

SOLEMNITY OF PENTECOST “B”

MAY 23/24, 2015

A woman who grew up in a town in which there was both a Latin Rite Catholic Church (our rite) and an Eastern Catholic Church whose liturgy was chanted in Slavonic told the following true story.

In order to augment the choir of the Eastern Church for the celebration of Pentecost the woman as a girl was recruited with several others to join parish’s choir for the feast. During the Mass the priest during one of the many litanies that are part of the Eastern liturgical rites would chant: “*Come, Holy Spirit!*” and from the balcony, by local parish tradition, a white dove would be released over the assembly. On this particular Pentecost an older man was given the job of releasing the dove. He carefully cradled the dove close to his breast beneath his heavy overcoat. The priest sang in Slavonic calling out: “*Come, Holy Spirit!*”. Nothing happened. Again, he chanted: “*Come, Holy Spirit!*” No response. A third time the priest cried out with great urgency: “*Come, Holy Spirit!*” Not wanting the dove to fly away before it’s appointed time, the old man had held the dove so close in his coat that when he opened it to release it at the priest’s invitation, he found to his horror that the dove had been deprived of oxygen and died! And so from the balcony the older man chanted a reply in Slavonic: “*The Holy Spirit smothered himself!*”

This story, funny as it is, does offer some points of reflection as we celebrate Pentecost today.

First, culturally, and through certain government policies, or proposed policies, the right of believers to bring faith into the public square and express it in the conversation of the forming of governmental policy, especially in areas directly affecting human and family life, are increasingly under attack. For popular culture, religious freedom is the right to worship and pray in church, but once we leave here, faith and moral convictions are to be left here as well. Like our ancestors in faith of earlier ages, we must continue to advocate and fight against all attempts to smother the voice and action of the Holy Spirit both as faithful members of the Church and as faithful citizens. Jesus himself has told us: “You are my witnesses.” (Mt. 28:16 ff)

Secondly, as members of the church, we need to guard ourselves against smothering the Holy Spirit by clinging too tightly to a personal theology and vision of the church, “lining-up” behind a particular bishop, author, or a group’s understanding and practice of a “vision” of the church, it’s liturgy, it’s laws, it’s devotional practices, while holding others who do not subscribe totally or in part to these views and faith practice, to the charge of being “unorthodox”.

We proclaim ourselves the “Catholic” Church. Church history reveals that it is one that, while agreeing on its central doctrines, has embraced a variety of theological approaches to understanding and explaining the truths of faith, promoting a variety of officially recognized liturgical forms, and encouraging a multiplicity of devotional practices. We all need to pray for the grace of humility as together under the leadership of the pope and bishops we journey on our pilgrimage of faith, encouraging and celebrating the many ways the Holy Spirit moves among us.

Thirdly, in our personal lives we need to guard against smothering the Holy Spirit by succumbing to the temptation to hide our faith out of fear or embarrassment or some other reason. Jesus in today’s Gospel tells us that the Holy Spirit is given to us for the purpose of equipping us to testify to him. Testifying to Jesus is not just about verbally sharing our faith with others, though very important. We testify to Jesus when (and perhaps best) when we choose to daily live out the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our interactions with others: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22). The Acts of the Apostles in recounting the encounter between the early followers of Jesus and the local citizenry of Antioch reports that through these daily encounters between believers and unbelievers that it was in Antioch that “the disciples were first called Christians” (AA 11:26). Hopefully, our fellow citizens in Ames say the same of us: “They are Christians. See how they love one another and all of us. I/We have experienced Jesus in him/her/them.”

Today’s traditional telling of the Pentecost story from the book of Acts tells us those gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem upon receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit immediately set forth to give testimony to Jesus. The Spirit was not smothered but released alive by and in them. May it be so for us.