

# **"The Church is always the youthful bride"**

In his homily on Pentecost, Pope Francis said: "the Church is always the youthful bride with whom the Lord is madly in love. Let us never tire of welcoming the Spirit into our lives, of invoking him before everything we do."

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In the first reading of today's Liturgy, the coming of the Holy Spirit at

Pentecost is compared to “the rush of a violent wind” (Acts 2:2). What does this image tell us? It makes us think of a powerful force that is not an end in itself, but effects change. Wind in fact brings change: warmth when it is cold, cool when it is hot, rain when the land is parched... this is way it brings change. The Holy Spirit, on a very different level, does the same. He is *the divine force that changes the world*. The Sequence reminded us of this: the Spirit is “in toil, comfort sweet; solace in the midst of woe.” And so we beseech him: “Heal our wounds, our strength renew; on our dryness pour your dew; wash the stains of guilt away.” The Spirit enters into situations and transforms them. He changes *hearts* and he changes *situations*.

*The Holy Spirit changes hearts.* Jesus had told his disciples: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be

my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). That is exactly what happened. Those disciples, at first fearful, huddled behind closed doors even after the Master’s resurrection, are transformed by the Spirit and, as Jesus says in today’s Gospel, “they bear witness to him” (cf. *Jn* 15:27). No longer hesitant, they are courageous and starting from Jerusalem, they go forth to the ends of the earth. Timid while Jesus was still among them, they are bold when he is gone, because the Spirit changed their hearts.

The Spirit frees hearts chained by fear. He overcomes all resistance. To those content with half measures he inspires whole-hearted generosity. He opens hearts that are closed. He impels the comfortable to go out and serve. He drives the self-satisfied to set out in new directions. He makes the lukewarm thrill to new dreams. That is what it means to change

hearts. Plenty of people promise change, new beginnings, prodigious renewals, but experience teaches us that no earthly attempt to change reality can ever completely satisfy the human heart. Yet the change that the Spirit brings is different. It does not revolutionize life around us, but changes our hearts. It does not free us from the weight of our problems, but liberates us *within* so that we can face them. It does not give us everything at once, but makes us press on confidently, never growing weary of life. The Spirit keeps our hearts young – a renewed youth. Youth, for all our attempts to prolong it, sooner or later fades away; the Spirit, instead, prevents the only kind of aging that is unhealthy: namely, growing old within. How does he do this? By renewing our hearts, by pardoning sinners. Here is the great change: from guilty he makes us righteous and thus changes everything. From slaves of sin we

become free, from servants we become beloved children, from worthless worthy, from disillusioned filled with hope. By the working of the Holy Spirit, joy is reborn and peace blossoms in our hearts.

Today, then, let us learn what to do when we are in need of real change. And who among us does not need a change? Particularly when we are downcast, wearied by life's burdens, oppressed by our own weakness, at those times when it is hard to keep going and loving seems impossible. In those moments, we need a powerful "jolt": the Holy Spirit, the power of God. In the Creed we profess that he is the "giver of life". How good it would be for us each day to feel this jolt of life! To say when we wake up each morning: "Come, Holy Spirit, come into my heart, come into my day".

The Spirit does not only change hearts; he *changes situations*. Like the wind that blows everywhere, he penetrates to the most unimaginable situations. In the Acts of the Apostles – a book we need to pick up and read, whose main character is the Holy Spirit – we are caught up in an amazing series of events. When the disciples least expect it, the Holy Spirit sends them out to the pagans. He opens up new paths, as in the episode of the deacon Philip. The Spirit drives Philip to a desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza... (How heartrending that name sounds to us today! May the Spirit change hearts and situations and bring peace to the Holy Land!) Along the way, Philip preaches to an Ethiopian court official and baptizes him. Then the Spirit brings him to Azotus, and then on to Caesarea, in constantly new situations, to spread the newness of God. Then too, there is Paul, “compelled by the Spirit” (Acts

20:22), who travels far and wide, bringing the Gospel to peoples he had never seen. Where the Spirit is, something is always happening; where he blows, things are never calm.

When, in the life of our communities, we experience a certain “listlessness,” when we prefer peace and quiet to the newness of God, it is a bad sign. It means that we are trying to find shelter from the wind of the Spirit. When we live for self-preservation and keep close to home, it is not a good sign. The Spirit blows, but we lower our sails. And yet, how often have we seen him work wonders! Frequently, even in the bleakest of times, the Spirit has raised up the most outstanding holiness! Because he is the soul of the Church, who constantly enlivens her with renewed hope, fills her with joy, makes her fruitful, and causes new life to blossom. In a family, when a

new baby is born, it upsets our schedules, it makes us lose sleep, but it also brings us a joy that renews our lives, driving us on, expanding us in love. So it is with the Spirit: he brings a “taste of childhood” to the Church. Time and time again he gives new birth. He revives our first love. The Spirit reminds the Church that, for all her centuries of history, she is always the youthful bride with whom the Lord is madly in love. Let us never tire of welcoming the Spirit into our lives, of invoking him before everything we do: “Come, Holy Spirit!”

He will bring his power of change, a unique power that is, so to say, both *centripetal and centrifugal*. It is centripetal, that is, it seeks the centre, because it works deep within our hearts. It brings unity amid division, peace amid affliction, strength amid temptations. Paul reminds us of this in the second



reading, when he writes that the fruits of the Spirit are joy, peace, faithfulness and self-control (cf. *Gal* 5:22). The Spirit grants intimacy with God, the inner strength to keep going. Yet, at the same time, he is a centrifugal force, that is, one pushing outward. The one who centres us is also the one who drives us to the peripheries, to every human periphery. The one who reveals God also opens our hearts to our brothers and sisters. He sends us, he makes us witnesses, and so he pours out on us – again in the words of Paul – love, kindness, generosity and gentleness. Only in the Consoler Spirit do we speak words of life and truly encourage others. Those who live by the Spirit live in this constant spiritual tension: they find themselves pulled both *towards God and towards the world*.

Let us ask him to make us live in exactly that way. Holy Spirit, violent

wind of God, blow upon us, blow into our hearts and make us breathe forth the tenderness of the Father! Blow upon the Church and impel her to the ends of the earth, so that, brought by you, she may bring nothing other than you. Blow upon our world the soothing warmth of peace and the refreshing cool of hope. Come Holy Spirit, change us within and renew the face of the earth. Amen.

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