

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
Pentecost, Confirmation, and The New Evangelization

I have a Christian friend from Nigeria who once traveled to a land far from his home. He asked those who sent him, "Are there any Christians in that place?" "No," they said, "there are none." "Good," he replied, "I will make some!" He did, too. He was one of the best evangelists I ever knew. His method? He simply spoke with courage and joy about his experience of Jesus Christ.

This week we celebrated the feast of Pentecost, a feast deeply relevant to the missionary witness of the faithful. The promise of Pentecost is that God will pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, enabling a joyful and bold proclamation that Jesus is our Savior. Like my friend, each of us can share simply about the great things God has done for us in Christ. Those who have received the Sacrament of Confirmation have received an extra promise that God will be with us as we share our faith.

The readings for Pentecost Sunday recall the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the infant Church when the believers "were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues." This unfolds in the second chapter of the Book of Acts, but throughout the book we find many more examples of the Spirit's empowering presence. The Holy Spirit works many graces in our lives, but the focus of Acts and Pentecost is the Spirit's power to bring witness, praise, and testimony to the saving acts of God. At each point in the narrative when St. Luke mentions the Spirit's work, he points us to some dramatic moment of Spirit-led speech. He mentions not only "speaking in tongues," but also prophecy and bold testimony. For example:

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses." (Acts 1:8)

"I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." (Acts 2:17, quoting the Prophet Joel)

"They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness." (Acts 4:30)

This is important to understand when we consider the apostles' insistence that new believers receive the Holy Spirit in Confirmation. (Acts 8:14-15) This "coming of the Spirit" in Confirmation is aimed particularly at empowerment for ministry and witness. The Second Vatican Council reaffirmed this biblical understanding of Confirmation:

[The faithful] are more perfectly bound to the Church by the sacrament of Confirmation, and the Holy Spirit endows them with special strength so that they are more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith, both by word and by deed, as true witnesses of Christ.
(*Lumen Gentium* 11)

The missionary witness of the faithful was a major theme of the Council, and has been reemphasized many times by the Popes since then. Bl. Pope John Paul II, for example, called for "a renewed appreciation of the presence and activity of the Spirit" since the Spirit "is the

principal agent of the new evangelization." The Pope taught that the Spirit acts in the Church "especially in Confirmation. (Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*)

Pope Francis spoke recently about the same thing:

The Holy Spirit draws us into the mystery of the living God . . . he impels us to open the doors and go forth to proclaim and bear witness to the good news of the Gospel, to communicate the joy of faith, the encounter with Christ. The Holy Spirit is the soul of *mission*. (Homily 19 May, 2013)

We reflect this week on the mystery of the Spirit's presence, and especially his gift of mission. Pentecost teaches us that one does not have to be a profound theologian to share the faith. One needs only to live in unity with the Church, and joyfully by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Sacrament of Confirmation promises that we have received this Spirit. To believe this and to act on it is the principal source for the New Evangelization.