

Pentecost Sunday

May 23, 2021

There have been many critics of Christianity down through the ages. They have proposed many reasons why they think people shouldn't believe in the message of Christ. Some have even claimed that belief in Jesus is harmful. In trying to persuade people to not believe, they dispute many of the truths that Christians proclaim whether it be that the Bible is the word of God, that Jesus is God made flesh, or that Jesus rose from the dead.

But, there is one truth that even the most ardent critic of Christianity cannot deny. That is, that from the beginning, belief in Jesus spread quickly throughout the world. From a small group of followers two-thousand years ago, it is now the dominant religion in the world today by far. And it continues to spread throughout the world, especially in Africa and Asia.

Another truth that atheists cannot dispute is that people are willing to believe in Jesus even though it requires tremendous sacrifice to do so. It is clear from the beginning that those who preached about the resurrection of Jesus were constantly being persecuted. Even today, Christians in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia are targeted by terrorists and hostile governments. Yet, people continue to profess their faith in Jesus fearlessly.

How can we account for the dramatic spread of Christianity and the fervent belief of so many people even in the face of persecution and death? The only reasonable explanation is that Jesus has really risen from the dead and that He has sent His Holy Spirit to the Church to empower us to preach that good news to the world.

Today, we celebrate Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles in a driving wind and as tongues of fire. We call this the birthday of the Church because from this point on, the apostles would go forth to preach the gospel message and establish communities of faith throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

This Church that we have been baptized into did not begin in a boardroom where people got together to put together a business plan. It didn't begin by drafting a constitution and set of rules for organizing it. Rather, it began with an act of God - the sending of His Holy Spirit. The Catholic Church, therefore, was not created by human beings and it does not continue to exist through human effort alone. Rather, it is the creation of the Holy Spirit and it continues Jesus' work throughout the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

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That is why we continue to exist after two thousand years. That is why we continue to grow despite so much opposition. The Holy Spirit is at work in believers ensuring that the Risen Jesus continues to be present and active throughout the world.

When we use the word “Church” we have to make it clear that we are talking about something more than buildings and an institution. The Catholic Church is larger than the Vatican.

When we use the word “Church”, we mean all believers who have been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and who profess faith in Jesus, both God and Man, who rose from the dead. As Catholics, we also profess that the Pope is the visible symbol of our unity and the guarantee that what we believe is in accordance with what Jesus taught. The creed that we profess at every Sunday Mass details the core of our beliefs.

The Church is a people - the People of God. We are the Church. St Paul teaches us that we, as a Church, are the Body of Christ. That is, each of us is a member of the Risen Christ who continues to be present and active in history through us. Jesus Christ is the head, we are the members, and the Holy Spirit is the soul. As members of His Body, each of us has a part to play. As St Paul tells us in today’s second reading, “As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.”

That means that each one of us is vital to the working of the Church. All of us have an important part to play in the mission of spreading the gospel. There is no one who is useless, who isn’t needed, who is a “weak link”. Each of us is as important to the mission of the Church just as every part of our body is important to our health.

We call the Holy Spirit, “Lord and Giver of Life.” Where the Holy Spirit is there is life in abundance. He is the presence and power of Jesus Christ manifest in our world today in the Church - that is, in us who have been baptized into His Body. It is only because of Him that the Church continues to exist and grow because we are the work of God’s hands. At this Mass, we will witness one of the great works of the Holy Spirit. He will transform simple bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Risen Jesus who will come to dwell with us. Like the apostles in the upper room, we are called and empowered to go forth from this place to spread the good news that Jesus is risen.

Each of us is called and empowered for this work in our own particular way. We can do so with confidence because the Spirit of God lives and works within us.