

The Solemnity of Pentecost: Religion from Within

A brilliant man, a man of education, with Doctorate Degrees and honors from most major universities, took a sabbatical. He decided to devote as much time as it would take, one year, two years or more, and learn all he could about Jesus. He studied ancient Greek and ancient Hebrew and Aramaic so he could read the earliest texts about Jesus. He studied Ignatius, Justin, Augustine, Aquinas, and all the famous theologians of centuries, always focusing on learning about Jesus. He read the works of modern theologians, Rahner, Schillebeck and so many others. He took courses in German and Dutch to better understand them.

After studying and studying he wrote his own book about Jesus. It was an instant success not just in the academic circles, but in every Christian and even non-Christian Church. The man, the esteemed professor was called upon to give talks about Jesus to all sorts of different groups, from seminarians to atheists. His lectures always ended with a question and answer period. Usually, there was no one in audience who could ask a question that the brilliant man had not been asked before or for which he did not have an answer at the tip of his tongue.

No one, until an elderly man raised his hand after one lecture. The old man asked: "How is it that someone who has studied as much as you has learned so little?"

What? What type of an arrogant simpleton would dare question the great scholar, the great professor?

After the commotion settled down, the scholar responded, "I am sure that I have much more to learn about Jesus, but why do you feel that I have learned so little?"

He had the old man. At least until the man said, "You have Jesus in your head, but you do not have him in your heart."

Knowledge of Christ come from the head, but knowing Christ comes from the heart. His Spirit must be within us.

And this is the great gift of Pentecost, the solemnity we celebrate today. The Spirit of the Lord has been given to us so that we don't just know about the Lord, we know the Lord.

The great fallacy of religious education is the concept that intellectual knowledge makes a person a Christian. Some parents participate in this fallacy by demanding their children go to religious education but never worship with the community. Some priests participate in this fallacy by determining a person's admission into a sacrament by the quality or maybe even quantity of his answers to catechetical questions. There is no academic test to determine one's faith. Knowledge of answers does not make a person a Christian. No, Jesus makes a person a Christian, and he does this by giving us his Spirit.

St. Paul learned this lesson the hard way. *The Acts of the Apostles* records one of St. Paul's greatest failures. He went to Athens with Barnabas, convinced that he could convert the Athenians by meeting them on their own ground, in the field of philosophy. Yes, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had been dead for over three hundred years, but Athens was still the center of philosophy. So Paul sent out the word that he had a new knowledge for the people of Athens. Many came to hear him. Paul began by speaking about the Temple to an unknown god he had come upon in Athens. He figured he would wow them by pointing out that this temple shows the Athenians were searching for Jesus. Jesus was the answer to all their intellectual inquiries. Do you know what the result of all this was? The people who heard Paul said, "This is very interesting. We'll talk about this another day," and they walked away, obviously unconvinced. Very few returned to become Christian.

From that point on, Paul was not concerned with intellectual arguments, instead he spoke about how the Love of the Lord had transformed his life. Paul went from Athens to Corinth and spoke about the Cross of Jesus, his death for love, his life, the gift of his love. At Corinth the people had an encounter with the Spirit of Jesus within Paul and many became Christian.

As a priest, so often I am edified by people who radiate the presence of the Lord without standing on a soapbox, without spewing out intellectual insights, without drowning me in pious platitudes. There is something about the truly holy that draws me to an experience of the Lord. What is this something? It is the Spirit. They possess the Spirit of Christ.

And it is these, truly spiritual people throughout the ages, who have drawn others to embrace the Lord.

The apostles spoke on Pentecost Sunday, and people of all different languages heard the Spirit speaking to them.

How about us? We have also been called to be apostles. Can we allow the Spirit to speak through us? Yes, if we allow ourselves to be tied to Jesus in our hearts, not just have knowledge about him in our heads.

That is what the word religion means, you know: being tied, being tied to the Lord.

The Spirit of Jesus has been gifted to us not just for ourselves, but for a world that longs for meaning in life. Pentecost is the celebration of the present reality of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in our lives. Today we pray that we might allow the Spirit to radiate the presence of Christ within us to a world that longs for an experience of its Savior.