Celebrating the Gift that is the Church

As we come to Pentecost this weekend, we celebrate the Holy Spirit being sent by our Lord to us. Our readings reflect on the Holy Spirit empowering the apostles, who then leave the room where they were initially afraid for their lives, and go out and begin the work of the Church.

On the one hand, we are mindful that the Holy Spirit empowers each of us to do just that; there are virtues are are all given, and also unique gifts. The Holy Spirit can in a sense be thought of as our helper in becoming a fisher of men as Jesus calls us to do.

The Holy Spirit also guides the Church, and Pentecost also marks the birthday of the Church. (I use a capital "C" there because Jesus created one, holy, catholic apostolic Church). This is not to say the Church, much like a family, has not had Her share of problems over the years. Made up of humans, some of those humans have made poor choices. Imagine for instance living in a time when you have one legitimate pope and two others claiming to be the pope. But here we are, some 2000 years later, and the gates of Hell have still not prevailed against our Church.

That said, one of the sad things that we all see are people who do not recognize what a gift the Church is. There are those who fall away; those who feel the Church is outdated; those who do not like what the Church has to say on faith and morals; or those who never really fully understand what the Church does for them. So how can we appreciate - and also articulate - all that the Church does and what Her role is?

For one, it's worth remembering that the Church is where we receive the sacraments; the visible signs of God in our midst; our bridges if you will to our Lord. Paramount among these is the Holy Eucharist which Jesus celebrated at the Last Supper and commanded us to repeat until He returns. This is so we have food for the journey, and are brought closer to the Lord. All of the sacraments are there to empower us in different ways, and to give us a reminder of how Jesus is always with us.

Secondly, the Church is there to guide us. This is what the apostles are doing when they go forth; they are proclaiming the faith. But faith formation is ongoing throughout our lives. This is why there is the Catechism, and why over the centuries we've had councils, and popes and other saints write so much about the faith. The Holy Spirit continually guides the Church to further articulate teaching and understand it at a deeper level. As such, the Church will at times talk about things such as abortion, capital punishment, contraception, the poor, racism, marriage and other issues, all of which at various points in history are "hot button" issues. The Church may often take a position that among many is not popular. But when you read through any teaching, what strikes you is how the Church makes the arguments for the truth. There are references to Scripture, and prior teachings of the Church, or saints; there are well thought out arguments to make the point. And this is because the universal mission of the Church is salvation of souls. This authority is not meant to diminish us, but to help us reach our potential. The question then for us is how do we do in this "being guided?" thing. Think

of growing up. Perhaps there was a time when you were frustrated at your parents; then you had children of your own, and had to give them guidance, or say “no” to certain things. We often see looking back the wisdom of our parents. Well, just because we turn a certain age doesn’t mean we’ve gained all wisdom. The Church is there to help us; so hopefully we listen. There are so many great ways to learn our faith, such as Bisho Robert Barron’s ministry (Bishop of Winona) at wordonfire.org; Fr. Michael Schmitz of the Diocese of Duluth has YouTube videos; and there is “Formed” (formed.org) where you can watch many great videos as well. Remember belief, or saying “I believe in God,” is just a small part of faith. Knowing what that statement means is what the Church helps us to do. So trust the Church, knowing that She, much like our real-life mothers, will at times challenge us with Her teaching. But it is there so we can grow.

Third, ever forget the Church is always here for you. As a priest, you often run into people who are estranged from the Church; they stopped going altogether; they felt a non-denominational church was more for them; they got angry at the Church for some reason; or they felt “unworthy.” We can take comfort when we read the backgrounds of the apostles or so many of the saints. But no matter what hour we come back, be we a “cradle Catholic” or like Saint Dismas the Good Thief who in his last moments asked Jesus to remember him, Jesus - and HIs Church - are there for us. I’ve celebrated many anointings of people who have been away for years; and many funerals as well, and in all of them, I try to convey the Church is here for you. So my hope is you know always this is your home - your local parish here at Saint Joe’s, but also the Church universal. And all are truly welcome.

And lastly, remember you are part of the Church’s mission to go out and help bring people to the faith. The Church equips us with the knowledge; but it’s up to us to go and speak about our faith. This happens through being an evangelist; through inviting people to Mass; to speaking up and engaging in discussions with others about why we believe what we believe; and through patience, knowing that while there may be apathy or even hostility at first among some, ultimately we may be very surprised by who eventually comes to join the Catholic faith through our efforts in conjunction with the Spirit working within us.

The Church will always make headlines at various points, and often not for the best of reasons. But, Jesus knew what He was doing when He created our Church. Let us never forget the Holy Spirit is continually there to guide our Church, which is also there to guide us. What a treasure She is. So let us turn to Her, trust Her, and know that when we do, She will help us in so many ways to get to heaven and build up God’s Kingdom.

Happy Pentecost, and have a blessed week!
Fr. Paul