
Pastoral Letter

July 3, 2019
Feast of St. Thomas, Apostle

Dear Faithful,

This pastoral letter is in preparation for the upcoming Parish Council Meeting to be held this Tuesday, July 9, at 6:30 pm in the parish center. Anyone who is interested is invited to attend.

At our recent Minister's Retreat, I shared a pastoral vision for the parish based on the account of *Pentecost Day* as presented in the Bible's Book of Acts. On that day in which the Holy Spirit descended as tongues of fire on one hundred and twenty disciples, Luke marvelously depicts the beginning of the Church Age. The following is an itemized summary of the events leading up to and including that day. All verses from Sacred Scripture will be in italicized text.

1. Forty days after the resurrection of the Lord is Ascension Thursday, the day Jesus ascends to the right hand of God. On that day Jesus enjoined his chosen witnesses — *not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for "the promise of the Father about which you heard Me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."* Acts 1:4-5 Jesus went on to say — *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* Acts 1:8
2. The disciples heeded the Lord's command to wait — *When they entered the city they went to the upper room where they were staying . . . All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus . . ."* Acts 1:13-14.
3. Ten days later, after praying with Mary the mother of Jesus, the words Jesus had last spoken to them concerning the Holy Spirit were fulfilled — *they were all together in one place (upper room). And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim."* Acts 2:1-4 On this day the Church was empowered by the Spirit to bear witness to Jesus. This Pentecost Day marks the beginning of the Church Age, the Age of the Spirit.
4. Luke says that on that day Jews from many nations were staying in Jerusalem — *Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem.* Acts 2:5 The apostle Peter, who is now filled with the Holy Spirit, is going address these devout Jews — *Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them . . . "Let this be known to you and listen to my words."* Acts 2:14 Peter will then proceed to proclaim his very first homily / sermon after being filled with the Holy Spirit.
5. Peter will first tell them about the promise of the Father by quoting Scripture — *"It will come to pass in the last days," God says, "that I will pour out a portion of my Spirit upon all flesh."* Acts 2:17 Next he will tell them about Jesus the Nazorean and conclude by saying — *"that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."* Acts 2:36 Upon hearing this message from Peter, the Jews will then be — *cut to the heart.* They will be moved to ask Peter and the other apostles — *"What are we to do, my brothers?"* Peter will say to them — *"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* Acts 2:38 Luke ends this portion of Peter's speech by saying — *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.* Acts 2:41
6. Luke then describes the life that these three thousand newly baptized and Spirit-filled people were inspired to live. *They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.* Acts 2:42
7. Luke then concludes this portion of Pentecost Day with these words — *And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.* Acts 2:27

In this brief synopsis about the beginning of the Spirit-filled Church as recounted by Luke, I believe it is perfectly suited to serve as a prototype — a blueprint if you will — of parish life and activity. In this pastoral letter, I will focus in on number six — the life that the newly baptized and spirit-filled people were inspired to live with the idea that it is the same life that we, as a parish, are called to embrace and live.

The Teaching of the Apostles

Luke says that they *devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles*. In the prologue to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, it says: "Those who with God's help have welcomed Christ's call and freely responded to it are urged on by the love of Christ to proclaim the Good News everywhere in the world. This treasure, received from the apostles, has been faithfully guarded by their successors. All Christ's faithful are called to hand it on from generation to generation, by professing the faith, by living it in fraternal sharing, and by celebrating it in liturgy and prayer." The parish (those who have welcomed Christ's call and freely responded to it, just as in the Book of Acts) is called to devote itself to the teaching of the apostles by proclaiming the Good News everywhere. This is what is expected from those who have received this "treasure" from the apostles. We are also called to hand it on from generation to generation. This includes what the diocese calls "life-long faith formation." In short, a parish is bound to learn and study the faith and to pass it along as best it can. Any thing to do with religious education, evangelization, bible studies, and so much more falls under this prototype category that God's Word says we should be devoted to — The Teaching of the Apostles.

The Communal Life

Luke says that they *devoted themselves . . . to the communal life*. Luke goes on to describe the nature of that first spirit-filled community — *All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Acts 2:44-45* Although a parish does not do this, we are still called to love one another. The apostle John says — *The message you heard from the beginning is this: we must love one another. 1 John 3:11* John will then go on to say — *My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action. 1 John 3:18* In short, parish communal life includes all the ways in which we come together, outside of the liturgy, and put our love into action. That might be having a youth group out of love for the youth. It might be coming together to feed the poor out of love for the poor. It might be having a yard sale to help support the needs of the parish out of love for the parish. Parish communal life and the way it may express itself is varied and many. At the root of it all, however, is charity. It is always motivated by love, which is the true vocation of every man, woman, and child. The Catechism addresses this communal nature of man: "The human person needs to live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement of his nature. Through the exchange with others, mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation." For a Spirit-filled community such as a parish, that vocation is love . . . love in action.

The Breaking of the Bread

Luke says that they *devoted themselves . . . to the breaking of the bread*. This is in reference to the sacred liturgy. The celebration of the Holy Eucharist is the most important action that the parish does when it comes together. It is so important, that we are obligated to do so at least once every Sunday. This is so, because once again, it boils down to love. This time however, the love we encounter in the Eucharist is the perfect love of the Son of God. Pope Benedict XVI emphasized this at the very beginning of his apostolic exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*: "The sacrament of charity, the Holy Eucharist is the gift that Jesus makes of himself, thus revealing to us God's infinite love for every man and woman." When we come together to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, we encounter the gift that Jesus makes . . . the Real Presence and infinite love of Jesus Christ, himself. Therefore, our liturgies should be as beautiful and uplifting as we can make them. In short, every ministry and action that the parish performs in its breaking of the bread is an expression of our love for the Lord, our God, and an encounter with His infinite love for us.

The Prayers

Luke says that they *devoted themselves . . . to the prayers*. The Catechism states: "In the New Covenant, prayer is the living relationship of the children with the Father who is good beyond measure, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Kingdom is 'the union of the entire holy royal Trinity . . . with the whole human spirit.' Thus, the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him." A parish is therefore to live, as much as possible, in the presence of and in communion with the thrice-holy God. It is to abide in the "grace of the Kingdom." Prayer is the means of doing this. Prayer should precede and accompany everything that the parish does or is planning to do. Through prayer, all things become possible and find their guidance. Our Savior tells us that in prayer we can receive all that we ask for — *"Truly, truly, I tell you, whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you."* John 16:23 In short, every movement towards prayer and every ministry of prayer that the parish may offer should be welcomed and promoted. It is the responsibility of every parish to become a haven of Christian prayer.

Conclusion

I believe that one can both find and place every possible parish ministry in one of the four areas mentioned above. Whatever a parish does or undertakes is nestled in one of these four categories. God's Word has provided a perfect prototype for any parish that is truly desirous to both flourish and grow. If we do our best to fulfill these four spirit-filled initiatives, then surely what happened to the first Christian community will happen to us — *And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Acts 2:27* We will be exploring this at our next Parish Council Meeting. Please come! I hope to see you there 😊 *Fr. John (MacK)*