

PENTECOST – 2009

Today, as we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, it is helpful to remember that the glories of that day almost 2000 years ago did not end, but continue today wherever the gospel is preached and lived. One interesting question to ask about that first Pentecost 2000 years ago is why the Holy Spirit guided the listeners to hear the Gospel in their own language. After all, the Holy Spirit could have guided the listeners to understand the language that the Apostles were speaking, which was probably Aramaic. Or He could have the Gospel understood in the common language of the time, namely, Greek. Why have the Gospel translated, it seems in the air, into many languages, rather than have all the hearers understanding the one language, even as they were all understanding the one Gospel?

One reason that each nationality heard the gospel its own language was to emphasize that, as the faith comes to each nation, it does not suppress the individuality of that nation, but rather brings it out more and more. The faith unites all peoples, but at the same time makes each culture and each person more themselves. In the darkness, all things look the same. Decay everywhere makes things look similar. But in the light, every land shines in its individual glory, and in good health, every person becomes more himself. Likewise, when the light of the gospel comes to each land, it brings out the individual goodness of each person and each nation. As C.S. Lewis said in his science fiction book That Hideous Strength, “there are universal rules to which all goodness must conform. . . . [But God] does not make two blades of grass the same, much less two saints, two nations, two angels.” If one looks at the lives of the saints, one will see how each one is very different, from St. Paul, who combined his Jewish background, classical learning, and the radical news of the gospel in a unique fashion, to Saints Benedict and Scholastica who preserved the Roman ideal of order and stability by incorporating it into the Benedictine order, to St. Francis of Assisi, who brought the ideal of the errant knight into his order, to St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, who here in this nation combined our great respect for education with her faith to form the Sisters of Charity, who were for over a century at the heart of the culture of American Catholic schools.

Sin, by contrast levels people and nations and makes them flat. The capital sins, pride, vanity, envy, anger, sloth, lust, gluttony and avarice are the same always and everywhere, and never will change. Ask any priest and he will tell you that the most common struggle in hearing confessions is sheer boredom, for sins, deprived of the admixture of virtue and gloss of excitement that the imagination adds, are just plain dull. When it comes to sins, the words of Ecclesiastes are fulfilled, “There is nothing new under the sun; it has all been done before.” And so sin likewise seeks to level all nations into a flat sameness. The Books of Maccabees record the attempt of the Hellenistic rulers of Syria to suppress the Jews in order to make all culture Greek; and it records the heroic struggle of many Jews to preserve their culture. Unfortunately, then as now with cafeteria Catholics, many so-called Jews were willing to abandon their morals in order to go with what seemed like the trend of the times. Likewise, the Romans persecuted Christians for 250 years, for the Christians wanted to build a new and unique culture, and that was not allowed; and the great irony is that all that is left of the Roman Empire is

what the Church has preserved. The nations of Europe were built with the faith, with the likes of St. Patrick going to Ireland, the Church Christianizing knighthood with the ideal of chivalry, the great cathedrals and monasteries becoming the center of culture, and nations such as Germany and France coming to their current status under Christian kings and the Holy Roman Empire. And, of course, there is the glorious nation of Poland, forged under its first Christian king in 975, and with its strong faith, surviving the Russian, German, Nazi, and Soviet Empires, which have since perished. But now the European Union has an official history of Europe that manages to leave out Christianity; it is perhaps appropriate to ignore the faith that forged independent nations when those nations are now giving up their independence as the Cross is replaced by the Euro as the center of worship, and Western Europe is contracepting and aborting itself into oblivion.

When we turn to the New World, history (although usually not secular history books) recounts efforts of the Church to uphold the dignity of the indigenous peoples against the colonial overlords. In 1537, Pope Paul III issued a decree commanding the respect for indigenous Americans, a decree that missionaries from the Jesuit, Franciscan, and Dominican orders tried to defend. History books often record that the colonial overlords usually called themselves Catholic, which is true. They called themselves Catholic in the same way that many modern politicians who promote legal abortions, educators who water down the faith, and entertainers who care not for decency call themselves Catholic. Those overlords and the modern cultural Catholic use the faith as a veneer, but when the faith challenges modern values or their own desires, they set it aside; it is meaningless to them.

We are likewise challenged now to uphold the greatness of this nation and other nations against the culture of death and decadence that threatens to dominate. In his last book Memory and Identity, published six months before he died, Pope John Paul II recounted how the major anti-Christian forces of the twentieth century, Nazism, Communism, and the culture of death and decadence have all tried to suppress national identity in favor of materialist philosophies that sought dominate the world. In this last month alone, the UN has tried (happily unsuccessfully) to pressure Columbia and Nicaragua into abandoning their prolife laws, as it has done to Ireland and Portugal before. The western press howled as the Pope in his trip to Africa condemned Western attempts to force those nations to accept artificial contraception as a condition of aid; the press did not report the favorable reaction of those nations to one who truly understood their culture. And this nation was founded upon faith in a God who gave all peoples certain rights, rights which no government has the right to suppress. John Adams wrote that “we have a constitution designed for a moral and religious people; and it is wholly inadequate to any other.” And yet we have a court system that suppresses the right to life for the unborn and the rights of families, and an entertainment industry that undermines the faith and decency. There are in short the imperial forces of what Pope Benedict has called the “dictatorship of relativism” at work.

The Holy Spirit calls us this day and every day to uphold that liberty of the Spirit that St. Paul wrote of, that liberty that can make each person a hero or heroine of God and each nation a unique motherland of saints. It is paradoxical, but true that the one

faith, the one gospel, the one Church established by Christ, with her common Scripture and sacraments, with the line of popes and bishops that goes back to antiquity and looking forward to the end of time, both joins every nation together under Christ and also helps them grow to express their unique goodness. This fact is one application of what Jesus Himself said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”