



Sixth Sunday of Easter C May 26, 2019

- ◆ **A Spirit who blows where he wills**
- ◆ **The Council of Jerusalem**
- ◆ **Novena to the Holy Spirit**

I wrote the following column for the Sixth Sunday of Easter 2001, a few months before I came to this parish.

In today's Gospel, Jesus begins to prepare his Apostles for his departure. It must have been a sad time. None of us like departures and separations from people we have come to know and love. So Jesus' talk about going away must have been emotionally very painful for his friends. They may have wondered: What are we going to do? How can we go on without him? Where is he going? Who is this Spirit that he speaks about imparting to us? These and other questions must have flooded their minds.

At Pentecost, Jesus fulfills his promise. The Holy Spirit comes upon the Apostles and bestows upon them all that they need to continue the work of Jesus.

It is easy for us to forget that the first followers of Jesus didn't have a Pope or College of Bishops as we know them today, to guide them. The *New Testament* is not yet written. They have no *Code of Canon Law* or *Catechism* to guide them. Their only guide is the *Holy Spirit* who will help them to remember the teachings of Jesus. The Holy Spirit will instruct them, guide them, comfort them, strengthen them, and give them courage to face rejection and persecution.

The Holy Spirit will help them to deal with conflict and division. We see this happening in today's first reading. Act 15 is about the first Church Council - the *Council of Jerusalem*. It is convened to deal with the "Gentile Question." Large numbers of Gentiles are converting to Christianity. This is most pleasing to Paul and Barnabas, but not at all pleasing to conservative Jews who have also embraced the New Way of Jesus. They believe that Gentile converts should also be circumcised and adhere to Jewish dietary regulations. Both sides gather in Jerusalem to discuss and debate this issue.

After much heated discussion, a compromise solution is reached. New Gentile converts need not be circumcised but, out of sensitivity to their Jewish brothers and sisters, have to adhere to some of their dietary regulations. For example, they have to refrain from eating meat that have been offered in sacrifice to idols. Notice that in the letter drawn up to be sent out to the other Christian communities, we find these words: "*It is the decision of the Holy Spirit....*" The first leaders of our church have a deep sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit. For Jewish Christians to accept the Gentiles as brothers and sisters would have been a huge step. It would have been like the Holy Spirit telling white Americans 100 years ago to invite African Americans to dine with them. It is just unthinkable.

Before Jesus leaves the earth, he promises to be with his Church for all time. He is with us through the Holy Spirit who is the *invisible* presence of Jesus in our midst. He is God's greatest gift to our Church and to us individually. This Holy Spirit was with Pope John XXIII when he convened Vatican Council II, which brought about immense changes in our Church. Just as the two sides heatedly debated the "Gentile Question," so did the bishops and Cardinals at Vatican II heatedly debate many pastoral issues. In the end, documents were drawn up which would dramatically change the way we celebrated the sacraments, the way we looked upon lay involvement in the Church, the way we related to other Christian churches and non-Christian religions, and the way we related to the world.

The Spirit is not confined to the Catholic Church or even to the Christian church. John 3:8 tells us: "*The Spirit blows where he wills,*" which means that the Holy Spirit is pleased to act wherever and in whomever he wills. Long before the Christian church accepted that black Christians were just as important as white Christians, the Spirit was communicating that message to people outside the church. In a similar way, long before the Christian church embraced the truth that women had a right to vote, the Spirit was communicating this truth to women outside the church. Long before the church

wrote documents on the environment and our moral responsibility to care for Mother Earth, environmentalists outside the church were seeking to sensitize us to environmental issues.

Isn't it ironic that people outside the walls of the institutional church heard the Spirit speak about a woman's right to vote, the dignity of Black Americans, and our need to respect the Earth, long before we in the church heard the Spirit speak on these issues. This fact should keep us humble and open to what the Spirit may be saying to us today through our so-called "secular" brothers and sisters. It is a reminder to us that the Holy Spirit is much larger than any one church or religion. The above issues show that the church in every generation is in constant need of conversion and reform. We should often pray for Mother Church—that she will hear and respond to what the Holy Spirit is saying to her in our time.

One wonders what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church these days. One might wonder what our Church *is not* hearing today. For example, what might the Holy Spirit be saying to the Church during this time of crisis in vocation to the priesthood and religious life? What might the Holy Spirit be saying to our Church about good Catholics who are divorced and remarried outside the Church? Should our official Church continue to tell such people—many of whom are very dedicated to our Church—that they cannot receive Holy Communion? One wonders.

The Spirit exists and moves not only "out there" but also "in here"—in each of us. The Spirit is our Divine Guide, Divine Strength, Divine Helper, Divine Comforter, Divine Advocate, the One who gives us Divine Peace and Joy. Yet one wonders how many of us are really tuned in to the Spirit. How many of us have developed inner ears to hear and discern the Spirit's call to us?

Much could be said about how we can develop spiritual inner ears. The key is *wanting*. When it comes to achieving anything worthwhile, much depends on motivation. How badly do we want it? Saints are saints by the grace of God, but they are saints also because they were very single-minded in their seeking for God and his ways. While they loved people and things as part of God's creation, they were also sufficiently detached from them that their dedication to God was never threatened by their love for people and the things of this world. As we grow in our desire to seek God in all things, so will we grow in our ability to hear and discern the Spirit's promptings.

Most, if not all of us, have a desire—maybe even a strong desire—to seek and follow God's ways. But we also have

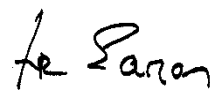
lots of *other* desires. And there's the rub in a nutshell. Having other desires is of course *not* bad. The problem arises when we become *overly attached* to our desires. Some desires can become idols. This happens when we allow our love for people and things to become more important than our love for God. Our *inordinate attachment* to people and things can easily hinder us from hearing what the Spirit may be saying to us. For example, I have a strong attachment to this parish. To the extent that this attachment is excessive, I may not be able to hear the Spirit calling me to serve God somewhere else. A spouse in an unhappy marriage may have a strong desire to do what he/she wants rather than to honestly and courageously seek to discern what the Holy Spirit wants. This is *not* to say that spouses should always stay married, especially if it is an abusive situation. Then again, our very strong desire and need for financial security could easily block us from hearing the Spirit calling us to be more generous with our finances.

As I have said, the Holy Spirit *is* God's greatest gift to our Church, to our world and to each of us personally. He seeks to protect us from false and evil ways. He seeks to lead us into the truth, to lead us down the path God has created for us to walk. Our challenge is to grow in our desire to hear and follow the Spirit. We should often pray for this grace. As we go about our everyday responsibilities, we should constantly seek the guidance, protection, comfort and strength of the Spirit. The more we try to be tuned in to the promptings of the Spirit, the more we will recognize his leadings and act on them. The holy person—the Spirit-filled person—is the one who hears the Spirit's promptings and acts on them.

Today's bulletin contains a Novena to the Holy Spirit which you can pray in preparation for the Feast of Pentecost (two weeks from today). The Novena should be started this Friday, nine days prior to Pentecost.

Each year at this time, people begin to ask about the summer. I leave for Uganda June 23 together with 8 other parishioners. I fly to Ireland July 1 and will be back at the end of July. Father Charles arrives June 21.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

NOVENA TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

In preparation for the Feast of Pentecost

Before Jesus' Ascension into Heaven, he tells his disciples to return to Jerusalem and to wait in prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit (See Acts 1:4-5). For the next nine days, the disciples, along with Mary and some other women, "devoted themselves to constant prayer" (Acts 1:14). This time of prayer is often called the first novena (meaning *nine*). A novena is a nine-day period of prayer for a particular intention.

Beginning Friday (nine days prior to Pentecost), you are invited to pray the following Novena to the Holy Spirit for any particular intention. You are encouraged to also pray for our Church family—that we will have a greater sense of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The Holy Spirit is God's greatest gift to us. For the next nine days, make a particular effort to be attentive to the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in your daily life and to respond to his promptings.

NOVENA OUTLINE

Opening Prayer

*Come, Holy Spirit,
fill the hearts of your faithful,
enkindle in us the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit
and we shall be created
and you shall renew the face of the earth.*

Meditate on Scripture assigned for each day (see next page).

Pray one decade of the Rosary asking Mary to help you to become more attentive and responsive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Closing Prayer

*Father of Light,
from whom every good gift comes,
send your Spirit into our lives
with the power of a mighty wind...
and by the flame of your wisdom,
open the horizons of our minds.
Loosen our tongues to sing your praise
in words beyond the power of speech,
for without your Spirit
we could never raise our voices in words of peace
or announce the truth that Jesus is Lord!
Amen.*

Scriptures for the Nine Days

Day 1

Luke 1:35 Mary conceives Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Luke 3:21-22 Jesus is baptized with the Holy Spirit.

“Jesus, baptize me anew with your Holy Spirit.”

Day 2

John 7:37-39 Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit.

“Come, Holy Spirit, possess my whole being.”

Day 3

Acts 2:1-12 The promised Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples.

“Holy Spirit, awaken in me the fire of your love.”

Day 4

Acts 4: 32-37 Led by the Holy Spirit, the first followers of Christ join together in a small Christian community to share life and God’s deeds in their midst.

“Holy Spirit, may our Small Christian Community grow in love for you.”

Day 5

Acts 10:44-48 The Holy Spirit is poured out on the Gentiles.

“Holy Spirit, help me to be open to your workings in the most surprising places and ways.”

Day 6

Acts 13:1-12 Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas are discerned to go on their first missionary journey.

“Holy Spirit, help me to hear your voice when you call out to me.”

Day 7

Rom 8:26-27 The Holy Spirit helps us in our prayer.

“Holy Spirit, teach me to pray.”

Day 8

1Cor 3:10-16 The Holy Spirit helps us to understand the deep things of God.

“Holy Spirit, show me God’s path for my life.”

Day 9

Gal 5:16-26 Paul names some of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. We are holy and Spirit-filled to the extent that the fruits of the Holy Spirit are operative in our lives.

“Holy Spirit, help me to grow in love, peace, joy.”