

PENTECOST: NEW ALTAR CALL

By Gloria Doino

Pentecost is Jewish in origin. Also known as the Feast of Weeks or Sauv'out, it was the festival associated with the gathering of the grain harvest. In pagan times, the first fruits of this Middle Eastern harvest were offered to the Gods of power and fertility. As the Jews grew bolder in their worship of the one true God "they began to drop the pagan trappings" (Robert Longman Jr. website, spirithome.com). The festival took on the status of a pilgrimage (Shaq) with crowds traveling to their regional shrines. For Jesus' friends and family that meant a trip to Jerusalem. They brought with them grain loaves and young livestock to offer as sacrifices. True to Mediterranean style, the festival was a lively celebration: processions, singing, liturgies and pageantry abounded. The event took place fifty days after the Feast of the Unleavened Bread (Passover), hence the name, Pentecost, which meant "fifty" in Greek. Over time, the giving of Torah at Sinai became the main purpose of the celebration for the Jews and remains so even today.

Devout Jews poured into Jerusalem. Jesus' community of believers (numbering about 120 at the time, including his mother, Mary) did likewise (Acts 1:13-15). The words of Jesus still rang in their hearts "I enjoin you not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak, for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4-5). For now, they found themselves behind closed doors, feeling disheartened, afraid, even suspicious. They were anything but festive. Hope was beginning to wane.

Imagine their delight when the Holy Spirit came with great gusto. The wind of the Spirit swept through the house. Sheer élan filled the group – electrifying hearts, inebriating spirits (some falsely thought them drunk). The Upper Room was ablaze with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. "Tongues of Fire" appeared and "Speaking in Tongues" broke loose. The commotion was such that it drew the attention of the crowds outside. Pilgrims from every district imaginable were present. They spoke a multitude of languages, but as they heard the witnesses "Speaking in Tongues," they were amazed... each pilgrim heard in his or here own native tongue. The confusion of languages experienced at the Tower of Babel was reversed. The Good News of Jesus was being preached. Best of all, it was being heard as if it were an "altar call" upon their lives; and they responded. *"The words were being carried with power and authority by the Holy Spirit into the ears and hearts of those listening. About 3000 new people joined their ranks. This was a new kind of Harvest and the giving of a new kind of Covenant"* (Robert Longman, Jr.). Henceforth, the Christian Feast was forever known by the festival name, "Pentecost."

Pentecost commemorates the founding of the church as an institution, but more than that it commemorates the receiving of its mission: *"To become loving disciples who would transform the world"* (*At Home with the Word, 2005*). In truth, the people of God had met the Spirit before through prophecies, teachings and guidance. Think prophets. Think John the Baptist. Think Jesus. His Life, Death, and Resurrection are an ongoing Spirit-filled legacy. The Lord had even blown the Spirit onto each of his disciples before departing. Pentecost was the day "that the Spirit took hold of the followers of Christ as a group... and came to stay" (R. Longman, Jr.). Like the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision, the Spirit of God brought life to the 'dry' fearful followers of Christ and made them a Body (Ezekiel 37:1-10). Indeed, "Pentecost is the celebration of God breaking through the boundaries of time and space...the Spirit of God coming to dwell within us so that we can become living Christ's, here and now" (Henri Nouwen, "Eternal Seasons").

So where are *we* in the equation? We have met the Spirit in Scripture, in the Sacraments, in Prayer and in Community. “In terms of God as Paraclete, there are no second class citizens. The Paraclete is just as present today, in the modern disciples of Jesus, as He was in the first generation” (Raymond Brown “The Once and Coming Spirit at Pentecost”). Under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit there are tasks to be accomplished and corresponding Charisms to accomplish them. Jesus’ life on earth has ended but his work of Redemption continues as He sends us forth in His Spirit. A fresh outpouring of the Spirit is ours for the asking, calling us to stoke the fires within. Our “Sealed Orders” (Agnes Sanford), that which we are called to do, wait to be opened. The only thanks the Paraclete expects for the gift of “*His gifts*” is that we use them wisely. Pentecost means going from being an observer to being a participant. But we are not alone. “God is with us and His name is Holy Spirit” (Karl Rahner, “the Great Church Year”). Allelu! Swim with the current of the Holy Spirit, in the company of the Early Christians. When you hear a new Altar Call upon your life, as they did...Rejoice. Unlatch the lock of your Upper Room. Go forth in haste. *The Spirit is waiting to work wonders through you!*