



The Holy See

PAPAL MASS ON THE SOLEMNITY OF PENTECOST

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Vatican Basilica
Sunday, 27 May 2012*

[Video]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am glad to celebrate this Holy Mass with you, enlivened today also by the Choir of the Academy of Santa Cecilia and by the Youth Orchestra — whom I thank — on the Solemnity of Pentecost. This mystery constitutes the Church's baptism. It is an event which gave her, so to speak, her initial form and the drive for her mission. And this "form" and this "drive" are ever effective, ever present, and are renewed in a special way through the liturgical actions.

This morning I would like to reflect on an essential aspect of the Mystery of Pentecost which has preserved its full importance in our time. Pentecost is the feast of union, comprehension and human communion. We can all see that in our world, although we are increasingly close to one another with the development of the means of communication and geographical distances seem to be disappearing, understanding and communion between people is both superficial and problematic.

Imbalances endure that frequently lead to conflict; dialogue between the generations is heavy-going and at times antagonism prevails; we witness daily events in which it seems people are becoming more aggressive and more belligerent; understanding each other seems too demanding so they prefer to remain closed in on themselves, in their own interests. Can we truly find and live in this situation the unity we need?

The narrative of Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles, which we heard in the First Reading (cf. Acts 2:1-11), contains against the background of one of the great frescoes we find at the beginning of the Old Testament: the ancient history of the construction of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9). But what is Babel? It is the description of a kingdom in which men had concentrated so much power that they thought they no longer needed to rely on a distant God and that they were powerful enough to be able to build a way to heaven by themselves in order to open its gates and usurp God's place.

However, at this very moment something strange and unusual happens. While the men are working together to build the tower they suddenly realize that they are building against each other. While endeavouring to be like God, they even risk no longer being human because they have lost a fundamental element of being human: the ability to agree, to understand each other and to work together.

This biblical account contains a perennial truth; we can see it in history and in our world too. The progress of science and technology have enabled us to dominate the forces of nature, to manipulate the elements and to reproduce living beings, almost to the point of manufacturing the very human being. In this situation praying to God seems obsolete or pointless, because we ourselves can construct and achieve whatever we like.

Yet we do not realize that we are reliving the same experience as Babel. It is true, we have increased the possibility of communication, of obtaining information, of transmitting news, but can we say that our ability to understand each other has increased? Or, perhaps, paradoxically, do we understand each other less and less? Doesn't a sense of mutual mistrust, suspicion and fear seem to be creeping in among human beings even to the point of making one individual dangerous to another? Let us therefore return to our initial question: can unity and harmony really exist? How?

We find the answer in Sacred Scripture: unity can only exist as a gift of God's Spirit who will give us a new heart and a new language, a new ability to communicate. And this is what happened at Pentecost. On that morning, 50 days after Easter, a mighty wind blew through Jerusalem and the flame of the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples gathered together. It settled on each one of them and kindled within them the divine fire, a fire of love capable of transforming them. Their fear evaporated, they felt their hearts filled with new strength, their tongues were loosened and they began to speak freely in such a way that everyone could understand the announcement that Jesus Christ had died and was risen. At Pentecost, where there had been division and alienation, unity and understanding were born.

However, let us look at today's Gospel in which Jesus says: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (Jn 16:13). Here, in speaking of the Holy Spirit, Jesus explains to us what the Church is and how she should live in order to be herself, to be the place of unity and

communion in Truth; he tells us that behaving as Christians means no longer being shut into our own “I” but rather being open to all things: it means inwardly welcoming the whole Church within ourselves or, even better, inwardly letting her receive us. Therefore when I speak, think and act as a Christian I do not do so by closing myself into myself, but I always do so in all things and starting with all things: thus the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of unity and of truth, may continue to resonate in our human hearts and minds and spur people to meet and to welcome each other.

Precisely because the Spirit acts in this way, he ushers us into the whole truth, which is Jesus, and guides us to look at it more deeply and to understand it. We do not grow in knowledge by locking ourselves into own ego but only in an attitude of profound inner humility do we become capable of listening and sharing in the “we” of the Church. And in this way it becomes clearer why Babel is Babel and Pentecost is Pentecost. Wherever people want to set themselves up as God they cannot but set themselves against each other. Instead, wherever they place themselves in the Lord’s truth they are open to the action of his Spirit who sustains and unites them.

The comparison of Babel with Pentecost is re-echoed once again in the Second Reading where the Apostle says: “Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16). St Paul explains to us that our personal life is marked by an inner conflict, a rupture between the impulses that come from the flesh and those that come from the Spirit; and we cannot follow them all. Indeed, we cannot be both selfish and generous, follow the tendency to dominate others and at the same time feel the joy of disinterested service. We always have to choose which impulse to follow and we can do so authentically only with the help of the Spirit of Christ.

St Paul — as we have heard — lists the works of the flesh. They are the sins of selfishness and violence, enmity, discord, jealousy and disagreement; they are thoughts and actions that do not let us live in a truly human and Christian way, in love. This direction leads to the loss of one’s own life. The Holy Spirit on the contrary leads us to the heights of God, so that we may already experience on this earth the seed of divine life which exists within us. St Paul says in fact: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...” (Gal 5:22).

And let us note that the Apostle uses the plural to describe the works of the flesh that cause us to lose our humanity, whereas he uses the singular to define the Spirit’s action, he speaks of “fruit”, just as the scattering abroad at Babel is contrasted with the unity of Pentecost.

Dear friends, we must live in accordance with the Spirit of unity and truth and this is why we should pray that the Spirit illuminate and guide us so that we may overcome our fascination with following our own truths and receive the truth of Christ, passed on in the Church. Luke’s account of Pentecost tells us that before ascending into heaven Jesus asked the Apostles to stay together to prepare themselves to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And they assembled in prayer with Mary in the Upper Room to await the promised event (cf. Acts 1:14). Gathered with Mary, as at her birth, today too the Church prays: “*Veni Sancte Spiritus!* — Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your

faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love!". Amen.

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