

A teacher was giving a lesson on the circulation of the blood. Trying to make the matter clearer, she said, "Now, class, if I stood on my head, the blood, as you know, would run into it, and I would turn red in the face."

"Yes," the class said.

"Then why is it that while I am standing upright in typical fashion, the blood doesn't run into my feet?"

One kid answered, "Cause your feet ain't empty."

OK, on to Pentecost. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles is the record of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of those who were left to carry on after Jesus' departure from the earth. It is the account of the dynamic released into the world through men and women of prayer. Jesus promised that we would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. And He told those scared followers to wait in Jerusalem. Those fearful men and women knew who they were. They knew they couldn't do it on their own power, so they did what Jesus told them to do. They waited. And the scripture says that with one accord, they devoted themselves to prayer. And we know what happened – suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. Luke is almost stumbling over himself as he grasps for words to describe what happened. And then, in a restrained way, that seems to indicate that there's no way to tell about what happened, but to put it down in the most simple, straightforward fashion. And so Luke penned what is one of the most under-dramatic sentences in the whole Bible, "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." As matter-of-fact as that – they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Something new came into their experience. Out of those closed doors, these formerly timid, frightened men and women went out to be proclaimers of the gospel – out into the very city which had crucified Jesus, they went to boldly tell that He was alive in the world.

The basic work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a promise of power. And I believe that this is the neglected factor of Pentecost in our lives – power. What is the nature of this power? How does it function in our lives, and to what end is it available? First, there is the power to enter in – the power to enter into the Christian life. What is it that makes a person Christian? What is it that causes us to say "I'm a Catholic Christian?" On what grounds can we make that claim? If we took a poll right now to get a response to these questions, I would guess that by far the majority of us would talk about what we believe. We might even recite part of the creed. Now there's truth and validity in the creed. It's fundamental. I've staked my life on it by being ordained. But if it stops there, it stops.

Unfortunately, that's where it is with far too many churchgoers. It stops there. So our churches are full of people who believe, and affirm some kind of formal faith, but who are empty and unfulfilled, who lack power, and who are still seeking to live on their own steam.

But intellectual ascent is not enough. We have to enter into the Christian life. This is more than belief, it is an exercise of the will. Don't miss this. Our will is the key to our Christian experience – not feeling, though feeling is a part of it – not a system of belief, though beliefs are important – but a commitment of the will, by which I mean conscious, deliberate decision and action. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World was one of the major documents of Vatican II. It states: "The split between the faith which many Christians profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age." (GS #43) The paragraph goes on to urge Christians to put their faith to work in daily life, rather than act

as if it is fulfilled by “acts of worship alone” and separated from “earthly affairs.” We are to have a living faith that actually DOES something for the sake of others. Church is not my personal salvation project.

This is tough going, because our wills are supremely ours. Here is where we are kings and queens. We sit on the throne of our own life, and we don’t want anyone to tell us what to do. Or not do. This is how we claim our freedom – in the exercise of our wills. But unless we surrender our will to the will of God, we have no power. No power to be changed personally – and no power to change the world around us. Even a tiny bit. So we might want to ask ourselves this Pentecost Sunday – who occupies the throne of my life? Me – or Jesus Christ? Have I yielded myself to Christ, allowing Him to lead? To give up MY life, MY money, MY desires, MY plans, MY agendas. That’s the first power of the Holy Spirit’s work – the power to enter in, and then for us to yield our wills to Christ. (this adapted from Maxie Dunman, PENTECOST: THE NEGLECTED FACTOR, in SERMON AND WORSHIP RESOURCES, retrieved 5/7/2024) It’s a tall order. But a lot of us think we’re good Catholics because we come to Church every Sunday and drop a few dollars in the collection. But as I’ve said before, “Sitting in Church on Sunday doesn’t make us Catholic anymore than sitting in a garage makes us a car.”

Second, every generation needs to experience Pentecost for itself. It needs God’s Spirit, and it needs it in its own particular way.

Scripture assures us that the Holy Spirit is not a generic force, one-size-fits-all, but a person, a relationship, a spirit that has “particular manifestations” and gives itself to each of us uniquely so that the understanding and strength that we receive are geared to help us in our own particular struggles. If this is true, if Pentecost is so differentiating, an important question arises: Where in life today do we most need the Holy Spirit to transform us? What are our peculiar spiritual disabilities?

Our unique weaknesses, like our strengths, are legion. However, for our generation, a number of things might be singled out as particularly debilitating to the soul: our propensity for distraction, our tendency to see individual fulfillment as salvation, our proclivity for ideology and fundamentalism, and our obsession with sexuality. We could use a particular infusion from the Holy Spirit to help us with these.

For example: Distraction is perhaps the most powerful narcotic on the planet. Simply put, what this means is that our daily communion, the manna that sustains us, is distraction – iPhones and iPads, game-shows, sporting events, sit-coms, talk-shows, entertainment news, scandals reported everywhere, pop music, movies, the list is literally endless. Not that these are bad in and of themselves. What’s bad is that they eventually anesthetize us: we watch the late-night comedians on TV, drink in one hand, a quart of Haagen Daas in the other, and laugh as they spoof the day’s events, let the tensions of the day subside, and sleep pretty well. Not bad, not bad at all, except we do it again the next night and the night after and onwards ever after, slowly numbing ourselves to the deeper issues of meaning, pain, justice, self-sacrifice, love, generosity, and death.

For our own Pentecost, we need then to pray for the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of depth, the spirit of courage, and given the over-sexualization of so much of today’s entertainment – the spirit of chastity.

Beyond distraction lies another struggle. Aidan Kavanaugh once said: “Today our icon is not a city, whether of man or God, but the lone jogger running through suburbia, in order, we are told, to feel good about himself.” We struggle today with individualism and the problem is not just with the obvious, the all too-common breakdown of our families, neighborhoods, parishes and communities, what’s called the ‘bowling-alone’ syndrome. The deeper struggle is with what Dorothy Day used to call ‘the harshness of love.’ What we

can't deal with is the painful give-and-take of ordinary community and friendship, the habitual slights and hurts that arise in every marriage, friendship, family, community, parish, and group. Look, it's impossible to interrelate without hurting each other. That's just a fact of life. But we find it difficult, so we withdraw, jog and bowl alone, not out of an ideology of individualism, but because we haven't the resiliency needed to deal with the bruises and disappointments that come with bowling and jogging with others. This makes community, church, friendship, family, impossible.

What Pentecost needs to pour into us today is the spirit of resiliency, the spirit of forgiveness, the spirit of patience, the spirit of long-suffering, the spirit of understanding, and the spirit to not go jogging or bowling alone.

We need too a Pentecost that can help us cope with the ideologies and fundamentalism – both in our society and church – that constantly beset us like so many bad viruses. We are forever infected with ideologies, be they of the left or the right, that block us from living vital parts of the gospel. Whether we rationalize it as protecting proper values, defending a divine creed, or advocating an issue of justice, over and over again we compromise the hospitality, charity, respect, catholicity, and tolerance called for by the gospels, all in the name of some cause. Our hearts, unlike God's, are forever wanting to lodge in just one room. In God's heart, there are many dwelling place, many mansions, many rooms. We need a Pentecost to mellow us with the spirit of mildness, stretch us with the spirit of catholicity, and especially fill us with the spirit of hospitality so as to take us beyond the hardness that we rationalize as creed or cause.

Finally, we need a Pentecost to help us deal with our sexuality. In a world in which sexual intimacy is held up as salvation, we have lost the proper balance between what our sexuality's DNA seems to demand in marriage, family, and friendship. We need a spirit of fidelity, inclusive community, and innocence in order to find real meaning and happiness. We need new tongues of fire to bring us the spirit of chastity, the spirit of full respect, the spirit of fidelity, and the spirit for emotional martyrdom, so that, even as we defend the goodness of sexuality, we are able too, on any given night, to sweat blood in a garden so as to not violate the bigger picture.

1 Corinthians 12:7 suggests that Pentecost is "the particular manifestation of the spirit, granted to each of us." We need to pray for such a particularized Pentecost to happen. Amen. (last part adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 3 July 2001)