

REFLECTION OF BISHOP FITZGERALD ON PENTECOST 2000

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On the feast of Pentecost we pray in a special way for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Of course we know that on the first Pentecost day the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles, and that since that time the Spirit has never ceased to animate the Church. Yet we pray for a new outpouring on all the members of the Church to help them to fulfil their mission in all its manifold aspects.

After curing the sick man at the Pool of Bethzatha, when challenged because the miracle had been performed on the sabbath day, Jesus said: "My Father goes on working, and so do I" (*Jn 5: 17*). Can we not say that the Spirit too goes on working? Since the beginning of creation the Spirit who hovered over the water (cf. *Gn 1: 2*) has been active in the world, and will remain active until the end of time. On this day of Pentecost we are invited to recognize the variety of ways in which the presence of the Spirit is manifested, some of which may be quite surprising.

In explaining to the people of Jerusalem what had happened to the Apostles at Pentecost, Peter recalled the words of the prophet Joel: "In the days to come - it is the Lord who speaks - I will pour out my spirit on all mankind. Their sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. Even on my slaves, men and women, in those days I will pour out my spirit" (*Acts 2: 17-18*). The universal nature of the promise would seem to be clear. Yet Peter himself was surprised when the Spirit came down on the Roman centurion Cornelius and his family. Peter and his companions "were all astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit should be poured out on the pagans too" (*Acts 10: 45*).

There is an important truth to be recognized here: we cannot set bounds to the action of the Spirit. The Spirit is free. As Paul says: "Now this Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (*2 Cor 3: 17*). It is important to remember this in our relations with other people, even if they do not share our faith, even if they belong to other religions. The Holy Spirit may truly be present in their hearts. This means that when Christians meet with people of other religions they should not feel that they have everything and the others have nothing, rather they should be ready to recognize this presence of the Spirit in the other. Cardinal Newman's motto comes to mind: *cor ad cor loquitur*, heart speaks to heart; the Holy Spirit in us reaches out to the Holy Spirit in the heart of our brother or sister of another religious tradition.

It will easily be appreciated how important this teaching is for the practice of interreligious dialogue. It is no wonder then that, when setting up the Vatican's office for dialogue, Pope Paul VI deliberately chose the day of Pentecost to make the announcement. Paul VI was truly a Pope of dialogue. His first Encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam*, turned on this theme. "The Church should enter into dialogue with the world in which she exists and labours", he wrote. "The Church has something to say; the Church has a message to deliver; the Church has a communication to offer" (*ES*, n. 65). He saw this as a dialogue of salvation, a dialogue which God has initiated, and

one which we are to take up without waiting to be summoned to it. Just as God's dialogue of salvation was made accessible to all, "in like manner our own dialogue should be potentially universal, that is all-embracing and capable of including all, excluding only one who would either absolutely reject it or insincerely pretend to accept it" (*ES*, n. 76).

Pope John Paul II has also insisted on the universal role of the Spirit. In his missionary Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, he wrote: "Thus the Spirit, who 'blows where he wills' (cf. *Jn* 3: 8), who 'was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified' (*AG*, n. 4), and 'who has filled the world ... holds all things together [and] knows what is said' (*Wis* 1: 7), leads us to broaden our vision to ponder his activity in every time and place (cf. *DV*, n. 53)" (*RM*, n. 29). He goes on to say how he himself has taken this vision into account. "I have repeatedly called this fact to mind, and it has guided me in my meetings with a wide variety of peoples" (*ibid.*). The Holy Father then draws a general conclusion regarding interreligious dialogue: "The Church's relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: 'Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man' (*Address to Representatives of Non-Christian Religions*, 5 February 1986)" (*ibid.*).

There are times when the presence of the Holy Spirit may seem almost tangible. Sometimes we meet people who are not Christians and yet whose goodness is evident. We are led to admire their faith and their fidelity, their courage and their compassion. We are encouraged to thank God for what he is doing in and through such people.

Yet it should not be thought that everything is perfect in the various religious traditions of the world. They have their shadow-side too. They may include degrading rites or practices which are morally objectionable. They may have an alienating effect on people. These elements are therefore subject to judgement. When Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to his Apostles he said that "when he comes, he will show the world how wrong it was, about sin, and about who was in the right, and about judgement" (*Jn* 16: 8). He also promised that the Spirit would lead to the complete truth (cf. *Jn* 16: 11). So, in speaking of the missionary activity of the Church, the Vatican Council stated: "It purges of evil associations those elements of truth and grace which are found among peoples, and which are, as it were, a secret presence of God.... So whatever goodness is found in the minds and hearts of men, or in the particular customs and cultures of people, far from being lost, is purified, raised to a higher level and reaches its perfection, for the glory of God, the confusion of the demon and the happiness of men" (*Ad gentes*, n. 9).

This missionary activity is not confined to "mission countries". It is to be carried out wherever the Church exists. Dialogue is one of the ways in which this can be done, for, as Pope John Paul II has stated very clearly, "interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 55). This dialogue can assume many forms, wherever people of different religions come together: striving to live harmoniously side by side, working together for the benefit of society, clarifying ideas about one another through formal exchanges, sharing spiritual experience. If positive results are to come from all these efforts, the help of the Holy Spirit is to be sought.

The Spirit will give that openness and receptivity which is so necessary when meeting other people. Christians will be able to respect the convictions of people of other religions. They will more readily recognize and overcome any ingrained prejudices towards people who are different. At the same time the Spirit of Jesus will help the Christian partners in dialogue to remain firm in their own faith in Jesus Christ. "If Christians cultivate such openness and allow themselves to be tested, they will be able to gather the fruits of dialogue. They will discover with admiration all that God's action through Jesus Christ in his Spirit has accomplished and continues to accomplish in the world and in the whole of humanity. Far from weakening their own faith, true dialogue will deepen it" (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, n. 50).

As we know, relations between people of different religions are not always smooth. Tensions can arise. In our time we have seen how, unfortunately, religion can be used to arouse hatred and set people one against the other. Yet we may have experienced also moments of reconciliation, when differences are overcome and hearts are united once more. This knitting together of hearts can come about through silent prayer together, where the silence seems to open up a space for the Spirit. There was such a moment at the beginning of the Day of Prayer for Peace, held in Assisi in 1986, when the representatives of different religions stood together with the Holy Father, in silence, at the Portiuncula. The same impression was given by the moment of silence during the concluding ceremony in St Peter's Square, at the end of the Interreligious Assembly held last October.

It is at such moments as these that we recognize the true nature of interreligious dialogue. It is not concerned merely with mutual understanding and good friendly relations, important as these may be. It is called to reach a deeper level. "In dialogue, Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment, to respond with increasing sincerity to God's personal call and gracious self-gift which, as our faith tells us, always passes through the mediation of Jesus Christ and the work of his Spirit" (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, n. 40).

It is for this grace that we are invited to pray on Pentecost.