SOLEMNITY OF PENTECOST

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of John 20:19–23. It is the scene of the Risen Christ sending the Apostles and “breathing” on them. It is an appropriate passage to reflect on as we celebrate the moment when the first disciples were enlivened by the Holy Spirit and filled with enthusiasm to continue the mission of Jesus.

The word “enthusiasm” comes from the two Greek words meaning “God within” (en theos). It refers to the experience a person has when they are "filled" with the Spirit of God. In the Greek world it was originally perceived as an arbitrary invasion of God into the psyche that filled the individual with an indomitable energy. This was the way the Greeks explained divine inspiration. In the Christian faith, however, to be enthusiastic is not only to be energetic; it is to be courageous, motivated, and committed. The disciples had that experience and thus began to carry on the mission of Jesus fearlessly as His witnesses even unto death. Because of their enthusiasm, they were able to do the things that Jesus did. The gift of the Spirit transformed their fear into faith. It motivated them from being self-preserving to becoming other-serving, and it changed the mission of the Church from merely a human organization into a holy endeavor. Wow—the Spirit can transform lives and communities!

When in your life do you experience "enthusiasm" in the religious sense of being "filled with God"?

What works of faith, as in the Mission of Jesus, have you been led to do as a result of your enthusiasm?

What fears can cause people today to be “paralyzed” in their witness of faith and dampen their enthusiasm?

How can people fulfill their religious observances with a “self-preserving” attitude rather than an “other-serving” attitude?

In John 19:22 we are told that Jesus “breathed on them.” That is an important statement for several reasons. First, it is a direct allusion to the action of God in Genesis 2:7 when the Lord first created humanity with an infusion of Divine Life. This connection to the first creation is reconfirmed in Ezekiel 37:9–10 and Wisdom 15:11 and speaks to the power of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of individual Christians. Jesus’ action of breathing on the disciples is a statement that a new creation is taking place in the life and mission of the Church and that humanity is regenerated by the life-giving action of the Holy Spirit. This life-giving spiritual regeneration occurs in the Sacraments through Baptism (see Jn 3:5), through the gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, and in the Eucharistic banquet where Tradition tells us that if we, with faith, eat the Body of Christ, we eat “Fire and Spirit” because it is the Holy Spirit we invoke over the gifts during the consecration.1

Second, the gift of the Spirit makes the community of believers, the Church, a fundamentally spiritual reality that carries out the works of God. These are not mere human efforts. When our Lord breathed on the disciples, He gave them the Spirit that could continue to

1 St Ephrem as quoted by Pope St. John Paul II, “Ecclesia de Eucharistia” in AAS 95, (17 April 2003), N. 17.
mediate His Divine Presence even in His physical absence. The Church, then, is the Mystical Body of Christ in the world through which Jesus continues His ministry (See 1 Pt 2:5 for a similar understanding of the Church as a “spiritual edifice”).

Third, the gift of the Holy Spirit draws the disciples into the communion of life and love, which is the Holy Trinity. This incorporation into the Divine Mystery is manifested by the ability to know the mind of Christ and speak with a prophetic voice in our time (see Joel 3:1 [alt. 2:28], 1 Cor 2:6–16, Jn 15:26–27 and 16:12–15).

How is the prophetic ministry of the Church, that is speaking on God’s behalf so as to interpret events from God’s perspective, carried out today both in the lives of individual disciples and through the institutional body of the Church?
What ministries in your faith community most clearly carry out the work of Christ today?
What is a new work Christ wants to accomplish through your faith community?
What prevents people from being able to fully receive and live the spiritual regeneration of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist?

The Holy Spirit’s presence in Acts 2:1–11 was manifested by the ability of people to hear the message of the Gospel despite “foreign tongues” (different languages). That means the Holy Spirit is able to bring about a deep communion of faith that crosses the divisions of language and culture. As Saint Paul teaches us, when one member of the body suffers, the other members suffer with it; when one member rejoices, all the members rejoice (see 1 Cor 12:26). That is a statement of deep communion of life lived on a global scale. Sometimes, however, we can have narrow vision and become shortsighted when it comes to understanding and embracing the universal communion of the Church. When we give in to a narrow vision, we become selective and limited in our charity and concern.

When have you experienced your faith as something that unites you deeply with those whom you have never met?
When do you most tangibly experience the “universal communion” of the Church?
What are some of the attitudes or actions that can cause us to lose sight of the universal nature of the Church?
How do you express your universal communion with those whom you have never met?
Jesus sent His disciples to be witnesses to the world, and that means they were to go beyond the safe confines of their own community so that others could experience the joy and peace they themselves had received from the Lord. What parts of our world most need Christian witnesses today?

In Assisi, every year on the Feast of Pentecost, Saint Francis of Assisi used to gather with his followers to pray for the Holy Spirit to be with them and guide them. Francis believed that the power of the Holy Spirit could change the world. Through Francis, the Holy Spirit indeed did change the world. The Holy Spirit is able to transform fear into courageous faith, anxious concern into peace, alienation into reconciliation, and disciples into missionaries! That’s quite a powerful work!

When do you pray to the Holy Spirit?
Through whom is the Holy Spirit working in a particularly powerful way to transform the Church and the world today?
What do you feel prompted to do by the Holy Spirit in your own life of faith?

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:3b–7, 12–13), he specifies that there are many gifts given by the Holy Spirit to individuals, but that those gifts are for the benefit of everyone and not just the personal benefit of the one who receives the gift. Thus, God equips us and asks us to work together as one body (the Body of Christ) so that the ministry of the Gospel can be accomplished through the Church. Each of us is given some gift that we can use to help carry out that mission. Remember: There are no spare parts on the Body of Christ! If we are not actively engaged in the work of ministry, it is because we haven’t found our place and not because there is no place for us.

What are some of the gifts, talents, or skills with which you have been entrusted, and how can these be used for the common good and the mission of the Church?
What gifts do we most need in the Church today to better carry out our mission?
What gifts, talents, or skills are you still seeking to use in the service of the Gospel?

Jesus says to the disciples, “As the Father sent me, so I send you … Receive the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit is given so that we can continue the mission of Jesus in the world. Jesus was sent to make God known, and in order to do that He had to make love known (because God is love). To make love known, He died on the Cross for us in an ultimate witness of self-giving and sacrificial love for others even in the face of hatred, rejection, and persecution. The Holy Spirit empowers us to carry on the mission of making God known in our world through the same demonstration of love. Others come to know God (who is love) through us. That is why Jesus was sent—and that is the purpose for which He sends us.

Who in our time most needs to know the love of God?
How have you come to know about the love of God through the witness of someone else?
If Jesus appeared to us this Sunday and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit … as the Father has sent me so I send you,” how do you think that personal challenge of Jesus would practically affect your community and its ministries?

Take time this Sunday to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit and to be accepting and responsive to that gift when it is given.

Breathe into me, Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy.
Move in me, Holy Spirit that my work, too, may be holy.
Attract my heart, Holy Spirit, that I may love only what is holy.
Strengthen me, Holy Spirit, that I may defend all that is holy.
Protect me, Holy Spirit, that I may always be holy.

Saint Augustine