



THEOLOGY CORNER

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“Why Did Jesus Send the Holy Spirit on Pentecost?”

This month, we prepare to celebrate Pentecost Sunday on May 28. Some of you may have heard this day referenced as the birthday of the Church. Why is this? Moreover, what is the significance of the Feast of Pentecost, and why did Jesus send the Holy Spirit after Pentecost had been “fulfilled”? Perhaps the first question we should address is: “What is Pentecost?” The name comes from the Greek “Πεντηκοστή” (transliterated: Pentekosté), which means “fiftieth.” The Christian significance of this is that the sending of the Spirit marks the *fiftieth* day after the Resurrection of Christ. But we should remember that Pentecost is not only a Christian feast. Luke writes in the book of Acts that the disciples were all gathered together “when the time for Pentecost was fulfilled.” (Acts 2:1). Clearly, Pentecost was well-established before Christianity began. Pentecost was one of seven Jewish feasts that were celebrated in their own annual cycle (Lev. 23). That’s right, the Jews also had a liturgical calendar! The other six feasts include: Passover, First-Fruits, Tabernacles, Trumpets, Unleavened Bread, and the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). In Hebrew, Pentecost was referred to as *Shavuot* which just means “weeks.” It became known as the “Feast of Weeks” since it was celebrated seven weeks after the “Feast of First Fruits” which began on the morning after the Sabbath following Passover (7 weeks = 49 days + 1 = 50). This “+1” is the “fiftieth” day (hence, Pentecost) when the adult males would go on pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem to make their offering. The feast of First Fruits was meant to celebrate the first fruits of their harvest, while the Feast of Weeks (i.e., Pentecost) was a celebration at the end of the grain harvest where they would bring more lavish offerings to thank God for the bounty he had provided them.

It is important to note that each of the Jewish feasts had a two-fold theme: 1) Agricultural; 2) Salvation historical. I have briefly mentioned some of the agricultural themes, but there were also strong themes referencing events in the history of the people Israel. For the Passover, for instance, the celebration was to commemorate the night of passover when the Israelites were delivered from Pharaoh. Pentecost was in celebration of the giving of the law (i.e., Ten Commandments) to Moses on Mount Sinai. The amazing thing about both the Feast of Passover and the Feast of Pentecost is that they transfer into the New Covenant as they are fulfilled. All the other feasts also point to what has been fulfilled. For it was a few hours before Passover that our Lord died on the Cross as the Jews would be preparing to sacrifice an unblemished lamb. At this time, Jesus became the Lamb of God who was the unblemished sacrifice for the redemption of the world. After which, he rose again on the third day which would have been the beginning of the feast of First Fruits which followed the Sabbath day. St. Paul draws this conclusion when he calls Christ’s Resurrection the “first fruits” of God’s harvest which was a sign that the harvest has begun (1 Cor 15:20). This leaves us with Pentecost. We see here that God’s story of salvation remains consistent from Old to New Testament as he uses this feast to transform it into something greater. Fifty days after the Resurrection, after Pentecost had been fulfilled, he sends the disciples the Holy Spirit. The full harvest has come when God infuses his own Spirit within his people to give us his entire inheritance – a participation in the Kingdom of God. But not just a participation in the Kingdom, but with a participation in his mission: “As the father has sent me, even so I send you.” (Jn 20:21). We can now participate in this mission after having been given his Spirit – leaving the disciples with the very presence of God himself; leaving them with the Advocate that he promised to give.

The Feast of Pentecost in the New Covenant is about the Gift of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Pentecost in the Old Covenant was about the celebration of the receiving of the Law, so too is Pentecost in the New Covenant a celebration of receiving the Law – receiving the New Law written in our hearts by the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Just as Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai as “the Lord descended upon it in fire” (Ex. 19:18), so too does God descend upon them in tongues of fire at Pentecost so that they may speak in different languages for the sake of reuniting the people of God and thereby reversing the confusion of languages in the Tower of Babel. It is therefore a celebration of the birth of the Church as the disciples received the Holy Spirit which enables them to be united in spirit with the Mystical Body of Christ. It was only after receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit that St. Peter preached his first homily (Acts 2:14) when he asked people to repent of their sins and be baptized. This marked the first action carried out under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, when thousands were converted to the faith and bound together as one in the one and undivided Spirit of God. Pentecost concludes the season of Easter in which we have fully celebrated the Resurrection of our Lord.

With all this in mind, let us prepare to celebrate the birth of the Church at the end of this month and continue to meditate on the fact that the “harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matt 9:37). We have received so much from God, but there is a great need in the Church for members to offer their gifts to God in response to the mission on which we have been sent at Pentecost. Just as the Jews would bring lavish offerings to the temple at Pentecost, let each of us make ourselves an offering to God this Pentecost in thanksgiving for our blessings – especially the gift of his Holy Spirit; whether this be discerning a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, or simply offering up more of our time, talent, and/or treasure for the sake of the his Kingdom. We all have a responsibility to carry out in response to the gift of the Holy Spirit; we just have to discover precisely in what ways each of us can live up to it. We have twenty-five candidates for Confirmation this year. On May 13, they will be given the grace to respond to this mission more fully. Please pray for them as you remember your own Confirmation and as you look to respond to this great gift you have been given.