

May 2020

Dear Brethren:

If you go back and read the Old Testament, you will discover that Pentecost was one of the Jewish feast days. Only they did not call it Pentecost. That is the Greek name. The Jews called it the Feast of Firstfruits or the Feast of Weeks. It is mentioned five places in the first five books—in Exodus 23, Exodus 24, Leviticus 16, Numbers 28, and Deuteronomy 16. It was the celebration of the beginning of the early weeks of harvest. In Palestine there were two harvests each year. The early harvest came during the months of May and June; the final harvest came in the fall. Pentecost was the celebration of the beginning of the early barley harvest, which meant that Pentecost always fell sometime from the middle of the month of May up to mid-June.

There were several festivals, celebrations, or observances that took place before Pentecost. There was Passover, there was Unleavened Bread, and there was the Wavesheaf. The Wavesheaf was the celebration of the beginning of the barley harvest. Here is the way you figured out the date of Pentecost: According to the Old Testament, you would begin with the day of the Wavesheaf offering, and then count off fifty days. So from Wavesheaf until Pentecost is considered the firstfruits harvest and Pentecost is the celebration of the end of the harvest. (The summertime in late June begins the larger wheat harvest which ends in the autumn.) Since it always included a count of fifty days from the Wavesheaf, and since fifty days always includes seven full weeks, it is the Feast of Firstfruits or the Feast of Weeks.

### **Three Lessons from Pentecost**

It is the day on the Christian calendar when many other churches around the world commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit on that day so long ago. To many of them, red is the traditional color of Pentecost, symbolizing the fire of the "Holy Ghost." Even though many read the book of Acts and see the story of that first Pentecost after Christ's resurrection, most overlook the real importance. Pentecost is foundational for our faith, especially for our life together as the Church, the true people of God. As we consider Acts 2, let us look together at three lessons from Pentecost:

## **We Really Need the Holy Spirit**

When some in the crowd at Pentecost accused the one-hundred-twenty of celebrating Shavuot a little too much, of being inebriated, Peter stood. Before a crowd of Jews, Peter appealed to a Jewish prophet:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams (Acts 2:17).

On this, Jesus knew that the task of making disciples in all nations would be immense. There was no way that the Church in its own puny power was up to the job. They absolutely had to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. If on that day long ago they really needed the Holy Spirit, then hear this: We also really need the Holy Spirit. We simply cannot fulfill the world-changing mission that God has given us if we operate in our own weaknesses.

There were three symbols when the Holy Spirit fell on the one-hundred-twenty gathered in the upper room: wind, fire and languages. When I say, "We really need the Holy Spirit," we think first of the symbol of wind. The *King James Version* describes it as a "rushing mighty wind." It is a symbol of spiritual power.

One of the special marks of the Holy Spirit in the apostolic Church was the spirit of boldness. Commentators have often remarked about the change that came over Peter on the day of Pentecost. Just fifty days earlier around a bonfire, when accused by a solitary slave girl, Peter had denied Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. Now in broad daylight, in front of a crowd of thousands, he boldly preached the Good News. What a difference the Holy Spirit makes. We really need the Holy Spirit! I wonder: Has it filled you?

## **We Really Need a New Direction**

Not only do we really need the Holy Spirit but, secondly, we really need a new direction. When the Holy Spirit comes—says John 16:8—it will convict the world of sin.

Besides the symbol of wind representing the Holy Spirit's power, there is the symbol of the flame of fire hovering over each of the one-hundred-twenty. This flame symbolizes the Holy Spirit's cleansing. Looking back on what had transpired at Pentecost before the council of Jerusalem, in Acts 15:8–9, Peter testified that God had "purified their hearts by

faith." What do we mean by purify? We are talking about new direction, abandoning wrong things that might destroy us and embracing the good things of God that give us purpose and long-term contentment. Only the Holy Spirit and its cleansing can give us the new direction that we so desperately need.

As Peter preached to the crowd, he realized that his listeners also needed a new direction. Look at Acts 2:23, 38: You crucified Him, with the help of wicked men! And then the crowd is troubled by Peter's accusation and asks: "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter answers: "Change your heart and lives." Other versions say: "Repent and be baptized." What are we talking about? New direction. Let the Holy Spirit's fire purify your sinful heart.

There is yet a third lesson from Pentecost. Not only do we really need the Holy Spirit; not only do we really need a new direction, but finally:

### **We Really Need Each Other**

It should strike us that Jesus could have sent the Holy Spirit to each of the one-hundred-twenty individually when they were praying at home alone. Instead, the Holy Spirit fell upon them when they were in the upper room, convoking as commanded and praying together. There is something about joining forces that moves spiritual mountains.

The third symbol—besides wind and fire—was languages. These were earthly languages, the various mother tongues spoken by the Jews who had come from so many far-off places. Was it a miracle of speaking or a miracle of hearing? The account is inconclusive, but one thing is sure: God was intent on getting His message across. The language miracle symbolizes the connectedness God desires for His people; language is meant to bind people together for a common purpose. What is striking about Acts 2 is that it begins with togetherness and it ends with togetherness. Acts 2:42 speaks of shared teaching, shared meals, shared prayers, even shared possessions. The Holy Spirit united their hearts in singleness of purpose and mission. Do you not long for that kind of unity in the church today? Simply put, we cannot accomplish individually the mission that God has given us.

Before Jesus' crucifixion, while He was with the apostles, He promised soon He would be in them. This was fulfilled when the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, came and filled the one-hundred-twenty on the day of Pentecost. This is the birth of the Church, a new beginning for those who had followed Him while He lived on the earth. This is a new beginning for the Church today which chooses to have faith in the Word of God—that this

promise is to all who truly believe. The demonstration of the filling of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost has not changed or become unavailable over time. The demonstration described in the book of Acts is the same today. The purpose of the first Pentecost then was the introduction of God doing something He had never done before, that of filling the faithful with His Spirit. The purpose for us today is that we become witness to His character, presence, and authority.

Your brother in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mario Y. Roque', written in a cursive style.

Mario Y. Roque