Led by the Spirit

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Today we assemble to celebrate the fulfillment of the promise that Jesus made to his Apostles — the descent of the Holy Spirit. This event is foundational in Christian life and mission. St. Paul insists that the Holy Spirit is not an optional presence for the Christian. He presents Christian spirituality as a spirituality led by the Spirit rather than by the desires of the flesh. There can be no Christian life without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Let me therefore propose that today each person here takes ownership of the spirit of Jesus that is within us.

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Catholics have ceased to fear that phenomenon known as the Charismatic Movement. Don’t get me wrong and begin to have ideas. I have never been known to be charismatic in that sense. What I mean to say is that there used to be some apprehension with regard to members of the Movement. They behaved abnormally and people held them in suspicion. Those led by the Spirit have this tendency to be disorderly and to upset things wherever they are.

In 1967 a young undergraduate at Notre Dame University, Indiana, emerged from a prayer meeting and was confronted by a retired missionary who asked him: “Now that you have received the Holy Spirit, when do you plan to leave the Catholic Church?” The astonished student replied that he had no plans to leave. The priest said, “Then you will lose the gift of the Spirit.”

When church life is business as usual, Charismatics appear to have melted into the mainstream church. In the ordinariness of our Christian life, we might want to ask: “Has the Spirit retreated?”

The universal language

On that first Pentecost in Jerusalem there were two outstanding happenings. The first is that the Spirit descended like tongues of fire which transformed the disciples. The second is that people from different national groups and languages were surprised to hear the Galilean disciples boldly proclaiming the wonderful works of God, “each of us in our own native languages.” Interpreters were not necessary.

How then did the different nationalities that assembled that Pentecost Day understand the disciples in their different languages?

Let me share with you two experiences. While I was a student in Montreal, about ten years ago, I came to do summer ministry in St. Rita’s Church in Woodstock. One day a male parishioner in his 80s asked me how my French was coming along. I said, “So, so.” He offered me advice: “Fr. Gabriel, if you want to get the French language, try to get a Quebec girlfriend.” Well, I couldn’t — don’t ask me why. The second experience was an encounter I had last year in Paris where I found myself studying French again. I went to meet a visiting Nigerian bishop. When I told him how difficult it was for an adult to learn French, he suggested that I speak the universal language. “What was that?” I asked. He said: “Speak the language of love.” I think the bishop was right. Love is the language that unites. On that first Pentecost, the flame of the Spirit enkindled the fire of his love in the different peoples present. And where there is love, one who speaks a foreign language can be understood.

A still active Spirit

The same Pentecost Spirit has continued to guide missionaries to the different peoples across the world, enabling them to build bridges across different cultures and taking them to places where, out of fear and insecurity, they would rather not go.

Today we 2,936 members of the Spiritan congregation face the challenge of being missionaries to ourselves as a means of being missionaries to others. We are called to continue to live our motto One heart and one soul with joy and cheerfulness. Formerly, being different and coming from different nationalities served to justify separate missions according to national groups. Staying separate and distinct enabled us to avoid renewal in ourselves: French for the French, English for the English, German for the Germans. In those days, for instance, efforts to place foreign and indigenous clergy together were at times resisted. Leave things be: that way it was peaceful, no one was hurt and upset.

Today, our congregation is at the dawn of a new Pentecost, when new signs of life demand recognition. At the 1992 General Chapter (Assembly), the Spirit spoke through the delegates summoning us to embrace regionalization as well as international community living with its difficulties and obstacles: loss of autonomy and control, putting up with falling national pride, living with cultural differences.

In Europe faced with dwindling membership, new groupings are emerging bringing together the hitherto autonomous...
Provinces of France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Portugal, Poland, England, Ireland and Spain irrespective of their different languages and cultures. On this side of the Atlantic, the North American/Caribbean group (Canada, U.S.A., Mexico, Haiti, Trinidad, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic) meets annually to promote common initiatives and closer collaboration. In Africa, where Spiritan vocations are on the rise, this regionalization is taking place as well. My own country, Nigeria, is one populous country that accommodates different ethnic groups that can become political foes. But, as Spiritans, we trust that the Spirit leads as we strive towards cooperation and endeavor to live and work together.

Further surprising manifestations of the Spirit

At the 2004 General Chapter we nearly elected the first African Superior General in a Congregation that started as a French Order. And right here for the first time, a Nigerian Spiritan has become pastor of St. Joseph’s, Highland Creek, assisted by a young Polish Spiritan. This in a situation where, even now, if you introduce yourself as a Spiritan, it is natural to hear the next question: “And what part of Ireland do you come from?” — even if you happen to be black. An article in the May 2006 issue of Spiritan magazine relates the surprise expressed on realizing that a Nigerian Spiritan is on mission in Ireland — what the editorial piece aptly titled “Reverse Mission”. Work of the Holy Spirit indeed!

No fire extinguishers please

The challenge at work among us Spiritans is also at work in the rest of the world. The old structures of nationalism must succumb to the new global realities. A tsunami in southeast Asia, an earthquake in Java, a crisis in Darfur, immigration flows into Europe and North America — all clamour for supranational responses. Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, came up with this confession: “interdependence — the fact of a crisis somewhere becoming a crisis everywhere — makes a mockery of traditional views of national interest.”

As individuals, families, communities we can no longer stand by and ignore the movement of the Spirit that spurs us on to share God’s love for all creation, especially where the poor and the weak are involved. The same Spirit that brought people together on the first Pentecost brings us together. The Spirit that inspired the early church to live one heart and one soul is at work in our church and our world.

The fire is flaring. Let us not be led by the desires of the flesh and play the fire extinguishers. Rather, led by the Spirit, let us leave no one in doubt that we are agents of God’s love.

As we light our Pentecost candles and spread their flames throughout this church, let them remind us of the fire the Spirit enkindled that Pentecost Day in Jerusalem. Let the fire of God’s love flare.