other.

We divide ourselves over which shepherd we will follow. We argue about the correct way to glorify God. We divide ourselves over matters great and small.

Most of you have probably heard by now of the letter Archbishop Cordileone of San Francisco recently published. The letter instructs the

Speaker of the House of Representatives, a professed Catholic, to refrain from presenting herself to receive Communion. The Speaker's material, and very public, participation in the taking of human lives by abortion, is incompatible with her Catholic faith. After trying every alternative, over a course of years, to deal with the situation privately, the archbishop felt he had no choice but to take this very public step.

The speaker's response was very predictable. As she has done in the past, she cites her personal conscience and states that the Church respects a person's private, informed conscience. But that is incorrect.

The Church does not speak of an informed conscience, the Church speaks of a well-formed conscience. A well-formed conscience is a conscience formed in the teachings of the Church.

If a person's private, informed conscience is at odds with the teachings of the Church then that is a conscience formed by pride, not by the love of God.

Pride divides and scatters us in all sorts of ways. We have become a society in which an individual's wants and desires take precedent over everything else. Rather than be obedient to the teachings of God given to us through his Church, it is more common for people to simply declare that the Church is wrong and then follow their own will.

"If you love me," Jesus said to His disciples, "you will keep my commandments." "Whoever loves me will keep my Word." "Those who do not love me, do not keep my words."

But as hard as we work to separate ourselves from each other, God works equally hard to bring us back together. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes

with a thunderous noise and a great wind. Flames appear from nowhere; a great ball of fire hovering in the sky. As the disciples watched, the ball of fire separates, smaller flames started to float through the air, coming to rest on each of the people gathered there.

Then all of a sudden the Christians started speaking in languages they didn't know. A crowd had gathered by now, people from all over the world were in Jerusalem for the festival that commemorated Moses receiving the Law. Every person understood the Christians speaking to them, explaining the Gospel, in their own language.

The Holy Spirit was working to reunite mankind, divided at the Tower of Babel.

The Holy Spirit guides us in this work. Saint Paul tells us that the Spirit blows freely wherever it will like a wind. We hear the sound it makes, but we do not know where it comes from or where it goes. The Spirit sets our tongues on fire spiritually, so that we in turn may speak and set fire to the hearts of those who listen to us, drawing them back to God and reuniting our family. And each person hears in a language that he knows intimately. He does not need to study or translate the message, it is a message that goes straight to the heart.

The church does not belong to any one individual. It is not your Church or my Church, or the pastor's Church, or the Bishop's Church. It is not even the Pope's Church. It is God's Church and as members of His Church we have all benefitted from its mission of unity, the Church has reached out to each of us and brought us into God's family.

But as its members we are also responsible for carrying its work forward. To do this we have to break down the barriers that divide us. The barriers of fear, misunderstanding, prejudice, jealousy, envy, resentment, and grudges. These are at the root of all conflicts, not just the conflicts that threaten our personal relationships, but also the conflicts that threaten the peace of the entire world. All of those large scale conflicts can be traced back to the conflicts in individual hearts. If we learn to break down the barriers in our own hearts, we will be more effective in building unity in the world around us.

There is a story about a meeting that took place during the Civil War between President Abraham Lincoln and a number of his generals. Lincoln was desperately working to restore the unity of a divided nation. As the meeting broke up one of the generals said, "let us pray that God is on our side."

"No, gentlemen," responded the President, "Let us pray that we are on God's side."

Jesus told us that He came to make all things new, that is, He came to restore all things to the unity that God intended from the beginning. And as Christians we follow Him in His work. But we must always remember that it is we who follow God's will and not God who follows ours.

How can we be united in one family unless we all love and obey one Father? It wasn't the Apostle's brilliance that allowed them to speak in foreign tongues on that first Pentecost. It was God's grace, the Holy Spirit working through the Church.

And so if we are to fulfill our roles as members of God's Church, whose mission is building unity, if we are to be active, efficient, and effective builders of unity in our families, schools, parish, and workplaces, we must first and foremost be men and women of prayer.

Prayer binds us firmly to God, so that through us, His strength can bring together the scattered pieces of fallen humanity. A mature prayer life makes us true partners in the work of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray that through all the turmoils and strife in our lives, that we may always keep our eyes fixed on Christ and work of His Church, and that we may always be on God's side.