

Homily – Pentecost Sunday – Assisi
May 24, 2015

It was in the upper room in the Cenacle where apostles, family members and a group of women were huddling together, trying to avoid detection by the temple police who were hunting for them. Perhaps they were the same police who had arrested Jesus and who took him away for judgment, condemnation and death. According to the Acts of the Apostles, Luke makes it clear those gathered in the upper room were stricken with fear, seeking security within themselves and behind bolted doors.

Not all of those gathered in the upper room were of one heart and of one mind. First of all, they were composed of three separate groups: Apostles; family members of Jesus; and the group of women, including Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Second, they did not share the same idea about who Jesus was, nor were they equally convinced that he had indeed risen from the dead, as some of the women and Apostles claimed. The empty tomb, Mary Magdalene's talk of meeting Jesus in the person of a gardener, and the Emmaus disciples' depiction of discovering Jesus resurrected in the breaking of the bread might not have convinced all gathered that their crucified Lord was indeed alive. And third, there were rivalries among the members of Jesus' family and the disciples, each seeking a privileged place of honor, which translates into the thirst for power. It does appear, however, that they did share the belief that the shackled doors to the upper room kept them temporarily safe from forces seeking to do them harm.

It is into this situation of fear, tension, division, and confusion that the God once again comes to the Apostles, to the family members of Jesus and to Mary, Jesus' mother and the other women. A penetrating noise breaks through their closed, fear-filled hearts. It is the noise of God's love and forgiveness and mercy that breaks into their lives. Fire, a symbol of power and light, descends on each of them, driving out the darkness of doubt that consumes them and opens their minds once again to the truth about God's unrelenting love and forgiveness for each of them. Freed from fear and doubt, they suddenly feel the overwhelming joy that comes from recognizing their status as beloved children of God, called to live a life of truth and holiness. For this reason, their mouths break into song, proclaiming all that God had been doing and still was doing in their lives and in the lives of those around them.

The different languages they speak are a revelation of the many ways Jesus has touched their lives. It is precisely this diversity of experiences that creates within them a new awareness of the harmony and unity to which they are called. It can never be reduced to uniformity but must be expressed by each believer who, in his or her own manner, is able to proclaim that God is alive within their hearts continuing to perform His miracle of grace and peace.

What is common to each of those gathered in the upper room is the experience of the grace of God discovered in the personal encounter they had with the Lord Jesus on their human journey. It is this personal encounter with Jesus that has moved them to embrace mercy and love, and to follow in the footprints of their Lord and Master. But something else has happened in the hearts of each of them. They no longer feel prisoners of their past, nor of any failures experienced in trying to follow the Lord. They were no longer prisoners of the fear of being rejected. Nor were they afraid to once again begin to trust God and to trust one another. God's Spirit set them free to move beyond the closed and barred doors of the upper room, to move beyond their fear of one another, and to move beyond their fear of being rejected by the world.

Because of this new-found freedom in the Spirit, they were able once again to open themselves to the mystery of God's grace, to the call to follow their Lord and Master unreservedly, and to share their own stories of love, mercy, peace, joy and hope with all they met on the road. It is this newfound freedom, a freedom rooted in love and mercy, that was understood by the great crowds of people from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia and from all other places. Those gathered in the upper room were speaking the deepest language of the human

heart, the language of hunger and thirst for meaning, forgiveness and love. “Each one hear them speaking in his or her own language” (Acts 2,6). In this way, all who were present experienced a holy newness of life.

In his homily at the Mass of Pentecost in 2013, Pope Francis challenges us to open our hearts to three dimensions of the Spirit that are reflected in the great feast we celebrate today. First, we are called to become people open to the newness of the Spirit who invites us to look forward to the future with eyes of faith. We are called to be a forward-thinking people, not frozen or paralyzed by our past or our present. Second, we are called to share the rich diversity of our individual experiences of life in God and life with one another, never reducing our desire for fraternal communion to mere conformism for the sake of appeasing one another. This applies equally to families. The harmony to which we are called is a result of the rich diversity alive within each of us and is a fruit of the Spirit of God, not of our efforts to reduce all to sameness and conformity. The struggles and difficulties we experience can be moments of grace if understood through the eyes of faith. And third, it is the experience of freedom that enables us – indeed obliges us – to break out in song, giving witness to the glory of God at work within us, within our fraternities, our families, with the Order and the Church. But in order for this to happen, we must allow God to bring forth His work of restoration within and among us. If we allow this to happen, we will become a Pentecost people.

May the fire of the Spirit burn within each us, set us free from all fear, and allow us to step out in faith and joy to all the world, announcing with joy the truth that Jesus promises to all people and all of creation. *“Veni, Sancte Spiritus! Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love!”*