

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Pentecost Forever, If We Dare

The celebration of this great feast remains perpetual — if, if we dare say yes to the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives. It is as simple as that and it is as frightening as that. For most of us look for the security of the cocoon. It takes courage to be a butterfly.

I use the ceremony of Confirmation as an opportunity to challenge the candidates, their witnesses and the adults assembled to dare say yes to the Holy Spirit each day of their lives. For the breath of the Spirit challenges all of us to move from our security to courses unpredictable. No one of us by nature wants to be a martyr to this painful pilgrimage. It takes great faith to leap into the unknown.

I shall never abandon this challenge because I have deep faith in its validity. When I ask the question in Confirmation of what is the difference between the lives of the great saints and martyrs in the history of the Church, and the hohum and drab existence of most of us, I should really be asking "Who is the difference?" For it is the Spirit of Christ Who makes the difference and Who transforms our human spirit into its full potential as His Spirit conspires with ours to move us to become liberated spirits.

This season of the year recalls the first Pentecost — the primary epiphany of the Holy Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles contains the written record of His advent which marked the birthday of the Church. The transformation that was accompanied by the sound of a roaring wind and by fire, renewed the face of the earth and the dry bones of huddled disciples became the limbs of men suddenly alive and anxious to move in haste and separately to the ends of the earth.

Ages before His Son, Jesus, had assured frightened and disconsolate disciples of the expediency of His departure from their midst to make way for the coming of His Spirit. God the Father had announced the wondrous work of the Spirit through His prophet Ezechiel. The 37th Chapter of this book portrays why Pentecost would be a matter of great human

urgency. The prophet is transported to an immense valley eerily still and strewn from end to end with human bones bleached white with death. God explains to His prophet that this is the condition in which He finds His chosen people. "If they only knew their plight, they would cry out: 'Our bones are dried up, our hope has gone, we are as good as dead.'" (Ez. 37) Then He described what His Spirit would accomplish with and for them: "The Lord Yahweh says to these bones: 'I am now going to make the breath enter you, and you will live. The valley of the dry bones will be transformed into another Eden filled with living things and men fully alive. This will happen when I shall put my spirit in you.'" (Ez. 14)

The great fulfillment of God's prophecy and of His Son's promise were the dramatic events of the first Pentecost (cf. Acts 2). Upon reading the account, we might be tempted to say that it happened once but will never occur again. The truth is that Pentecost is now and forever to all people of faith who are willing to be open to the Spirit and to say "Amen" to the Word of God. The manifestation of His coming to modern disciples may not be so clothed with the spectacular as was the first Pentecost, but wind and fire still remain valid symbols of the Spirit's entry into our lives today.

The wind teaches us much about the person of the Spirit. Christ, Himself had spoken of similarities between the qualities of wind and the characteristics of the Spirit. "The wind blows wherever it pleases; you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit." (John 3:8) Wind and spirit cannot be contained nor controlled by man. A world without wind would leave man immobile. Be calmed, we would never voyage to other lands, see new horizons and cultures. Such as the activity of the Spirit. Once the Apostles were stirred by the breath of God, they were spirited like the birds of the air all the way to the ends of the earth. Pentecost still is a reality to all who pray: "O breathe on us, O Breath of God. Make us alive and spirited with joy and enthusiasm."

The coming of the Spirit on the First Pentecost was also perceived as fire. God's previous appearances had usually been engulfed in fire. It was in fire that He gave His people the Law as their path to Him. In a pillar of fire He led them

out of the wilderness. The coming of His Son was to be as a fire cast upon earth which, for some, would be Hell and for others the warmth of His love. His disciples are to be like lamps placed on lampstands where all can be illumined by the gift of the Spirit and whereby the powers of darkness can be dispelled. All human securities not rooted in God but in self are to be drawn toward the fire of the Spirit — tested — and either consumed or purified. And Pentecost is now to all who pray:

"Come, Holy Spirit, replace the darkness within us with your gentle light
Replace the coldness within us with a loving warmth —
Replace the winter weather with your Spring —
Light the fires of your love in our hearts
Consume the treasured loves of our egotism and unbelieving hearts."

The First Pentecost also witnessed the Spirit's power to end the babel of languages that had always symbolized man's disunity. It is the work of the Spirit to knit people together — to initiate perfect and effortless communication between men. Whenever we are present to each other superficially, we speak foreign languages to each other. At the First Pentecost people understood each other and were understood and the content of their speech was the same, "The Marvels of God."

How we need this unifying presence of the Spirit today! We have allowed too many to be strangers to us, to speak with alien tongues. Languages that are foreign to us are heard in every divided home, on every street, between races, classes, generations, and nations. The frequency of war in our day is but a surface indication of our incapacity to speak to and to be heard by each other. How we need His Spirit to unify us!

Yes, Pentecost can be today if we but will it. Every call to renewal — be it the Year of Renewal, The Time of Renewal, The Holy Year — has been based on this premise and hope. But since the Spirit ordinarily limits His Presence and Power to the depth, length, and breadth of our Amen, we must offer the hope and prayer that there will be this Pentecost a sense of urgency in our voice as we cry out:

"Come, Holy Spirit, Come!"

No Compromise on Patrimony of Faith

Following are excerpts from Pope Paul's address to the General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, May 17.

There crowds in upon me the panoramic view of the pastoral problems that affect the life of the Italian Church. I feel almost tempted to discuss them with you, venerated brothers. But for evident practical reasons, I will not yield to this temptation, attractive though it is. I wish to limit myself to just a few observations.

The first concerns method. I wish to assure this conference of two things, that is, of the constant, watchful and loving interest with which I personally follow your work, always in the desire of its harmony, both within itself, and with the whole Catholic Church, but recognizing, in fact promoting, that relative responsible autonomy in its own field which devolves upon a conference so numerous and so responsible as the Italian one. History and canon law oblige the pope, as such, and as Bishop of Rome, to a special, a very special, solicitude for the fate of the Church in Italy, that is, of the Church of this politically united country. But this takes place with the unitary formation of a national episcopal body, which had never existed or been canonically recognized as such before this century. So then we have the growth of a special solicitude of the pope for the Italian episcopate, which is headed by him, and at the same time the expression of particular confidence in this episcopate. You see with what free initiative your programs take shape, and with what satisfaction I follow and encourage their wise and beneficial fruitfulness.

I admire the increase of pastoral awareness, as regards the maturing of the collegial art of your ecclesial government.

Here we have the duty of evangelization, which at

this moment is causing the attention of the Italian episcopate, in its pastoral sense, to converge in an admirable effort in order to mobilize the whole ecclesial community to live its vocation on a plane of complete faith, of faithfulness to the Gospel of Christ; of justice, love, integrity and of the expression in concrete life of the ideals in which one believes; of dedication to the poor and service of brothers.

This commitment of constant evangelization brings with it the elevation of man, promotes his dignity, freedom, greatness, defends him from the degrading debasement of passions, arms him for the spiritual battle which, above all and essentially, "is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6, 12)

In this talk, which concerns the historical reality of the Church in Italy and the essentially pastoral solicitude of the collegial body of Bishops, I cannot prescind from the forthcoming socio-political event. I say at once that the plane on which we place ourselves, as pastors, is different, since, as I said, it aims at the formation of an awareness of faith. Yet the fact involves not only contingent elements of passing history, but it involves the very lives of Christians, called to commit themselves in the world and to be its vivifying soul. It is therefore so important that it may be decisive for the future with regard to so many specific questions of ours — religious, pastoral, doctrinal, ethical and social.

There are situations, there are circumstances, especially when there is at stake the treasure of our faith and the commitment of our testimony, which make it necessary to turn the babel of so many different voices into one harmony. What would the supporters of undiscerning pluralism say if the instruments of an orchestra were to play each its own tune? If an elementary discipline is called for by every normal rule of society, if it is imposed even by those who wish to overthrow the society, is it to be wondered at that we should call for it for ourselves?

It is necessary, furthermore, to be consistent; the patrimony of Christian faith cannot be subject to opportunism and compromise, otherwise it is finished. It cannot be combined with views that are completely and intrinsically opposed to its nature. The believer cannot ignore the declarations already made, in which, with fatherly solicitude and often with deep sorrow, "groaning," there is expressed the mind of the Bishops, who are "heralds of the faith . . . authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ", as the Council said.

Nor can the believer ignore very serious and tremendously probative experiences, which, in spite of certain verbal delarations to the contrary, and contrary to the hopes that the Christian always wishes to cherish, trusting in Providence and in the immanent force of truth and justice, indicate how an anti-religious and anti-ecclesial "constant", which ends up, therefore, by being anti-human, still remains, unfortunately, unchanged and present in well-known movements of thought and practice.

In short: as far as this serious problem is concerned, there is nothing more for me to do but confirm the indications and reasons already fully proposed. First, it is not lawful to shirk one's electoral duty when there is connected with it a profession of faithfulness to principles and values that cannot be renounced, even if their perfect representation may be questionable from certain points of view and in some cases.

Far less does it seem to us, in the second place, in conformity with civil, moral, social and religious duty, and therefore tolerable, to grant one's support, especially publicly, to a political expression which is, for ideological reasons and by historical experience, radically opposed to our religious conception of life. Higher motives and interests, which prompt this two-fold position, are known to everyone; and you have discussed them fully here. It only remains for me to strengthen your concordant and courageous unanimity with mine.