

Pentecost 2023

When I was a younger man—beginning in my mid-teens really—I began searching. In hindsight, I could see that what I was looking for—without fully realising it—was the ideal community. This search was perhaps partly driven by the breakdown of my immediate family and my drift from the Church, but I had a deep longing to find something greater than myself that I could commit my life to – to be part of a great story, to contribute to something that would live on once I was gone.

And so I tried out different groups. I experimented with different spiritualities. I even lived in a couple of small intentional communities – but in all of this I could not find a group or a community that I was prepared to give my life to.

Every community I looked at seemed flawed. They were either too superficial, or too provincial, or too susceptible to each new ideological fashion. I was looking for something more, and until I found it my life was in a perpetual kind of limbo. I studied some, I worked different jobs, I made assorted friends, but it all felt like some kind of preparation before I would enter into the real work—the real adventure—of my life.

Little did I know that, when I eventually found what I was looking for, I found it in the very place that I had drifted away from: the Church. The corrupt, hypocritical, annoying, mysterious, wonderful Church. Trust me, I was as surprised as anyone! That which once frustrated me so much, I had now come to love like it was my own.

Despite all of my resistance, the Church had somehow become my people, my family. To my everlasting surprise, I found in the Church the space to pursue my deepest ideals, those things that in my heart of hearts I'd always wanted for my life – because—despite all her human messiness—the Church is fundamentally built on Christ, and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

In the Church I found companions who share my love of God—in fact often putting mine to shame—and who support me when the world or my own weaknesses make it hard to live out my deepest ideals. To be sure, the human messiness was still there, but it had increasingly become a consolation. After all, the older I get, the more I am aware of my own failings, my own weaknesses. As such, it became a comfort for me that the Church is, as some have called it, “a hospital for sinners,” as well as being a breeding ground for saints.

So it was in the Church—of all places—that I had found my family. It was in the Church that I had found my home.

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And today is a powerful day for the Church. It's the end of the great fifty days of Easter, the day the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles, the day that we celebrate our collective birthday.

Our tradition speaks of several different "beginnings" for the Church—from the initial gathering together of the Apostles, to the blood and water flowing from Christ's side on the cross—but Pentecost is the one that I think best symbolises the Church coming into her own.

The first followers of Jesus had their three years of preparation; they endured the incomprehensible sorrow of Christ's Passion and Death; they rejoiced in his Resurrection; and they looked skywards as he ascended to the Father, taking our human nature with him. They were now ripe for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who descended upon them "like tongues of fire."

Before Easter and Pentecost, the Apostles consistently missed the point, and they all ran for cover once Jesus was arrested. Afterwards, they were changed men. Filled with the joy and otherworldly hope of the Resurrection, and guided by the Spirit, the Apostles would now go out *bursting at the seams* with courage and the fire of God's love, serving as his instruments for the transformation of the world.

This is not just something that happened 2,000 years ago. Christ sends his Spirit ever anew, to build up the Church, and to renew the face of the earth. The Holy Spirit descends anew whenever we celebrate the sacraments, including our Mass today. This is not simply a story from the past. This is *our* story; this is *your* story.

Yes, the world will always struggle to make sense of the Church, because the Church can never fully conform to the spirit of the world.

When the world seeks self-aggrandisement, the Church at her best seeks self-donation.

When the world seeks prestige, we seek humility.

When the world tries to impress others, we seek to be pleasing to God.

When the world goes chasing after possessions, we seek simplicity.

When the world promotes sexual promiscuity, we promote chaste fidelity.

When the world wants to get ahead of others, we seek to *serve* others.

When the world exalts the rich, we have a preference for the poor.

We follow a Master who said it is better to give than receive; a leader who proclaimed that the first will be last, and the last will be first; a Lord who gave up his life for our salvation.

Yes, we may regularly fall short of our ideals, sometimes in very public and humbling ways. And yes, we may regularly face setbacks and opposition. Our adventure in discipleship may seem daunting at times, but do not be afraid – Christ has overcome the world, and he has ensured that *we are never alone*.

Firstly, we have each other – a family of over one billion who seek and struggle to follow Christ, and who together feed, clothe, shelter and educate more people than any other organisation in the world.

Secondly, we have the communion of the saints, who have blazed a trail before us and who intercede for us still from heaven. And we are called to imitate the saints, and to *be* saints – to live lives of evident sanctity and joy that by their very existence are the most convincing witnesses to the love of God and the value of the Church.

Thirdly—and most importantly—we have the Holy Spirit, whose descent upon the Church we celebrate today. Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as the “Paraclete”, which essentially means a defence lawyer – one who would take your side in the face of the accusations of others. In other words, in the Holy Spirit, we are assured that God is explicitly on our side. Indeed, God is more on our side than we are on our own side. And as St Paul wrote to the Church in Rome, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

So my friends, you need never be embarrassed of your Church. For all the human mess, it remains that she is founded by Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit. The Christian faith truly is, as it has always been, the great hope for the world, and we—the Church—are its herald.

Today we celebrate our birthday – and we call again on Christ to send down his Spirit, so as to fill us with his grace, and to renew the face of the earth.