

**Solemnity of Pentecost – Cycle B**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – May 20, 2018**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor**

If you ask any Catholic to tell you about the first Pentecost, you will – I suspect – get some version of the account we just heard from the Acts of the Apostles – the story of wind and flame and the spirit descending upon the Apostles. And in completely Christian terms, that is appropriate. We celebrate Pentecost as the great fiftieth day of the Easter season, the birthday of the Church – the great festival of the Holy Spirit. But, in actuality, the feast of Pentecost was celebrated long before that momentous morning in the Upper Room. Pentecost was originally a Jewish festival – one that came fifty days after Passover. It is also called *Shavuot* or the Festival of Weeks and was originally an agricultural festival. On *Shavuot* or Pentecost, Jews rejoiced and gave thanks for the first fruits of the grain harvest. The entire crop would take some weeks longer to mature and to harvest, but by fifty days the first fruits should be ready. And it was these first fruits – not whatever was left over after the best was all taken – but these first fruits that were offered to God. At Passover, the Israelites had eaten hurriedly with unleavened bread, eaten, as the Book of Exodus says, as those who were in flight – preparing for their escape from the grasp of Pharaoh. By Pentecost, they were no longer in a hurry. They were ready to celebrate their covenant with God – a covenant that was sealed with the law given on Sinai, a covenant that brought them to the promised land and had given them – if not milk and honey – then, at least, an abundant harvest. Passover was the festival of deliverance, but Pentecost was the festival of security and of belonging.

It is appropriate, therefore, that God poured out his Spirit on Pentecost, on that festival that brings the Exodus event, the Passover to its conclusion. For Christians, the gift of the Spirit marks the culmination of the Paschal Mystery. The story of love that began with the Incarnation, and which reached its climax in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, comes to its joyous and energetic fulfillment at Pentecost. Yes, Pentecost marks the end of the Paschal Mystery, but every ending is also a beginning. For Israel, Pentecost represented the beginning of their covenant relationship with God in the Land of Promise. From that point forward, the destiny of the Jewish people would forever be associated with the land given to them by God on the east bank of the Jordan. For the Church, Pentecost represents the transition from an understanding of Jesus Christ as one who walks among us to an understanding of ourselves as his Mystical Body – as his continued presence on earth. The Holy Spirit of God, the same Spirit by whom the earthly body of Jesus was conceived of the Virgin Mary, also conceived the Church, his mystical body on that Pentecost morning. The same Spirit of Love who connected Jesus to the Father throughout his life on earth now connects us as well – connects us to one another in heaven and on earth, connects us to Jesus and connects us to the Father.

The love and mercy of God, the Spirit of God first poured out upon the Apostles in the Upper Room is continually poured out upon the Church, upon us.

The principal means by which the Spirit of Love is present and active in the Church is through the sacraments given to us by Christ himself. The Spirit is poured out upon us in Baptism and Confirmation, comes to us as the healing and merciful presence of God in reconciliation and anointing of the sick, and strengthens us for our vocations in the sacraments of marriage and holy orders. But most importantly, the Spirit of God transforms for us ordinary bread and ordinary wine into the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. We are able to celebrate the Eucharist by the power of the Holy Spirit. The gifts we offer to God at each Mass echo the ancient celebration of Pentecost – we offer our own first fruits – the finest of wheat, the fruit of the vine. And were it not for the Spirit, our first fruits would remain just that – agricultural offerings made into bread and wine. But remember that at every Mass, the priest calls down the Spirit upon bread and wine by placing his hands over the gifts. Through this *epiclesis*, through this invocation of the Spirit, our first fruits become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep – the only begotten Son of God. The Spirit of the Living God not only brought to fulfillment the Paschal Mystery that Pentecost morning in the Upper Room, he brings to fulfillment the ancient festival of Pentecost, of *Shavuot*, the ancient festival of first fruits in each and every celebration of the Eucharist.

Yes, at every Mass, the Spirit transforms our First Fruits not to provide us with something to do on Sunday, but for a larger purpose. We are called to approach the altar of God not as spectators, but as those who are fed, as those who become what we receive. We are invited to share in the Body of Christ in order to become the Body of Christ. The process of becoming, the process of change is not always easy. Sometimes, I suspect, we feel far from God's love, from God's Spirit. We may feel abandoned by God, though, of course, it is more likely that we have abandoned God or at least crowded him out of our lives by our focus on the world. In those moments, we are invited to follow the examples of the Apostles, to quiet ourselves and to wait and pray in our own Upper Room for our own encounter with God's Spirit. Yes, sometimes we feel distant from God, but sometimes we feel as though we are being swept along by the power of God's love, as though the fire of God's spirit is burning away the sinfulness within us. That is the true Pentecost experience. That is God's Spirit vibrant, alive, active within us. God loved us enough to give us his only Son. He continues to love us through his Spirit of Truth which unites us to him, conforms us to him, transforms us into his Mystical Body. Come, O Holy Spirit, come!