



## The Holy See

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### EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION ON THE SOLEMNITY OF PENTECOST *HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI* *Vatican Basilica*

*Sunday, 11 May 2008 Dear Brothers and Sisters,* St Luke places the account of the event of Pentecost that we heard in the First Reading in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. The chapter is introduced by the words: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place" (Acts 2: 1). These words refer to the previous setting in which Luke described the small company of disciples that had gathered perseveringly in Jerusalem after Jesus' Ascension into Heaven (cf. Acts 1: 12-14). It is a description rich in detail: the place "where they were staying" - the Cenacle - was an "Upper Room"; the 11 Apostles are listed by name and the first three are Peter, John and James, the "pillars" of the community; mentioned with them are "the women" and "Mary the Mother of Jesus, and "his brethren", already an integral part of this new family, no longer based on blood ties but on faith in Christ. The total number of people which was "about a hundred and twenty", a multiple of the "Twelve" of the Apostolic College, alludes to this "new Israel". The group constitutes an authentic "*qhlil*", an "assembly" in accordance with the model of the First Covenant, the community summoned to listen to the Lord's voice and to walk in his ways. The Acts of the Apostles stresses that "[a]ll these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer" (1: 14). Prayer, therefore, is the principle activity of the nascent Church through which she receives her unity from the Lord and lets herself be guided by his will, as shown by the decision to cast lots in order to elect the one who would take Judas' place (cf. Acts 1: 26). This community was gathered in the same place, the Upper Room, on the morning of the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, the feast of the Covenant which commemorated the Sinai event, when God, through Moses, proposed that Israel be his own possession among all peoples to be a sign of his holiness (cf. Ex 19). According to the Book of Exodus, that ancient pact was accompanied by a terrifying manifestation of power by the Lord when we read: "Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly" (Ex 19: 18). We find the elements of wind and fire in the Pentecost of the New Testament, but untainted by fear. The fire specifically took the form of tongues of flame which settled on each one of the disciples who "were all filled with the Holy Spirit" and through the effect of this outpouring "began to speak in other tongues" (Acts 2: 4). It was a true and proper "baptism" of fire of the community, a sort of new creation. At Pentecost, the Church was not established by human will but by the power of God's Spirit. And it is immediately clear how this Spirit gives life to a community which is at the same time one and universal, thereby

overcoming the curse of Babel (cf. Gn 11: 7-9). Indeed, it is only the Holy Spirit who creates unity in love and in the reciprocal acceptance of diversity which can free humanity from the constant temptation to acquire earthly power that seeks to dominate and standardize all things. "*Societas Spiritus*", a society of the Spirit, is what St Augustine calls the Church in one of his homilies (71, 19, 32: *PL* 38, 462). However, prior to him St Irenaeus had already formulated a truth which I would like to recall here: "Where the Church is, there also is God's Spirit; where God's Spirit is, there is the Church and every grace; and the Spirit is the truth; to distance oneself from the Church is to reject the Spirit", and thus "exclude oneself from life" (*Adversus Haereses* III, 24, 1). Beginning with the event of Pentecost this union between Christ's Spirit and his Mystical Body, in other words the Church, was fully manifest. I would like to reflect on a particular aspect of the Holy Spirit's action, that is, the manner in which multiplicity and unity are interwoven. The Second Reading speaks of this, addressing the harmony of the different charisms in the communion of the same Spirit. But already in Acts we heard the account of this interweaving which is revealed with extraordinary clarity. In the event of Pentecost it becomes clear that many languages and different cultures are part of the Church; in faith they can be understood and make one another fruitful. St Luke aims unambiguously to convey a fundamental idea, which is, that the very act of the Church's birth is already "catholic" or universal. From the outset the Church speaks in all languages, because the Gospel entrusted to her is destined for all peoples, according to the will and mandate of the Risen Christ (cf. Mt 28: 19). The Church which is born at Pentecost is not primarily a particular Community - the Church of Jerusalem - but the universal Church, which speaks the languages of all peoples. From her other communities were to be born in every part of the world, particular Churches which are all and always actualizations of the one and only Church of Christ. The Catholic Church is therefore not a federation of Churches but a single reality: the universal Church has ontological priority. A community which was not catholic in this sense would not even be a Church. In this regard, it is necessary to add another aspect: that of the theological vision of the Acts of the Apostles concerning the journey to Rome of the Church of Jerusalem. Among the peoples represented in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, Luke also mentions "visitors from Rome" (Acts 2: 10). At that time Rome was still distant, "foreign" to the newborn Church: it was a symbol of the pagan world in general. But the power of the Holy Spirit was to guide the footsteps of the witnesses "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1: 8), even to Rome. The Acts of the Apostles ends precisely when St Paul, through a providential plan, reaches the capital of the Empire and proclaims the Gospel there (cf. Acts 28: 30-31). Thus the journey of the Word of God which began in Jerusalem reached its destination, because Rome represents the entire world and therefore embodies Luke's idea of catholicity. The universal Church is brought into being, the Catholic Church, which is the extension of the Chosen People and makes its history and mission her own. At this point, and to conclude, John's Gospel offers a word that harmonizes very well with the mystery of the Church created by the Spirit. The word that came twice from the lips of the Risen Jesus when he appeared among his disciples in the Upper Room on the evening of Easter Day: *Shalom* - "peace be with you!" (Jn 20: 19, 21). The expression "*shalom*" is not a mere greeting; it is far more: it is the gift of peace promised (cf. Jn 14: 27) and won by Jesus at the price of his blood, it is the fruit of his victory in the battle against the spirit of evil. Thus, it is a peace "not

as the world gives" but as God alone can give it. On this feast of the Spirit and the Church, let us thank God for having given to his people, chosen and formed in the midst of all peoples, the precious good of peace, of *his* peace! At the same time, let us renew the awareness of the responsibility that is connected with this gift: the Church's responsibility to be, constitutionally, a sign and instrument of God's peace for all peoples. [I sought to pass on this message recently by going to the Headquarters of the United Nations Organization in order to address my words to the representatives of the peoples.](#) However, we must not only think of these events "at the summit". The Church carries out her service to Christ's peace above all in the ordinary presence and action among men and women, with the preaching of the Gospel and the signs of love and mercy that accompany it (cf. Mk 16: 20). Of course, among these signs it is mainly the Sacrament of Reconciliation that should be emphasized. The Risen Christ instituted it at the very moment he gave the disciples his peace and his Spirit. As we heard in the Gospel passage, Jesus breathed on the Apostles and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20: 22-23). How important and, unfortunately, insufficiently understood is the gift of Reconciliation which sets hearts at rest! Christ's peace is only spread through the renewed hearts of reconciled men and women who have made themselves servants of justice, ready to spread peace in the world with the force of the truth alone, without descending to compromises with the world's mentality because the world cannot give Christ's peace: this is how the Church can be the leaven of that reconciliation which comes from God. She can only be so if she remains docile to the Spirit and bears witness to the Gospel, only if she carries the Cross like Jesus and with Jesus. The saints of every epoch witness precisely to this! In the light of this word of life, dear brothers and sisters, may the prayer we are raising to God in spiritual union with the Virgin Mary become ever more fervent and intense. May the Virgin of listening, the Mother of the Church, obtain for our communities and for all Christians a renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. "*Emitte Spiritum tuum et creabuntur, et renovabis faciem terrae* - Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be recreated, and you shall renew the face of the earth". Amen.

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