May 20, 2018

Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2:1–11; 1 Cor 12: 3b-7, 12-13 or Gal 5 16-25; Jn 20:19-23 or Jn 15:26-27; 16:12-15

By Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, Ph.D.

Today is Pentecost Sunday. This feast is celebrated on the seventh Sunday (49 days) after Easter, and it commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of Jesus Christ while they were in Jerusalem celebrating the Feast of Weeks, as described in Acts 2:1–31. Sometimes Pentecost is called “the Church's birthday,” because it marks the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the post-resurrection Christian community, and the beginning of their ministry to make disciples of all nations.

In hearing today’s First Reading, what is most striking is the Holy Spirit’s transformation of a tightly knit and fearful post-crucifixion motley lot into a Christian community, boldly and publicly proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, to the world. True – this was also a post-resurrection crowd. Yet, they were also a post-ascension crowd – living on the as yet unfulfilled promise of Jesus to send them an “Advocate.” But then – “suddenly” a noisy wind and flashes of fire changed everything!

Filled with the Holy Spirit, these largely unschooled Christians were somehow enabled to communicate the Gospel to peoples of a vast variety of cultural, ethnic, and national origins in ways and languages that were understood. Clearly emboldened by the Holy Spirit, the close circle of Jesus’ disciples opened their hearts and lives and engaged and welcomed all the peoples of the then-known world – becoming one community of faith – Christians! What a marvelous variety the Holy Spirit calls forth!

For the Second Reading the Church’s Lectionary provides two options. The 1 Cor 12: 3b-7, 12-13 reading stresses that faith in Christ is a free gift of the Holy Spirit. That gift takes form and expression in the vast variety of ways through the gifts and talents of all the People of God. Yet, just as all the organs of the human body make up a single person so too, all baptized persons, “drink of the same Spirit.” Or, do we?

As we hear in Gal 5 16-25, each of the baptized live out our baptismal calling according to the gifts we have been given. However, as Paul warns there are clearly “desires of the flesh” that are “against the Spirit.” All too often we hear “desires of the flesh” as meaning violations of chastity or sexual promiscuity. But we miss perhaps what is of more common importance for today’s divided, violent and conflictual world. Paul’s list includes: “hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy.” How does this match up with what is going on in my life and yours? How are those vices present in our families? Among neighbors? At school? In the workplace? In your country? Across the globe? With contributions to irreparable environmental destruction? Are we acting as baptized Christians – empowered by the Holy Spirit with – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?”

In his recent Apostolic Exhortation, “Rejoice and Be Glad,” Pope Francis provided us with some excellent helps that can enable us to be more attentive to God’s Holy Spirit in our lives and strengthen our growth in holiness in the midst of a morally complex world. Francis reminds us that each of us is called to be holy! This means first and foremost that we simply are true to ourselves – allowing nothing to get in the way of our exercising the gifts and talents God has generously given each of us. The Holy Father stressed that holiness happens best in the ordinariness of everyday life
– simply being open to the Holy Spirit's nudging to be thoughtful, generous, and kind when confronted with any situation – especially hard ones. This means working at overriding being arrogant or asserting supremacy and elitism in all of its forms. And further, it means trying to be with people – attempting to understand their perspective before judging them, confronting them or casting them aside. In humility – we need to acknowledge that “There but for the grace of God, go I.” He insists that kindness is key to holiness (this includes being kind in our “on-line communication”). Our baptismal call to holiness asks us to become poor in spirit, peacemakers, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, and – above all – merciful.

In “Rejoice and Be Glad,” Pope Francis summarizes:

129. Holiness is also parrhesia: it is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in this world. To allow us to do this, Jesus himself comes and tells us once more, serenely yet firmly: “Do not be afraid.” (Mk 6:50). I am with you always, to the end of the world” (Mt 28:20). These words enable us to go forth and serve with the same courage that the Holy Spirit stirred up in the Apostles, impelling them to proclaim Jesus Christ. Boldness, enthusiasm, the freedom to speak out, apostolic fervour, all these are included in the word parrhesia. The Bible also uses this word to describe the freedom of a life open to God and to others (cf. Acts 4:29, 9:28, 28:31; 2 Cor 3:12; Eph 3:12; Heb 3:6, 10:19).

133. We need the Spirit’s prompting, lest we be paralyzed by fear and excessive caution, lest we grow used to keeping within safe bounds. Let us remember that closed spaces grow musty and unhealthy. When the Apostles were tempted to let themselves be crippled by danger and threats, they joined in prayer to implore parrhesia: “And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness.” (Acts 4:29). As a result, “when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

What will enable us to follow Pope Francis’ direction is paying attention – as did those first post-crucifixion, post-resurrection, and post ascension Christians – to the promise of Jesus:

"When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me. And you also testify . . . .

"I have much more to tell you . . . .
But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. Everything that the Father has is mine; for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you."

Dawn Nothwehr, OSF, PhD, is The Erica and Harry John Family Endowed Chair in Catholic Theological Ethics at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.