

PENTECOST 2022

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world.

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. . . . But this cannot be seen, only believed and 'understood' by a peculiar gift.”

So wrote Thomas Merton in his book: *‘Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander’*. Waking from a dream of separation – self-isolation liberation from poison of illusory difference – an immense joy of being man – a member of the race that God chose to become incarnate in – all walking around shining – if only they could see themselves as they really are.

‘If only’. If only, Jesus said in the Gospel you loved **me**, then the commandments would not be restrictions to be negotiated and compromised but guides to a life-giving encounter. ‘If only’ you loved me then my word would be the light that gives you energy to shine. There would in Merton’s words be: *‘no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed’*. No more would we avoid conversations with one another, no more build up barriers of misunderstanding, prejudice, and competition.

Filled with the Holy Spirit we would get to be amazed and astonished at just how beautiful each one of us is - shining with the image and likeness of God. The Spirit comes to anoint our inner vision, the way we view one another as partners in an embrace of love, no longer any need to hide from fear and self-defence. The ‘unspiritual-self’ that Paul speaks of has really captured us and impaired our ability to be amazed and astonished – only seeing others as problems, not able to risk communion.

Merton says, this can only be understood by a peculiar gift – this gift is the Spirit who teaches us all things. We are appalled at the cruelty of the unbridled aggression of Russia who seeks to steal the freedom of another nation and forget that this arises from the fact that we do it all the time through sarcastic and vicious remarks. We steal others good name and we capture their freedom through passive aggression and self-centered choices. Punishing others by our rejection and inflated opinions.

And so today we plead for that fresh out-pouring of the Holy Spirit upon each and every person, upon the whole of creation: We ask to be awakened to the light that this Spirit of truth can bring, receive the comfort, solace and peace in the midst of all our woes. We are ready to have our wounds healed, our strength renewed, our guilt taken away and our dryness quenched. But this can only happen if we are willing to let go of our bitterness, stubbornness, allow our frozen heart to be melted. Can we risk this? Can we risk this? In the moment of silence at the end of the homily pause, stop the clever self-talk, the unspiritual banter, the voice of the accuser and listen to that voice of the advocate within who says: ‘Do you want to be alive?’ ‘Why not risk today being the version of yourself that God has truly created you to be?’ ‘Open yourself to the fire of his love?’ ‘feel his breath within’.

I think of people who have done this, friends I trust and know who give me good example. I think of Benedict of Norcia, Francis and Clare of Assisi, Teresa of Calcutta, Maximillian Kolbe, Karol Wojtyla, Carlo Acutis, Charbel Makhlouf and so many others who listened to the Spirit and were led and transformed by the light and fire of that transforming presence. People who gave witness to the unity in diversity – the communion which is the genius of the Spirit.

I think also of the young men from Senegal and Sudan sleeping at Stazio Termini in Rome. Grateful not so much for the food that was given them but the fact that they were treated like human beings – people with dignity, temples of the Holy Spirit. Or the Superior General of the Missionaries of Charity, Sr Joseph, newly elected and facing great difficulties, especially from the Indian Government but radiating a deep faith, peace, and joy. I think of the newly professed sisters of Mother Teresa who on the evening of their profession gathered to hear for the first time where they were to be missioned: Lebanon, Russia, Ukraine, Iraq, Sudan, Egypt and the joy with which they embraced these unknown challenges.

When I think of the Holy Spirit I do not think of the things I have read in books or heard in homilies, important and helpful as these have been, but rather the living examples of people filled with the Spirit and who have been for me real ambassadors of hope and life. People, like you who shine now with the radiance of that life-giving presence. I feel that presence now for the Holy Spirit is a person and makes his home within and shines among us. You are walking around shining like the Sun, with a power so great, this is what we celebrate and embrace today.

The nation has rightly paused these past days to give thanks for the selfless and consistent service of Queen Elizabeth, clearly a woman for whom faith is an essential and foundational part of who she is. The coronation oath she took 70 years ago has been daily lived and the crowds that have come out to celebrate give clear witness to the affection in which she is held. As we give thanks, we also pause to recognize the invitation that the gift of the Spirit means for each and every one of us. ‘Everyone’, says St Paul, ‘who is moved by the Spirit’ is a child of God. If we are children, then we have a divine heritage... we share in His glory.

Today is a day to shine. To recognize the gift that has been given, the responsibility that comes with that gift, but to live from that precious gift of the Spirit. ‘If Christ is in you’, which he is, then ‘your spirit is life.’ So, shine with that life today.

Abbot Robert Igo, OSB

5 June 2022